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'THE CRACKED MIRROR':

ANNE SEXTON'S POETICS OF SELF-REPRESENTATION

JOANNA RUTH GILL

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## ABSTRACT

### 'The Cracked Mirror': Anne Sexton's Poetics of Self-Representation

This thesis re-evaluates the work of the poet Anne Sexton (1928-1974), concentrating, in particular, on the indeterminacies, contradictions and aporia which it finds to be characteristic of her ostensibly frank and self-revelatory writing. The study is based on a close textual analysis of Sexton's writing, is informed by poststructuralist theories, and is sustained by an examination and discussion of archive collections of her previously unpublished papers. In seeking an understanding of Sexton's poetics, the thesis identifies and interrogates the strategies of denial and obfuscation apparent in her own explication of her work – principally, by scrutiny of the unpublished, and previously unresearched, drafts of a series of lectures which she delivered in 1972.

Chapters One and Two consider the origins of 'confessional' or – Sexton's preferred term – 'personal' poetry and reassess her place within contemporary poetry. They suggest that Sexton's writing is engaged in a process of negotiation and contestation, both with the boundaries and expectations of confessionalism, and with the strictures of T. S. Eliot's theory of 'impersonality'. In support of these arguments, Chapter Two offer a reading of Sexton's little-known poem, 'Hurry Up Please It's Time', alongside its intertext, Eliot's *The Waste Land*. Chapter Three reassesses received views of the supposedly beneficial interrelationship between confessional speaker and reader. It examines Sexton's appropriation of dramatic masks and personae and her use of metaphors of striptease and prostitution, and suggests that these are employed simultaneously to appease and to repel an intrusive audience. Similarly, Chapters Four and Five trace Sexton's problematisation of two previously-accepted tenets of confessional poetry: its status as autobiography and its truthfulness, drawing attention to the techniques employed in order to give the *impression* of both. Chapter Six considers Sexton's problematic engagement with a language which is not malleable, transparent, and referential but, rather, is experienced as uncooperative and occlusive.

Finally, the thesis recuperates Sexton from the common charge of narcissism, arguing that it is the writing, rather than the poet, which is self-reflexive and self-conscious. In this respect, it concludes that her work – perhaps unexpectedly – anticipates many of the tendencies of postmodernist writing.

## AUTHOR'S DECLARATION

I declare that the work in this thesis was carried out in accordance with the regulations of Cheltenham and Gloucester College of Higher Education and is original except where indicated by specific reference in the text. No part of the thesis has been submitted as part of any other academic award. The thesis has not been presented to any other education institution in the United Kingdom or overseas.

Any views expressed in the thesis are those of the author and in no way represent those of the College.

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Finally, and most importantly, my greatest thanks and my deepest love go to Neil, who has been with me every step of the way.

## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

## PUBLISHED MATERIAL

Unless otherwise indicated, the source used for Sexton's poems is:

*Anne Sexton: The Complete Poems* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1981)

The volume in which each poem was originally published is indicated by an abbreviated parenthetical reference, within the text, after the *first* mention of each poem (all are Boston: Houghton Mifflin):

<i>To Bedlam and Part Way Back</i> (1960)	(TB)
<i>All My Pretty Ones</i> (1962)	(PO)
<i>Live or Die</i> (1966)	(LD)
<i>Love Poems</i> (1969)	(LP)
<i>Transformations</i> (1971)	(TR)
<i>The Book of Folly</i> (1972)	(BF)
<i>The Death Notebooks</i> (1974)	(DN)
<i>The Awful Rowing Toward God</i> (1975)	(AR)
<i>45 Mercy Street</i> (1976)	(MSt.)
<i>Words for Dr. Y.</i> (1978)	(DY)

The sources of Sexton's published prose and uncollected poetry, are indicated by footnoted references and listed in the bibliography. Published letters are quoted from *Anne Sexton: A Self-Portrait in Letters*, ed. by Linda Gray Sexton and Lois Ames (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1979). These are referenced in the footnotes by the abbreviation *Letters*, followed by page number and date.

## UNPUBLISHED MATERIALS

Unpublished materials (principally, letters, journal entries, lecture notes, poem drafts and worksheets) are, in most cases, from the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, The University of Texas at Austin. Such material is referenced by a brief description in the footnotes, and its source is indicated by the abbreviation 'HRHRC'. Unless otherwise indicated, these are original typescripts (Sexton rarely wrote by hand). An unpublished poem and extracts from three others are reproduced in Appendix One. Unpublished letters are referenced in the footnotes by the names of the writer and recipient, date, and archive source.

Material (principally audiotaped interviews) from the Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University is referenced by a brief description in the footnotes, and the source is designated: 'Radcliffe Institute Archives.' Original material obtained from other sources is identified by full reference in the footnotes.

## Introduction

‘To be carefully read is a rare and wonderful thing’\*

Anne Sexton’s comment, made in response to an unusually insightful and suggestive critique of her work, highlights the failure at the heart of Sexton scholarship: the failure ‘carefully’ to ‘read’.<sup>1</sup> Sexton’s work has been subjected to a variety of critiques: the psychoanalytic and/or Jungian (for example, the work of Diana Hume George and Brenda Ameter), the generic (M.L. Rosenthal and Robert Phillips’s evaluation of Sexton in the context of confessionalism), the biographical and/or ‘chronological’ (studies by Diane Wood Middlebrook and Caroline Hall) and the thematic (for example, Frances Bixler and Richard Morton’s discussions of Sexton’s religious themes).<sup>2</sup> Yet in none of these has it been found necessary to pay close attention to the text. The focus, instead, has been on areas outside or beyond the writing (on the writing’s apparent origins, on its autobiographical status, on its mythical or archetypal resonance, on its psychoanalytic and/or therapeutic value, on its place in the genre). As Neil Myers posits: ‘in such poetry we do not “read” so much as experience.’<sup>3</sup>

It is possible to argue that previous approaches to Sexton’s writing, predicated as they are on liberal-humanist assumptions about the referentiality of language, the transparency of the text, and the authority of the subject, have been ill-equipped – and thus proved unable – to account for the elusiveness of her poetry and the mercurial complexity of her thought. This critical failure, or stalemate, has tacitly been recognised. Robert Bagg, writing in 1960, concedes the critical consternation which was to underpin much subsequent scholarship: ‘Nobody really knows why Lowell, Snodgrass and now Anne Sexton are so good, why they are not put down by sentimentality. The critics are confused, left behind in inarticulate

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\* Anne Sexton, Letter to Beverly Fields, [1963(?) HRHRC.

<sup>1</sup> The essay to which Sexton refers is: Beverly Fields, ‘The Poetry of Anne Sexton’, in *Poets in Progress: Critical Prefaces to Thirteen Modern American Poets*, ed. by Edward Hungerford ([n.p.]: Northwestern University Press, 1967), pp. 251-285.

<sup>2</sup> Diana Hume George, *Oedipus Anne: The Poetry of Anne Sexton* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1987); Brenda Ameter, ‘“Put Your Ear Down to your Soul and Listen Hard”: Anne Sexton’s theory and Practice of Archetypal Poetry’, in *Original Essays on the Poetry of Anne Sexton*, ed. by Frances Bixler, ([n.p.]: University of Central Arkansas Press, 1988), pp. 81-91; M. L. Rosenthal, *The New Poets: American and British Poetry Since World War II* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1967); Robert Phillips, *The Confessional Poets* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1973); Diane Wood Middlebrook, ‘Housewife into Poet: The Apprenticeship of Anne Sexton’, *New England Quarterly*, 56 (1983), 483-503; Caroline King Barnard Hall, *Anne Sexton* (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1989); Frances Bixler, ‘Anne Sexton’s “Motherly” Poetics’, in Bixler, ed., pp. 92-101; Richard Everett Morton, *Anne Sexton’s Poetry of Redemption: The Chronology of a Pilgrimage* (Lampeter: Edwin Mellen Press, 1989).

<sup>3</sup> ‘The Hungry Sheep Look Up’, in *Critical Essays on Anne Sexton*, ed. by Linda Wagner-Martin (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1989), pp. 19-24 (p. 21) (first publ. in *Minnesota Review*, 1 (1960)).



admiration.’<sup>4</sup> Writing some twenty years later, on the posthumous publication of Sexton’s *Complete Poems*, Helen Vendler proposes that ‘a clear sense of Sexton’s talent – its extent and its limitations – has yet to appear’.<sup>5</sup>

This thesis attempts to provide that ‘clear sense of Sexton’s talent’, principally by offering a close and attentive reading of her writing (published and unpublished poetry, prose, diaries, letters, interviews and lectures notes).<sup>6</sup> In Marjorie Perloff’s terms, my approach attends as much to the work’s ‘formal representations’ as to its themes, pathological status, or perceived congruence with the lived experience of the historical author.<sup>7</sup> Thus it runs counter to many of the perspectives outlined above (epitomised by Robert Phillips’s assertion that ‘what the poet has to say is more important than how he says it’).<sup>8</sup> I argue that ‘how’ the poet says ‘it’ is inextricably connected with what is being said, and (to recall Myers’s view) that it is impossible to ‘experience’ without first encountering, or “‘read[ing]” the text.

Instead of regarding Sexton’s as poetry of harrowing authenticity, one which ‘used such direct expression that there could be no pretending that she was saying anything other than she was’,<sup>9</sup> I propose that her writing (poetry, prose and paratextual clarifications, for which read obfuscations)<sup>10</sup> is characterised by strategies of distortion, occlusion and denial. In the words of ‘The Room of My Life’ (AR), discussed in Chapter Six: ‘nothing is just what it seems to be.’ *Contra* conventional readings of the frank truthfulness of Sexton’s writing, hers is a poetics of subterfuge, disorientation, and misdirection. Where, for example, Richard Howard suggests that she wears ‘[her] heart on [her] sleeve’,<sup>11</sup> I argue that her interest lies in ‘camouflage’, masks, and concealment.<sup>12</sup> My close reading of the contradictions in and between texts, and of their indeterminacy and aporia, indicates that these are self-conscious,

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<sup>4</sup> ‘A Regime of Revelation’, in Wagner-Martin, ed., pp. 24-27 (p. 24) (first publ. in *Audience*, 7 (1960)).

<sup>5</sup> *The Music of What Happens: Poems, Poets, Critics* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 1988), p. 300.

<sup>6</sup> My approach shares J. Hillis Miller’s aim (in *Tropes, Parables, Performatives: Essays on Twentieth-Century Literature*) to ‘let reading carry me as far as it would go’. (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1990), p. xiii. Equally, I concur with Virginia Woolf’s view that ‘one can’t read too carefully, or attach enough weight to every line and hint’. *A Writer’s Diary*, ed. by Leonard Woolf (London: Hogarth Press, 1953), p. 4.

<sup>7</sup> *Poetic License: Essays on Modernist and Postmodernist Lyric* (Evanston: North Western University Press, 1990), p. 26. Perloff complains, in *The Poetic Art of Robert Lowell*, that ‘the confessional poem is consistently treated by critics as *confession* rather than as *poetry*’. (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1973), p. 80 [Perloff’s emphasis].

<sup>8</sup> Phillips, pp. xiii-xiv.

<sup>9</sup> Wagner-Martin, ‘Anne Sexton, Poet’, in Wagner-Martin, ed., pp. 1-18 (p. 4).

<sup>10</sup> See Gerard Genette, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, trans. by Jane Lewin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

<sup>11</sup> ‘Anne Sexton: “Some Tribal Female Who is Known But Forbidden”’, in *Alone With America: The Art of Poetry in the United States Since 1950* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1970), pp. 442-50 (p. 443).

<sup>12</sup> Anne Sexton, ‘Journal of A Living Experiment’, 3 October 1967, HRHRC.

manipulative, and ultimately successful practices – that hers is not a poetry of revelation but one of disguise, not a search for certainty but an exercise in provisionality.

My study differs from those of earlier Sexton scholars in that it benefits from the practices and insights offered by recent (principally poststructuralist) approaches to writing which are anticipated in Sexton's work and which have emerged, or come to prominence, in the late twentieth century (that is, in the period since her death in 1974). As the following chapters will indicate, new, post-humanist notions of the previously unproblematised givens of Sexton's poetry (for example, the nature of confession, autobiography, subjectivity and truth, and the origins and status of language) permit its radical re-evaluation. Such approaches, in their openness to indeterminacy, and lack of interest in totalisation, offer perspectives which are more congruent with Sexton's own interests. It is in its negotiation of these shared areas of interest (the construction of 'truth' or the status of the personal 'I') that Sexton's writing seems most engaged (and is most intriguing) and where it most clearly refutes – or at the very least, questions – the critical orthodoxy. I have, accordingly, structured my thesis around a discussion of these preoccupations (confession, the personal and the impersonal [Chapters One and Two] and autobiography, truth, and language [Chapters Four, Five and Six]): a strategy which allows me to bring new critical thought and Sexton's own engagement with these complex issues into productive proximity. However, my 'careful read[ing]' of Sexton's writing has alerted me to the presence of a number of other important concerns: for example, about the spectacular and performative nature of confession and the persistent self-reflexivity of writing which I have discussed in Chapter Three and my Conclusion.

To turn back to the theoretical bases of my research: Michel Foucault's work (hitherto, surprisingly neglected by scholars of confessional poetry) informs my re-reading of the nature of confession and of Sexton's place within the mode and my understanding of her playful experimentation with truth and lies. Equally, Foucault's views on discourse, and work in the same area by Antony Easthope and Leigh Gilmore, offer a valuable perspective on the previously neglected (although, to Sexton, persistently engaging and problematic) relationship between subject, text and reader. Leigh Gilmore's study of autobiography, *Autobiographics: A Feminist Theory of Women's Self-Representation*, underpins my reading of Sexton's apparently personal or autobiographical poems as elements of a discursive and artful process, rather than as a simple 'chronicle' of a life.<sup>13</sup> Further, Gilmore's notion of 'autobiographics' offers a model for the reading practice adopted throughout this thesis: one which – like

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<sup>13</sup> Caroline Hall, p. ix.

Sexton's writing – is concerned with 'interruptions and eruptions, with resistance and contradiction as strategies of self-representation'.<sup>14</sup>

I reappraise earlier, perhaps reductive, psychoanalytic accounts of Sexton's writing (and life) in the light of more recent, and more sophisticated, psychoanalytic thought. Whereas Diana Hume George's reading is predicated on the understanding that the poet (and thereafter the critic) can find and 'tell' the definitive 'truth' about subjective experience (hence her identification of Sexton with Oedipus), my interest is in Sexton's ambivalence about this task (and her understanding that it may never be achieved).<sup>15</sup> Sexton, I suggest, exploits what Jacqueline Rose calls the 'productive' anxiety of acknowledging 'how uncertain truth can be'.<sup>16</sup> Further, the post-Saussurean reappraisal of language informs my perception of Sexton's poetry and my challenge to conventional views of its mimetic and referential qualities. As my readings in Chapter Six will indicate, Sexton is involved in an engagement (in the productive and militaristic senses) with a language which is not a passive and secondary tool to aid communication, but rather, is autonomous, self-referential and potentially uncooperative.

Finally, Linda Hutcheon's thought-provoking analysis of self-reflexive writing, principally in *Narcissistic Narrative*, informs the argument which is implicit throughout this thesis, and explicitly aired in the Conclusion, about the acute self-consciousness of Sexton's poetry. Her poems should be read not as a 'chronicle' of a life (to quote Hall again) but rather, as a chronicle of their own discursive processes (their processes of 'production and reception').<sup>17</sup> Equally, Hutcheon's analyses of postmodernist practices help me to situate Sexton's work in a trajectory which exceeds or transcends the limitations of the confessional mode with which she is usually identified, and allows me to isolate, and account for, radical and contestatory elements in her poetics.

My thesis may be described (in Gilmore's terms, drawing in turn, on Foucault) as a 'genealogy' of Sexton's poetry. In contradistinction to previous critical approaches, which seek to excavate the psychological/biographical/experiential 'truth' behind the texts, a 'genealogy' such as this 'must find its subject in the act of seeking it [. . .] it is always a study of changed minds and catastrophe, of digressions that cannot predict or control their narrative ends'. In this respect, my thesis – like Sexton's writing – represents not a search for truth (for definitive origins or meaning) but an open-ended and speculative process of engagement and enquiry. As Gilmore explains: 'genealogy proceeds through a diffusion of desire more interested in multiplying knowledges than in waiting for the right "one".' It is 'opposed to a

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<sup>14</sup> *Autobiographics: A Feminist Theory of Women's Self-Representation* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), p. 42.

<sup>15</sup> *Oedipus Anne*, p. xii.

<sup>16</sup> Jacqueline Rose, *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath* (London: Virago, 1991), p. xiv.

<sup>17</sup> *Narcissistic Narrative: The Metafictional Paradox* (London and New York: Methuen, 1984), p. xvii.

search for origins even as it traces the temporary homes of meaning in a general attempt to understand where truth comes from.’<sup>18</sup>

Such an innovative and theoretically challenging perspective permits a fresh and, as this thesis will aim to show, rewarding perspective on a number of ‘canonical’ poems (for example, on ‘Her Kind’ and ‘For John, Who Begg Me Not to Enquire Further’ (TB), discussed in Chapter One and the Conclusion respectively). Most importantly, though, in its openness to fragmentation, aporia, contradiction and opacity, and in its lack of interest in identifying and confirming coherence, consistency and closure, it offers a strategy for negotiating many of Sexton’s most complex and elusive poems: those which resist simplification and reduction, such as the neglected, long poems, ‘Hurry Up Please It’s Time’ (DN) and ‘Is It True?’ (AR), and the little-known sequences of ‘Horoscope Poems’ and ‘Letters to Dr. Y.’ (DY), discussed in Chapters Two, Five and Six.<sup>19</sup> It offers, for the first time, strategies appropriate to the negotiation of Sexton’s much-maligned, and little-heeded, later works.

The poems contained in Sexton’s later and posthumous volumes (*The Death Notebooks*, *The Awful Rowing Toward God* and *Words for Dr.Y.*, for example), because not recognisably confessional (in terms of voice, form and subject matter), have simply not obtained a reading. As Laurence Lerner admits, his interest lies only in Sexton’s ‘first three volumes, which contain her best and most clearly confessional work’.<sup>20</sup> Antony Easthope regards such neglect as symptomatic of ‘conventional literary criticism’ wherein ‘stylistic heterogeneity cannot be countenanced. It has to be made over into a unity at all costs’.<sup>21</sup> It is the argument of this thesis that a re-evaluation of confessional writing (one informed by the critical thought outlined above), and of Sexton’s relationship with the mode, will allow for the readmission of previously excluded (because not recognisably confessional, not easily assimilable) poems. Equally, we can arrive at no adequate understanding of what

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<sup>18</sup> Gilmore, pp. 5, 6.

<sup>19</sup> As William Carlos Williams says of the difficulty of Gertrude Stein’s work, and of the importance of persisting with its reading: ‘Literature is right down in among the foundations of the intelligence by its chemistry of words. Difficult to the untrained mind the lines may be. If they’re important, and I say they are, the only clue to be got from them is learn their significance.’ ‘A 1 Pound Stein’, in *Selected Essays* (New York: New Directions, 1969), pp. 162-66 (p. 164).

<sup>20</sup> ‘What is Confessional Poetry?’, *Critical Quarterly*, 29.2 (1987), 46-66 (p. 53). It should be noted that when critics complain of Sexton’s late lapse in quality, as, for example, in Jane McCabe’s assertion that in her last books she seemed to ‘lose control of her language at the same time that she lost control of her life’ they betray a confusion of critical and moral judgement such that what Sexton is being condemned for are failings in her personal life rather than in her writing. “‘A Woman Who Writes’: A Feminist Approach to the Early Poetry of Anne Sexton”, in *Anne Sexton: The Artist and Her Critics*, ed. by J.D. McClatchy (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978), pp. 216-43 (p. 225).

<sup>21</sup> *Poetry as Discourse* (London: Methuen, 1983), p. 30.

confessionalism is without considering the contribution of works which interrogate, subvert, and thereby extend, its boundaries.<sup>22</sup>

In addition to revisiting the ‘canonical’ texts, paying long-overdue attention to the little-known sequences and to the late, underestimated, works, I draw attention to a number of unpublished or uncollected poems. I have included these in my discussion either because they shed light on otherwise impenetrable elements of previously published texts (thus the ‘Dog-God’ poems add to my reading of ‘Hurry Up Please It’s Time’, all discussed in Chapter Two) or because they offer general insights into Sexton’s poetics (for example, ‘An Obsessive Combination of Ontological Inscape, Trickery and Love’, discussed in the Conclusion). Further, unlike most previous Sexton critics, I offer readings of a number of Sexton’s prose texts (for example, the short story ‘The Letting Down of the Hair’ and the article ‘The Freak Show’, discussed in Chapter Three). Again, these are interesting because of what they suggest about Sexton’s ‘stylistic heterogeneity’ (to borrow Easthope’s term) and her experimentation with forms and techniques beyond the limits of the confessional mode.

This thesis also attempts – again, in contradistinction to conventional readings of Sexton’s poetry which identify her as a ‘disciple’, ‘echo’, even ‘bandwagon follower’ of Sylvia Plath and Robert Lowell<sup>23</sup> – to recuperate Sexton as an important poet in her own right. I explore Sexton’s own ambivalence about what she called the ‘Lowell, Sexton, Plath lump’,<sup>24</sup> suggesting, in places, that the influence may be in the other direction, or that Sexton’s sources and influences may come from elsewhere – for example, from the work of T.S. Eliot and W. H. Auden, neither of whom have previously been recognised as forebears.

My perspective on Sexton’s work is informed and sustained by my research in the Anne Sexton archives at the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center at the University of Texas at Austin, and at the Schlesinger Library of Radcliffe College, Harvard University. Surprisingly, this material has been neglected by almost all of the critics and commentators mentioned in this thesis, the exceptions being Sexton’s biographer, Diane Wood Middlebrook

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<sup>22</sup> Thom Gunn concedes that it is a ‘mistake [. . .] to look for a poet’s best poetry among her typical work’, ‘Out of the Box: Elizabeth Bishop’, in *Shelf Life: Essays, Memoirs and an Interview* (London: Faber, 1994), pp. 77-86 (p. 79) (first publ. in *Times Literary Supplement*, 22 July – 2 August 1990).

<sup>23</sup> Obituary, *New York Times*, (6 October 1974), 65; Vendler, *Music*, p. 306; Margaret Newlin, ‘The Suicide Bandwagon’, *Critical Quarterly*, 14.4 (1972), 368-78 (p. 369).

<sup>24</sup> *Anne Sexton: A Self-Portrait in Letters*, ed. by Linda Gray Sexton and Lois Ames (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1981), p. 307 (20 January 1967). Sexton was complaining to Ted Hughes about his grouping of the three poets in his article ‘Notes on the Chronological Order of Sylvia Plath’s Poems’, *Tri Quarterly*, 7 (1966), 81-88. In his subsequent apology to Sexton, Hughes conceded that ‘the linking your [sic] three names together in every review that appears about [Plath] has become an automatic reflex that seems to me to obscure differences that are much more important than the links, and a big obstacle to any reader’. Ted Hughes, Letter to Anne Sexton, [January 1967(?)], HRHRC.

and the writers collected in Dave Oliphant's *Rossetti to Sexton: Six Women Poets at Texas*.<sup>25</sup> Research in the archives reveals the presence of a vast number of fascinating texts, many of which complicate or contradict the perception of Sexton afforded by previously-published letters and interviews. Specifically, my scrutiny of these sources has revealed a number of unpublished, and previously undiscussed, manuscript poems (such as those referred to above) along with significant early drafts of, and amendments to, published texts. Further, it has allowed me accurately to date most of Sexton's poems and thus to refute the basic, and mistaken, premise of 'chronological' readings, such as Caroline Hall's (cited earlier) and to challenge the consensus, mentioned above, about Sexton's late lapse in quality. It is clear that a number of sequences (for example, the 'Letters to Dr. Y.') were written intermittently throughout Sexton's career and that some of the poems published in later volumes were, in fact, written much earlier. Sexton's can thus be shown to be a poetry of multiple and simultaneous styles and voices and not the coherent and consistent expression of one experience.

In addition, research in the Sexton archives has allowed me to obtain a fuller view of her correspondence. The published volume of letters, *Anne Sexton: A Self-Portrait in Letters*, because it represents only Sexton's voice, fails to show the reciprocal, discursive, dialogic nature of the exchanges (for example, between Sexton and her tutor John Holmes, discussed in my Conclusion), and is thus frustratingly partial. Study of Sexton's library, held in the Texas archive, gives valuable insight into her reading practices, and into influential texts and sources (Dostoevsky's *The Possessed*, for instance, mentioned in Chapters One and Three). Further information has been obtained from unpublished introductions to poetry readings, teaching notes and the (incomplete) journal which Sexton was required to keep while a tutor/participant in the 'Teachers and Writers Collaborative'. Finally, my major source of archival information has been the unpublished drafts of Sexton's 'Anne on Anne' series of lectures, delivered at Colgate University in 1972 while she held the Crawshaw Chair of Poetry. Although the value of these documents as a source of information on Sexton's poetics has been noted (Middlebrook suggests that 'these lecture notes provide unique access to her view of contemporary poetry and her place in it'),<sup>26</sup> they have not, hitherto, been studied by

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<sup>25</sup> Although the title of Oliphant's edited collection implies that its contents are based on study of the Texas archives, this is not, unfortunately, always the case. Of the five essays on Sexton, two are personal memoirs and one studies Sexton's fan mail rather than her own writing. Only the essays by Stephen Vinson ("Wild Animals Out of the Arena": Anne Sexton's revisions for "All My Pretty Ones" [pp. 191-221]) and Diane Wood Middlebrook ('Anne Sexton: The Making of "The Awful Rowing Toward God"' [pp. 223-35]) make significant use of the Sexton archives. (Austin: Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center/University of Texas at Austin Press, 1992).

<sup>26</sup> *Anne Sexton: A Biography* (London: Virago, 1991), p. 358. Only Paula M. Salvio makes brief use of these in her article: 'Teacher of "Weird Abundance": Portraits of the Pedagogical Tactics of Anne Sexton', *Cultural Studies*, 13 (1999), 639-660. However, as Salvio's title suggests, her interest lies in Sexton's teaching strategies rather than in her poetry.

scholars of her poetry. As my use of this resource throughout this thesis will demonstrate, the value of Sexton's lecture notes as an illustration of her poetics is immeasurable.

In the letter from which I took the epigraph to this chapter, Sexton proceeds to summarise exactly what it is that she finds so rewarding in the perceptive critic's reading of her work: 'you make so many connections that I never had thought about [. . .] and much that i [sic] am ignorant of [. . .] much that really rings a bell.' It is the argument of this thesis that Sexton's is a richly textured, elusive, idiosyncratic and suggestive poetry – the work of a distinctive and astute poet – and one which deserves to be 'carefully read'.

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## Chapter One

‘A woman like that is misunderstood / I have been her kind’\*:

Anne Sexton’s confessional poetics

Anne Sexton has been described as the ‘High Priestess’ and the ‘Mother’ of confessional poetry, and as ‘the most persistent and daring of the confessionalists’. It has been said that ‘no poet was more consistently and uniformly confessional than Anne Sexton [...] her name has almost become identified with the genre’.<sup>1</sup> Sexton herself commented ‘at one time I hated being called confessional and denied it, but *mea culpa*. Now I say that I’m the *only* confessional poet’.<sup>2</sup> Yet the evidence of Sexton’s poems, and of comments which she makes in letters, interviews and lectures, belies any such straightforward identification. Indeed, Sexton’s own ‘*mea culpa*’ may be read as a rueful and ironic sign of a label unwillingly tolerated, rather than as a wholehearted statement of affiliation. Paradoxically, by proclaiming herself ‘the *only* confessional poet’, Sexton both 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*.

The claim to be the ‘only’ confessional poet is at one with the sense conveyed elsewhere – and persistently – by Sexton that what she is doing in her poetry is something quite new and distinctive. Only Muriel Rukeyser has had the prescience to note the particular significance of Sexton’s work in this respect, seeing in her poetry signs that ‘the “confessional” poem is beginning to turn into something, and I think we have waited for this for a long time’.<sup>3</sup> In an interview with William Heyen and Al Poulin conducted in September 1973, Sexton reiterates and elaborates on her own statement:

Well, for a while, oh for a long 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.

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\* Anne Sexton, ‘Her Kind’.

<sup>1</sup> Phillips, p. 6; George, *Oedipus Anne*, p. 90; J.D. McClatchy, ‘Anne Sexton: Somehow to Endure’, in McClatchy, ed., pp. 245-90 (p. 245); Lerner, p. 52.

<sup>2</sup> *Letters*, p. 372 (23 December 1970) [Sexton’s emphasis]. If we place the emphasis on ‘I say that,’ we open up the possibility that Sexton’s apparent identification is a false one; that the role of ‘confessional poet’ is a part played at will, and to specific and misleading effect. Sexton’s apparently self-evident (although in fact ambiguous) declaration is echoed in the statement with which I open Chapter Four: ‘It’s true that I’m an autobiographical poet most of the time, or so I lead my readers to believe.’

<sup>3</sup> Muriel Rukeyser, ‘On *The Book of Folly*’, in McClatchy, ed., pp. 154-61 (p. 159) (first publ. in *Parnassus: Poetry in Review*, 2.1 (1973)).



Here too, however, Sexton's apparent affiliation with the 'confessional' label is tempered by the understanding that the label does not quite fit, that her work transgresses or exceeds the limits of the mode. As Sexton concludes: '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.'<sup>4</sup>

As Sexton's comments indicate, her relationship with what has been labelled 'the confessional mode' is more problematic than has conventionally been recognised.<sup>5</sup> In order to do justice to Sexton's complex, idiosyncratic and elusive poetics, it is necessary to identify and evaluate contemporary definitions and conceptualisations of confessionalism and to indicate the ways in which they have influenced subsequent readings of her poetry. Mine is not a documentary account of the origins of confessionalism (as Sexton notes, 'there is a long history of confessional writing')<sup>6</sup> but rather a brief summary of the most significant of the contemporary definitions of what came to be known as the 'school' of post-war confessional poetry.<sup>7</sup> The discussion which follows of the work of M.L. Rosenthal (who was instrumental in naming the mode), Robert Phillips (author of the first, and indeed only, full-length study of it), C.B. Cox and A.R. Jones (authors of two influential *Critical Quarterly* essays) and Al Alvarez (who, in a variety of media, popularised the term) confirms the value of questioning the adequacy of the term 'confessional' as a descriptor of Sexton's poetry.<sup>8</sup>

In the light of what J. Hillis Miller, Antony Easthope and John Thompson designate a 'paradigm shift' in approaches to writing (that is, the post-humanist development of a diverse and challenging range of critical theories and practices), it is possible – even necessary – to re-evaluate orthodox notions of the characteristics and boundaries of confessionalism.<sup>9</sup> The question then becomes not one of whether Sexton's poetry meets the criteria for the mode as conventionally understood, but whether recent critical thought (for example, Michel Foucault

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<sup>4</sup> Anne Sexton, interview with William Heyen and Al Poulin, in *No Evil Star: Selected Essays, Interviews and Prose – Anne Sexton*, ed. by Steven E. Colburn (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1985), pp. 130-57 (p. 133) (first publ. in *American Poets in 1976*, ed. by William Heyen (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1976)).

<sup>5</sup> Rosenthal, *The New Poets*, p. 26.

<sup>6</sup> Crawshaw Lectures (9) p. 2, HRHRC.

<sup>7</sup> Lerner, p. 47.

<sup>8</sup> Although *Critical Quarterly* is an English journal (and Alvarez, discussed later, an English writer contributing to English media), I think it appropriate to draw on these essays given that they represent the only contemporary overviews of the genre (American commentary emerging through shorter reviews, or at a rather later date) and made a significant contribution to the debate. Sexton refers frequently to *Critical Quarterly*, suggesting at one point that 'the English seem to read [. . .] The English seem to take me seriously. U. States [sic] is too big or something'. Letter to Fred Morgan, 12 August 1965, HRHRC. Linda Wagner-Martin comments on the importance of these early English readings of Sexton's work in 'Anne Sexton, Poet' (pp. 4, 5, 14). Such is the influence of the journal that Ian Hamilton accuses 'the salaaming *Critical Quarterly*' of turning Sexton into a 'cult figure of neurotic breakdown'. 'On *All My Pretty Ones*', in McClatchy, ed., pp. 127-29 (p. 127) (first publ. in *London Magazine*, IV (1965)).

<sup>9</sup> J. Hillis Miller, *Theory Now and Then* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991), p. 205; *Contemporary Poetry Meets Modern Theory*, ed. by Antony Easthope and John O. Thompson (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991), p. vii.

on confessional practice, Leigh Gilmore on autobiography, and Linda Hutcheon on self-reflexivity) offers a way of redefining confessional writing; a way which will account for, and finally allow us to *read* Sexton's singular ('I am the only confessional poet') writing. My close study of a number of Sexton's poems and of her paratextual comments, informed by my understanding of these current theories, provides an indication of the limits of Sexton's commitment to the mode (as defined by her contemporaries) and of the extent of her manipulation and testing of its boundaries.

M.L. Rosenthal claims to have been the first to name the mode, using the term 'confessional' to describe the poetry of Robert Lowell in a 1959 review of his book *Life Studies*.<sup>10</sup> Here, Rosenthal isolates what were to become the defining features of 'confessional' writing. The new poetry is understood to be primarily therapeutic in intent and effect ('soul's therapy' and 'self-therapeutic'), autobiographical (Lowell's speaker is 'unequivocally himself') and truthful (it features 'uncompromising honesty').<sup>11</sup> This notion of the therapeutic or cathartic potential of this particular literary form, as we shall see, underpins much subsequent writing about confessionalism, this notwithstanding Sexton's own ambivalence about such ends. As she commented in a 1970 interview (characteristically dissociating personal experience from the process of writing, and foregrounding the deceptive nature of the text): 'You don't solve problems in writing. They're still there. I've heard psychiatrists say, "See, you've forgiven your father. There it is in your poem." But I haven't forgiven my father. I just wrote that I did.'<sup>12</sup>

According to Rosenthal, the author's 'private humiliations, sufferings, and psychological problems' are central to the poem. This marks a deeply reductive, and indeed pathological, reading of the text (one which finds an echo in R. L. Phillips's claim that confessional poetry represents 'a direct expression of self' and 'an expression of personality').<sup>13</sup> Such readings reach their apotheosis in the work of Neil Myers who argues that 'what distinguishes Sexton's work from most of the genre is that she has survived'. Myers proposes an unworkable critical practice, one which suffers from the refusal to separate lived (living) experience from text, and which begs the question: when Sexton dies, do the poems come to seem less distinguished?<sup>14</sup>

As Rosenthal's subsequent explanation of how he chose the term 'confessional'

<sup>10</sup> M.L. Rosenthal, 'Poetry as Confession', *The Nation*, 189 (1959), 154-55 (p.154).

<sup>11</sup> *ibid.* Similar definitions persist in recent 'confessional' memoirists' descriptions of their work. Robert McCrum, author of *My Year Off: Rediscovering Life After a Stroke* (London: Picador, 1999), conflates Rosenthal's notions of therapy and autobiography, designating his work 'autotherapeutic', e-mail to the author, 2 November 1999.

<sup>12</sup> Anne Sexton, 'Craft Interview with William Packard', in McClatchy, ed., pp. 42-47 (p. 46) (first publ. in *The Craft of Poetry*, ed. by William Packard (New York: Doubleday, 1974)).

<sup>13</sup> Rosenthal, *The New Poets*, p. 26; Phillips, pp 8-9.

<sup>14</sup> 'The Hungry Sheep Look Up', p. 22.

indicates ('the term "confessional poetry" came *naturally* to my mind when I reviewed Robert Lowell's *Life Studies*'), the work is thought to arise irrepressibly and spontaneously from a fount of subjective experience and thence to the page.<sup>15</sup> Such rhetoric is pervasive in confessional criticism. Robert Phillips describes the mode as 'springing' from the 'need to confess',<sup>16</sup> and Al Alvarez praises Lowell's adoption (in *Life Studies*) of 'a manner far looser, easier, less stretched, and much closer to his *natural* speaking voice than anything he had done before'.<sup>17</sup> It is contiguous with the rhetoric of 'compulsion' which similarly informs contemporary readings of the mode. C.B. Cox and A.R. Jones applaud Sylvia Plath's 'compulsive intensity' in their 1964 *Critical Quarterly* essay, 'After the Tranquillized Fifties'.<sup>18</sup> Jones subsequently elaborates on these themes in his article 'Necessity and Freedom', proposing that confessional writing is characterised by an 'intolerable compulsion to confess' which is in turn, 'irresistibly tied to a free-floating and neurotic guilt.' Of the poetry of Lowell, Plath and Sexton, he argues that 'the experience of the work is inevitable and necessary suffering'. Indeed, the very title of his essay plays 'necessity' (something compelling, unavoidable, and coercive) against 'freedom' (release, 'break-through').<sup>19</sup> Even T.S. Eliot, writing slightly earlier, and describing what he terms 'meditative verse', speaks in terms of an 'obscure impulse' and suggests that the author of such poetry suffers under an enervating 'burden which he must bring to birth in order to obtain relief'.<sup>20</sup> May Swenson goes so far as to offer the tautological notion of an 'impelling impulse behind all [Sexton's] poetry so far'.<sup>21</sup>

This concept of the inevitable release of unbearable experience finds its modern-day expression in Erica Wagner's description of Ted Hughes's *Birthday Letters* as 'the artistic flowering of more than thirty years of pent-up emotion: this is the tidal force that gives the

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<sup>15</sup> *The New Poets*, p. 25 [my emphasis]. That the term came 'naturally' to Rosenthal invokes Keats's 'if poetry comes not as naturally as the leaves to a tree it had better not come at all'. So, too, the notion of spontaneity recalls Wordsworth's 'spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings'. Both signal the debt to Romanticism which several critics have identified.

<sup>16</sup> Phillips, p. 8.

<sup>17</sup> 'Beyond All This Fiddle', *Times Literary Supplement*, 23 March 1967, 229-32 (p. 230) [my emphasis].

<sup>18</sup> C.B. Cox and A.R. Jones, 'After the Tranquillized Fifties: Notes on Sylvia Plath and James Baldwin', *Critical Quarterly*, 6.2 (1964), 107-22 (p. 108).

<sup>19</sup> A.R. Jones, 'Necessity and Freedom: The Poetry of Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton', *Critical Quarterly*, 7.1 (1965), 11-30 (pp. 14, 15, 13). Jones's phrase replicates (although he does not cite the source) the title of Theodor Reik's *The Compulsion to Confess: On the Psychoanalysis of Crime and Punishment* (New York: Grove, 1959). However, it erroneously confuses clinical and textual phenomena (see p. 180). Sexton owned several of Reik's books, although not this one.

<sup>20</sup> 'The Three Voices of Poetry', in *On Poetry and Poets* (London: Faber and Faber, 1957; repr. 1986), pp. 89-102 (pp. 97-98).

<sup>21</sup> 'On All My Pretty Ones', in McClatchy, ed., pp. 122-24 (p. 123) (first publ. in *The Nation*, 196.8 (1963)).

poems their power'.<sup>22</sup> We find it, too, with an explicitly gendered inflection, in Alicia Ostriker's *Stealing the Language*: 'A moment arrives when the volcano erupts, the simmering blood boils over, the fire breaks out [. . .] the imperative of this moment has almost become an axiom in feminist poetry and criticism' (a process which Ostriker calls 'expressive-purgative').<sup>23</sup> Metaphors of tidal waves, volcanoes, earthquakes (Rosenthal describes the confessional poet as a 'uniquely seismographic instrument')<sup>24</sup> only confirm the apparently natural, organic and inadvertent nature of the confession, with the unfortunate consequence that the poet is figured as passive victim of some unpredictable and irrepressible force. Thus, defining accounts of the mode (and indeed many subsequent readings, informed as they are by these early critiques) are predicated on a kind of biological reductionism; one which regards the text as a reaction to – or, more generously, the product or expression of – the lived experience of the subject. Yet Sexton herself demurs, redirecting critical attention from the biography to the text (the process of writing, the choice of 'word'): 'Not a "compulsion." I hate to use the word because there might be a better one. But could I say "a seizure of inspiration"? Compulsion puts it on the level of neurosis.'<sup>25</sup>

In 'After the Tranquillized Fifties', Cox and Jones, like a number of their contemporaries, assume a direct and productive relationship between individual experience (as expressed in the poem) and society as a whole (the poem's audience). Wider society, we are told, both plays a part in generating overpowering feelings, and benefits from their expression. Cox and Jones postulate an explicit relationship between individual and social breakdown ('in a deranged world, a deranged response is the only possible reaction of the sensitive mind'), personal breakthrough ('the poet moving into new and disturbingly unusual territories') and generic break-out. They regard the development of 'surprising', 'new' and 'very different' forms of poetry as symptomatic of the desire to 'break free' of the stultifying (English) tradition.<sup>26</sup> Their rhetoric, incidentally, draws on Sylvia Plath's well-known comments about the influence on her own work of Sexton and Lowell's "intense breakthrough into very serious, very personal emotional experience [. . .] which I think is

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<sup>22</sup> *Ariel's Gift: Ted Hughes, Sylvia Plath and the story of 'Birthday Letters'* (London: Faber and Faber, 2000), p. 3. For more on Wagner's reading of confessionalism, see my "While My Pen Travels On", *Swansea Review*, 2001 [forthcoming].

<sup>23</sup> *Stealing the Language: The Emergence of Women's Poetry In America* (London: Women's Press, 1987), p. 126.

<sup>24</sup> *The New Poets*, p. 130.

<sup>25</sup> Anne Sexton, interview with Gregory Fitz Gerald, in Colburn, ed., *No Evil Star*, pp. 180-206 (p. 190) (first publ. in *Massachusetts Review*, 19 (1978)).

<sup>26</sup> Cox and Jones, p. 121. For more on the Anglo-American dimension, see my "Well I guess this didn't travel very well across the Atlantic": English readings of Anne Sexton', *Overhere*, 18.3 (1999), 20-29.

something quite new and exciting”’.<sup>27</sup>

Cox and Jones argue that the poet is ‘traditionally’ and ‘necessarily’ mad, but is to be tolerated because she or he shares their ‘vision of truth beyond the horizon of ordinary mental states’ and their experience of ‘derangement’ with, and for, the reader.<sup>28</sup> More simplistically still, Robert Phillips claims that in confessional poetry, ‘if totally successful, the personal is expressed so intimately, we can all identify and empathize.’<sup>29</sup> Stephen K. Hoffman summarises such readings thus:

The entire poeticized experience, then, serves ultimately as both the epitome of a broader cultural experience and an essentially evangelical paradigm for successful personal adaptation to, and usually transcendence of the circumstances of the age, which is offered to the reader for his edification and profitable emulation.<sup>30</sup>

However, it is difficult to countenance such essentialist readings of the relationship between personal expression and public response. Who is the ‘we’ to whom Phillips refers? Who does Hoffman’s ‘the reader’ represent? How is the reader to identify with, and draw an example from, a subject which is, itself, shifting, variable and indeterminate? Robert Boyers (in an article with which Sexton was to take issue) assumes the existence of a communal, contemporary experience – a shared sense of identity – which responds to, and takes meaning from, the poems. However, the ‘we’ to which Boyers (like Phillips) refers, implicitly excludes women. And even if it were to acknowledge women as readers, how could it hope to speak for all potential subject positions?

The anonymity of Miss Sexton’s oppressors makes her struggle all the more representative and relevant, for today we have all learned what it is like to perpetually stifle our complaints, not knowing to whom we can rightfully attribute a primary responsibility. Surrounded by middle-men, faceless bureaucrats and managers, we turn our anger inwards.<sup>31</sup>

Even those who try to respect the multiplicity and diversity of experience to which Sexton’s poetry might speak seem ultimately to efface distinct reading positions in their speculative search for common ground: ‘Like many contemporary black poets, women poets have to

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<sup>27</sup> Qtd by Alvarez in ‘Sylvia Plath’, in *Beyond All This Fiddle: Essays 1955-1967* (London: Allen Lane/The Penguin Press, 1968), pp. 45-58 (p. 50) (first publ. in *Review*, 9 (1963)). Alvarez notes that his article had acquired ‘some kind of underground critical currency’, p. 45. Plath, it seems, shares Sexton’s view of the distinctive newness of her work.

<sup>28</sup> Cox and Jones, p. 108.

<sup>29</sup> Phillips, p. 17.

<sup>30</sup> Steven K. Hoffman, ‘Impersonal Personalism: The Making of a Confessional Poetic’, *English Literary History*, 45 (1978), 687-709 (p. 689).

<sup>31</sup> ‘Live or Die: The Achievement of Anne Sexton’, in McClatchy, ed., pp. 204 –15 (p. 211) (first publ. in *Salmagundi*, II.i (1967)).

some extent created a new audience – people who did not read poetry as a habit but who began to understand that they were being addressed.’<sup>32</sup>

Cox and Jones’s argument is both contradictory and circular. We are told that contemporary poetry, while a specific reaction to the ‘maladjusted, psychotic personality of the age in which we live’, simultaneously takes its place in a long and honourable tradition: ‘literature has always interested itself in perverse states of mind.’<sup>33</sup> They tell us that there are some ‘sensitive’ minds (‘mad’ poets) who experience the world as ‘deranged’ and, by sharing their experience, cause the rest of us to appreciate the virtues of ‘normality’. Simultaneously, they propose that the modern world is itself ‘mad’ (‘the maladjusted, psychotic personality of the age in which we live’), the implication being that it is the ‘mad’ who, after all, have a sane world-view, and that the rest of us live by a precarious and erroneous belief in our normality. Quite apart from the problems with this argument already discussed, the assignation ‘mad’ is less determinate, and certainly less meaningful, than Cox and Jones would have us believe. As Sexton indicates, ‘mad’ is a social construction, not a fixed, determinate and transhistorical identity. It is, in her case (as Chapter Three will explain), a role to be appropriated and discarded at will: ‘I have been given a dramatic role in that I am popularly known as the crazy poet [. . .] it is my fault. I did write about it thoroughly, explored it so I made my own costume.’<sup>34</sup>

‘After the Tranquillized Fifties’, then, in keeping with other attempts to define the confessional mode, offers a profoundly pathological account of the state of contemporary American poetry, while simultaneously appearing overly optimistic in its latent assumptions about the therapeutic benefits of such writing – for poet and reader alike.<sup>35</sup> Its argument is predicated on a series of fallacies: the essentialist belief that there is a ‘truth’ out there which the ‘sensitive’ mind will retrieve; the normative distinction between ‘them’ (the insightful or plain ‘mad’ poet) and ‘us’ (the ‘normal adjusted’ masses who wait attentively for the insights to be brought back from the front line of insanity); the naïve confidence in literature’s mimetic qualities and in the transparency of language.

The consensus that confessional writing originates in extremes of experience generates a judgmental, even authoritarian, critical approach, such that the poems which are considered most successful are those which can best contain or assuage the fiercest of emotions. Hayden Carruth, for example (here ‘damn[ing] with faint praise’), says of the

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<sup>32</sup> McCabe, loc. cit. p. 5 above.

<sup>33</sup> Cox and Jones, pp. 108, 107.

<sup>34</sup> *Letters*, p. 396 (4 June 1973).

<sup>35</sup> This argument would find short shrift in Denise Levertov’s essay ‘Anne Sexton: Light Up the Cave’. Levertov, writing after Sexton’s suicide, argues against the tendency to equate breakdown with artistry: ‘While the creative impulse and the self-destructive impulse can, and often do, co-exist, their relationship is distinctly acausal; self-destructiveness is a handicap to the life of art, not the reverse.’ In *Light Up the Cave* (New York: New Directions, 1981), pp. 80-86 (p. 81).

poems in Sexton's *Live or Die*: 'They are the work of a gifted, intelligent woman *almost* in control of her material.'<sup>36</sup> A. R. Jones complains that in some of Sexton's poems, 'it is as if the subject has got out of control, become indeed almost hysterical.'<sup>37</sup> M.L. Rosenthal finds in the epigraphs to Sexton's first two volumes ('the slogans of the confessional movement', as he labels them) 'force of character', 'a hard yet sensitive simplicity' and 'clarity of line'.<sup>38</sup> However, it is arguable that her epigraphs emphasise uncertainty, indeterminacy and disorientation rather than decisiveness and determination. When Sexton cites the story of Oedipus at the beginning of *To Bedlam and Part Way Back*, it is Jocasta's fear and indecision which interest her. When she quotes Franz Kafka at the beginning of *All My Pretty Ones* ("a book should serve as the ax for the frozen sea within us"), it is the condition of despair, isolation and disorientation to which the 'ax' (writing) gives access which she emphasises: 'the books we need are the kind that act upon us like a misfortune [. . .] that make us feel as though we were [. . .] lost in a forest.' Rosenthal and his contemporaries – in their privileging of this new poetry's 'force' and 'clarity' over its evasiveness and indeterminacy – show signs of a persistent fealty to the standards and practices of the dominant pre-confessional (that is, formalist) tradition.

Such priorities, I would suggest, also signify an underlying anxiety about the subject's possible failure to control her overwhelming emotions (failure to stem the flood, or cap the volcano), thereby placing the auditor at risk. Louise Bogan goes so far as to complain of the risk of infection: 'one poem, by Anne Sexton, made me positively ill.'<sup>39</sup> It is the auditor's fear of being overwhelmed by somebody else's uncontrollable emissions (physical or psychological; the two are conflated) which stimulates the desire to impose strict barriers and forms of constraint. James Dickey's choice of metaphor in his vitriolic – and notorious – review of Sexton's *To Bedlam and Part Way Back* reveals his fear of contamination by her effusions:

Anne Sexton's poems so obviously come out of deep, painful sections of the author's life that one's literary opinions scarcely seem to matter; one feels tempted to drop them furtively into the nearest ashcan, rather than be caught with them in the presence of so much naked suffering.<sup>40</sup>

<sup>36</sup> 'In Spite of Artifice', *Hudson Review*, 19.4 (1966-7), p. 698 [my emphasis].

<sup>37</sup> Jones, p. 27.

<sup>38</sup> *The New Poets*, pp. 131-32.

<sup>39</sup> *What the Woman Lived: Selected Letters of Louise Bogan 1920-1970*, ed. by Ruth Limmer (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1973), p. 375.

<sup>40</sup> 'Five First Books', *Poetry*, 97 (1961), 316-20 (p. 318). Sexton's daughter recalls that 'the most poignant image I have of the difficulties she endured as an artist was my discovery, on the evening of her suicide, that she still carried in her wallet a clipping of the ax-job James Dickey had done'. Linda Gray Sexton, *Searching for Mercy Street: My Journey Back to My Mother, Anne Sexton* (Boston: Little Brown, 1994), p. 96.

Similarly, of Sexton's next volume (*All My Pretty Ones*), he complains: 'It would be hard to find a writer who deals more insistently on the pathetic and disgusting aspects of bodily experience.'<sup>41</sup> Dickey expresses many of the misgivings which characterise contemporary readings of confessional poetry: the sense of shame, the fear of becoming voyeuristic, the anxiety about taboo, the nervousness about being contaminated by the object of the gaze, and the uncertainty about how, exactly, to *read* (how to bring one's 'literary opinions' to bear).<sup>42</sup>

Patricia Meyer Spacks, too, reveals an anxiety about voyeurism. In her review of Sexton's *45 Mercy Street*, she asks: 'How, for instance, can one properly respond to lines as grotesquely uncontrolled as these?' What is the 'proper' (the etymological connection with the French *propre*: neat, orderly, clean, should be noted) way to read these poems? How can one witness somebody else's break-down without being tarnished, defiled, or shamed by what one sees? Is it possible to read and respond to the text while retaining a *cordon sanitaire*? Spacks proceeds to lament Sexton's 'increasing slovenliness' before admonishing her to strengthen her control over her mental – and physical – excesses: 'art requires more than emotional indulgence, requires a saving respect for disciplines and realities beyond the crying needs, the unrelenting appetites, of the self.'<sup>43</sup> Such anxieties, I will argue in the following chapters, are not only experienced by Sexton's readers, but inform Sexton's own ambivalence about her work (emerging in scatological and visceral metaphors, and in images of self as poisoner). As Alicia Ostriker suggests, 'the phrase "confessional poetry" has become equivalent to wrinkling up one's nose as at a nasty odor.'<sup>44</sup>

Alvarez's highly influential *Times Literary Supplement* article, 'Beyond All This Fiddle' (later reprinted as the lead essay in his book of the same name), recapitulates many of the – at times contradictory – conceptualisations of confessionalism discussed thus far.<sup>45</sup> For Alvarez (as for Rosenthal and Cox and Jones), confessional – or 'extremist' – poetry is simultaneously a poetry of its particular time and place (a response to the loss of 'traditional supports [. . .] religion, politics, natural cultural tradition, reason') and an expression of

<sup>41</sup> 'On *All My Pretty Ones*', in Colburn, ed., *Telling the Tale*, p. 106 (first publ. in *New York Times Book Review*, 28 April 1963).

<sup>42</sup> Arguably, Sexton is figured as a contemporary Medusa – lethal to all who gaze on her.

<sup>43</sup> 'On *45 Mercy Street*', in McClatchy, ed., pp. 186-89 (pp. 186, 188, 189) (first publ. in *New York Times Book Review*, 30 May 1976).

<sup>44</sup> 'The Nerves of a Midwife: Contemporary American Women's Poetry', *Parnassus: Poetry in Review* (Fall/Winter 1977), 69-87 (p. 75).

<sup>45</sup> Alvarez's relationship with Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath and his championing of Plath's early work is well documented, although his enthusiasm for the mode waned over time. In a 1966 postscript to his 1963 essay about Plath, Alvarez qualifies his earlier comments about the relationship between breakdown and 'what I now call Extremist poetry'. *Beyond All This Fiddle*, p. 57. More recently, he has declared that "'confessional poetry" was a mindless, loose-lipped style [. . .] of inward exploration [that] has now gone out of fashion'. *Where Did it All Go Right* (London: Richard Cohen, 1999), p.197.



alienated individuality.<sup>46</sup> It is a poetry in which content or subject matter ('psychic exploration [. . .] the artist's identity,') are more important than structure or form ('not a question of form'). In this respect, Alvarez anticipates Phillips's opening gambit: 'I felt that what a poet has to say is more important than how he says it.'<sup>47</sup> These are, of course, difficult readings to square with Sexton's profoundly self-conscious, purposive and complex poetics (the subject of this thesis). Moreover, they are contradicted by Alvarez's subsequent declaration: 'clearly it takes a highly disciplined and informed art to probe dispassionately and successfully into the extremes of inner space.' The *reductio ad absurdum* of such views is reached in Alvarez's assertion that 'a major test of originality is not a question of form but of psychic exploration, not of artifact but of the artist's identity'.<sup>48</sup>

As Alvarez's own argument demonstrates, these are problematic distinctions either to draw or to maintain. How can we distinguish between the text and the 'identity' which allegedly lies behind it? How can we know this identity without first encountering the 'form' or 'artifact' (that is, the text)? The attempt is, finally, self-defeating, descending into circularity and self-contradiction, and it generates an impossible reading practice: 'A poem succeeds or fails by virtue of the balance and subtlety of the man himself.' This latent faith in the innate superiority, or special gifts, of the creative author is made explicit in Alvarez's speculative profile of the 'Extremist' artist: 'He is what he is because his inner world is more substantial, variable and self-renewing than that of ordinary people.' Thus we are asked, ultimately, not to read and evaluate the poetic text, but to look through and beyond it to the living subject (of the poems in Lowell's *Life Studies*, Alvarez enthuses: 'you look through them to see the man as he is').<sup>49</sup>

Notwithstanding Alvarez's initial assertion that the 'movement towards Extremism' is either a product of the vicissitudes of the modern age or a symptom of the intensity of the poet's experience (or possibly both), he proposes, finally, that the extremist poem is produced in response to the demands of its audience for deeper and darker insights:

The more ruthless [the poet] is with himself, the more unshockable the audience becomes. This pushes the artist into what I would call Extremism. He pursues his insights to the edge of breakdown and then beyond it, until mania, depression, paranoia and the hallucinations that come with psychosis or are induced by drugs become as urgent and as commonplace as Beauty, Truth, Nature and the Soul were to the Romantics.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Alvarez, however, is less specific than Phillips who was later to identify confessional poetry as the product of 'post-Christian, post-Kennedy, post-Pill America' with a confidence which belied the inaccuracy of his chronology (p. xiii).

<sup>47</sup> Phillips, p. xiv.

<sup>48</sup> 'Beyond All This Fiddle', pp. 230, 229.

<sup>49</sup> *ibid.* p. 231.

<sup>50</sup> *ibid.* p. 230.

Here, perhaps unwittingly, Alvarez has lighted on one of the most striking and fruitful of the more recent theorisations of confession. His comments anticipate Michel Foucault's understanding of the importance for the completion of the confession of the relationship between subject and reader, penitent and confessor.

Foucault's understanding of confessional process offers a valuable means of repudiating the critiques discussed thus far, and provides a source of insight into Sexton's own complex and sophisticated poetics. It is thus necessary to quote him at some length:

The confession is a ritual of discourse in which the speaking subject is also the subject of the statement; it is also a ritual that unfolds within a power relationship, for one does not confess without the presence (or virtual presence) of a partner who is not simply the interlocutor but the authority who requires the confession, prescribes and appreciates it, and intervenes in order to judge, punish, forgive, console, and reconcile; a ritual in which the truth is corroborated by the obstacles and resistances it has had to surmount in order to be formulated; and finally, a ritual in which the expression alone, independently of its external consequences, produces intrinsic modifications in the person who articulates it: it exonerates, redeems, and purifies him; it unburdens him of his wrongs, liberates him, and promises him salvation.

For Foucault, as for Sexton, confession is not a means of expressing the irrepressible truth of prior, lived experience, but rather a 'technique [. . .] for producing truth'.<sup>51</sup> Confession is not an unpredictable symptom of unbearable emotions, it is a 'ritual'. The confession is generated and sustained not by the profundity of need or strength of compulsion of the author, but by the discursive relationship between speaker, text and reader (penitent, confession and confessor).

Sexton's early poem, 'Kind Sir: These Woods' (TB), is a deceptively playful text which offers a complex and suggestive engagement with some of the practices and problems of confession, exemplifying Foucault's understanding that the confession is 'a ritual'. In its emphasis on 'games', 'tricks' and voluntary participation, it indicates that the confession may be willed, sought out and constructed, rather than spontaneous, reactive and compulsive. The poem cites as its epigraph a line from Thoreau's *Walden*: 'For a man needs only to be turned around once with his eyes shut in this world to be lost . . . Not til we are lost . . . do we begin to find ourselves.' This refers the reader back to a line from the final stanza of the previous poem ('You, Dr. Martin') in which the speaker plaintively asks: 'Am I still lost?' In the context ('You, Dr. Martin' depicts the speaker's stay in a mental asylum, or 'summer hotel'; a seasonal retreat which finds an echo in the 'late August' games of 'Kind Sir'), the metaphor of being 'lost' – the passive mode is significant – represents psychological disturbance and vulnerability. 'Kind Sir' dramatises this disorientation and, more importantly, renders the

verb 'to lose' in its active form, thus transforming being lost into the rather more purposive act of losing oneself. We recall, from the epigraph to *All My Pretty Ones*, that the 'books we need' are precisely those which offer this experience.

The poem renders explicit the presence of the auditor/confessor (here, a 'Kind Sir') whose acceptance of the confession is necessary for its success. This is Foucault's 'partner who is not simply the interlocutor but the authority who requires the confession, prescribes and appreciates it'. The formality of 'Sir' denotes authority, while 'kind' connotes the penitent's desire to please. A similar relationship sustains 'Cripples and Other Stories' (LD), discussed later, where the speaker enters into a seductive/masochistic relationship with her doctor. 'Kind Sir' presents us with what is, in archetypal terms, a nightmare scene, yet this literal and metaphorical loss of self is also, and paradoxically, a 'technique' for finding oneself. Foucault's 'ritual' is here dramatised as a childhood game: 'It was a trick / to turn round once and know you were lost.' The poem emphasises not the horror of being lost, nor the bravery of the search for the way out, but the process by which one might activate this crisis. The references to the literal or metaphorical loss of self as a 'game' and a 'trick', and the idiom of the nursery rhyme ('the forest between Dingley Dell / and grandfather's cottage') undermine the alleged inevitability and necessity of the trauma and show the speaker to be an active and willing participant in the game.

Becoming lost is a strategy, not an accident. Indeed, Sexton's speaker, rather than seeking the way out (of the wood of mental collapse), is looking for the way in. She seeks not therapy or an 'expressive-purgative' release (as Ostriker puts it), but an attenuation of her condition. As Jacqueline Rose has commented (here confirming Thoreau's understanding): 'you can only start seeing – this was Freud's basic insight – when you know that your vision is troubled, fallible, off-key. The only viable way of reading is not to find, but to disorientate, oneself.'<sup>52</sup> *Contra* the views of Rosenthal about the 'force of clarity' which is intrinsic to the confession, in 'Kind Sir' it is immersion in chaos and confusion which is necessary and fruitful. Here, as in *Macbeth* (an intertextual reference which adds to the dramatic and magical resonance of the woods; Sexton's second volume, *All My Pretty Ones*, takes its title from Shakespeare's play), day and night are inverted or have become indistinguishable, leaving the speaker without any landmarks by which to determine her position. In the words of a subsequent poem, 'Music Swims Back to Me' (TB), 'there are no signposts to tell the way.'

'Kind Sir' moves from these recollections of a childhood game ('it was a trick to turn round once') to a more insistent and self-reflexive commentary on the processes and

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<sup>51</sup> *The History of Sexuality, Volume One: An Introduction* (Harmondsworth: Peregrine, 1981, repr. 1984), pp. 61-62, 59.

<sup>52</sup> *States of Fantasy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), p.144.

techniques which should, I would argue, be regarded as central to Sexton's poetics. First, we have the embracing of excess and abundance, itself marking a disregard for rules and prohibitions. Sexton's speaker has gone one stage further than the epigraph from *Walden* advocates – she has 'turned round twice':

Kind Sir: Lost and of your same kind  
I have turned round twice with my eyes sealed  
and the woods were white and my night mind  
saw such strange happenings, untold and unreal.

Second, we have the process of introspection. Although her eyes are sealed, she has gained insight from the technique of looking inward (a confirmation of the literal and metaphorical relationships between sight, insight and foresight, and truth and sooth-saying, which emerge repeatedly in Sexton's poems, and will be discussed in subsequent chapters). Finally, Sexton's speaker acknowledges – albeit only to belittle them – contemporary readings of the courage and bravery of the confessional search:

And opening my eyes, I am afraid of course  
to look – this inward look that society scorns –  
Still, I search in these woods and find nothing worse  
than myself, caught between the grapes and the thorns.

This rhetoric of courage and bravery is typical of readings of confessionalism, even to this day.<sup>53</sup> 'Courage' is the only quality which James Dickey concedes in his review of Sexton's work: 'Mrs. Sexton's candor, her courage, and her story are worth anyone's three dollars.'<sup>54</sup> Robert Phillips posits, as one of the identifying marks of confessional poetry, that 'it displays moral courage'.<sup>55</sup> And central to Laurence Lerner's 1987 *Critical Quarterly* essay, 'What is confessional poetry?', is the view that 'the writing of a confessional poem is an act of courage'.<sup>56</sup> As this indicates, the epithet 'courageous' is a moral judgement. It implicitly accepts the value of the act of confession, and credits its putative honesty and sincerity (if it were not believed, it would not be called 'brave' but rather deceitful or self-justifying). It is a credulous reading which would accept as a sign of courage that which might, in fact, be a successful act of deceit or subterfuge (so, Sexton's 'The Double Image' (TB), mentioned in Chapter Five, is typically approved as a supreme act of bravery rather than an impressive and

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<sup>53</sup> John Diamond's *C: Because Cowards Get Cancer Too* (London: Vermilion, 1998), for example, is praised as a 'brave and brilliant book' (*Times Literary Supplement*, 9 October 1998, p. 29). Such epithets are parodied to brilliant effect in Bel Littlejohn's spoof confession '*Hug Me While I Weep for I Weep for the World* which she describes as 'a brave book, brave and intimate' before declaring: 'my stark, painful, almost unbearable reminiscences are out: enjoy.' 'Now You Can Read my True Searing Story', *Guardian*, 24 October 1997, p. 19.

<sup>54</sup> 'Five First Books', p. 319.

<sup>55</sup> Phillips, p. 17.

<sup>56</sup> p. 56. Lerner proceeds to distinguish between 'narrative', 'pronoun' and 'emotional courage'.

effective obfuscation). Such readings suggest that, notwithstanding the difficulties entailed, there is something worthy and beneficial about the confession. For Foucault, of course, it is precisely these barriers and difficulties which construct and validate what we take to be ‘courage’ (or what we take to be truthful; a quality to which it is related, hence Dickey’s yoking of ‘candor’ and ‘courage’). As Foucault suggests in the comments cited earlier, confession is ‘a ritual in which the truth [or the subject’s bravery] is corroborated by the obstacles and resistances it has had to surmount in order to be formulated’.

Sexton’s speaker claims to be ‘afraid’, although the weakness of the adjective, and the dismissive rider, ‘of course’, belie any real sense of terror. Further, ‘of course’ reads as a concession to the expectations of her audience rather than a credible statement of her own position. Indeed, she indicates (and this insight will inform my subsequent reading of a number of poems) that such fear as there is is not a consequence of her own encounter with the anticipated object of her search, but is a product of her anxiety about the audience’s condemnation (society’s ‘scorn’). If we are to understand the confessional text not as the compulsive expression of the prior experience of the author, but as a gesture which achieves its meaning and status as confession only in the process of being received or read, then it is arguable that it is the audience, and not the experience, which induces fear.<sup>57</sup>

Finally, to go back to the metaphor of the map and the technique of disorientation, ‘Kind Sir: These Woods’ shows that the speaker is able to ascertain her place on the map (metaphorically to find herself) by a process of triangulation, by situating herself in relation to two other points (the grapes and the thorns, connoting salvation or crucifixion, contentment or suffering).<sup>58</sup> Her identity is to be understood as being defined by these two poles. Moreover, the metaphor of triangulation may be read as signifying the speaker’s sense of her own identity as confessional poet, which is understood as an effect of her relationship with writing (the fruitful and productive ‘grapes’) and audience (the ‘thorns’: representing suffering and condemnation).

If we look at the few poems in which Sexton explicitly refers to ‘confession’, we can see that they too refuse interpretation according to the terms proposed by the early delineators of the mode. ‘With Mercy for the Greedy’ (PO), for example, resists the facile assumption that the confession is a symptom of the subject’s compulsion or ‘need to confess’.<sup>59</sup> The poem is prefaced with a dedication: ‘For my friend, Ruth, who urges me to make an appointment

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<sup>57</sup> As Antony Easthope proposes, ‘the meaning of the text is always produced in a process of reading’ – a notion rendered explicit and fundamental in Sexton’s poetry. *Poetry as Discourse*, p. 7.

<sup>58</sup> In the introduction to *Autobiographics*, Leigh Gilmore develops a sustained metaphor of mapping to describe the ways in which women writers locate their positions in relation to the dominant tradition.

<sup>59</sup> It was after a reading of this poem that Sexton made the comments quoted at the beginning of this chapter: “‘Look, Anne, you’re the *only* confessional poet around”.’ See pp. 9-10 (above).

for the Sacrament of Confession.’ As Sexton explains in one of the Crawshaw Lectures which she gave at Colgate University, the poem was written after Sexton had had an (illegal) abortion: ‘When I came back from the abortion, I wrote my friend Ruth who lived in Japan about what I had done. Her reply was religious, and she sent me her dog bitten cross.’<sup>60</sup>

Sexton had used the experience as the basis of her poem ‘The Abortion’ (PO), an early draft of which opens with an epigraph from the suppressed chapter of Dostoyevsky’s *The Possessed*: ‘The fundamental idea of the document is a terrible, undisguised need of punishment, the need of the cross, the public chastisement. Meanwhile the need of the cross in a man who doesn’t believe in the cross . . .’<sup>61</sup> As this indicates, the ‘need’ to confess is more complex and multifaceted than Cox, Jones, and Sexton’s other early critics would suggest. Is it simply an instinctive need to release ‘unbearable’ emotions? Is it a need for forgiveness? Is it the exhibitionist’s need of an audience? Or, as Sexton’s invocation of Dostoyevsky would suggest, is it a ‘need of punishment’? As the draft epigraph to ‘The Abortion’ and as ‘With Mercy for the Greedy’ implies, neither the existence nor the profundity of all or any of these ‘need[s]’ is any guarantee of their satisfaction. As Sexton exclaims in ‘With Mercy’ – echoing Dostoyevsky – ‘need is not quite belief.’

The title of the poem itself offers an early indication of the reciprocal or discursive nature of the confession. It confirms the symbiotic relationship between merciful auditor and needy (greedy, excessive, uncontrolled, impulsive) penitent. In so doing, it invokes Shakespeare’s ‘The quality of mercy is not strained / It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven’ from *The Merchant of Venice*, and, more importantly, the play’s recognition of the reciprocal or mutually beneficial nature of such an exchange: ‘It blesseth him that gives and him that takes.’<sup>62</sup> In ‘With Mercy for the Greedy’, the reciprocity of benefit (the merciful need to give and the greedy need to take) symbolises the dialogue at the heart of confession. Sexton problematises the notion that the confession is the product of the needs of the speaker alone, showing that the auditor too has needs (here, perhaps, the need to claim the speaker for her faith) and that it is the desire to fulfil these which, at least in part, sustains the confession.<sup>63</sup>

Indeed, notwithstanding the passive and acquiescent position inscribed for the reader of confessional poetry in early delineations of the mode, Sexton reveals that the reader wields considerable power and may even be regarded as dominant. The confessional process is predicated on the presence – and indeed the appeasement – of a sympathetic auditor willing to

<sup>60</sup> Crawshaw Lectures (9) p. 16, HRHRC.

<sup>61</sup> *All My Pretty Ones*, typescripts and worksheets, HRHRC.

<sup>62</sup> *The Merchant of Venice*, IV.1.179. Hillis Miller describes such an exchange as ‘the economy of equivalence, of giving and receiving, of equable translation and measure’. *Tropes*, p. 141.

<sup>63</sup> Sexton’s short story ‘The Letting Down of the Hair’, discussed in Chapter Three, explores these ideas in more detail.

show mercy to even the neediest and most abject of penitents. The *Oxford Shorter English Dictionary* defines mercy thus: 'Forbearance and compassion shown by one person to another who is in his power and who had no claim to receive kindness.' Foucault proposes that although the 'veracity' of the confession is 'guaranteed' by 'the bond, the basic intimacy in discourse, between the one who speaks and what he is speaking about', power in fact has a more specific origin:

The agency of domination does not reside in the one who speaks [. . .] but in the one who listens and says nothing; not in the one who knows and answers, but in the one who questions and is not supposed to know.<sup>64</sup>

Thus critical attention must be redirected from the putative experience of the needy ('greedy') subject to the role of the merciful (and thus dominant) auditor.

The mock formality of the opening lines of 'With Mercy for the Greedy' (replicating the apostrophe in 'Kind Sir: These Woods'), the legalistic repetitions, and the exaggerated dichotomy of 'you' and 'me' confirm the penitent's subservience to the authority of her listener (Ruth, the addressee of the letter/poem):

Concerning your letter in which you ask  
me to call a priest and in which you ask  
me to wear The Cross that you enclose.

The wooden cross which inspires the poem is posited as the means of mediation between merciful and greedy (it is an object of exchange sent by Ruth to the speaker in order to initiate prayer) and as a symbol of potential salvation. It acts as a metaphor for the confessional text, symbolising – in that both cross and poem are transferred from one party to the other – confessional dialogue, or the communication of needs between penitent subject and ideally merciful and responsive confessor. Ruth sends the cross in the hope of a response and the confessing subject makes her confession in like manner. Indeed, in this poem, the gift of the cross prompts the confession by return. Similarly, in the context of this poem at least, the cross and the proposed confession hold out the hope of some kind of comfort or cure.

Yet such hopes are thwarted. Cross and poem alike are mere aesthetic – and thus incredible – renderings (in the sense of imitations, representations) of ineluctable experience, belief, or, as here, loss of faith. The cross fails because of the inability of the recipient to understand or *read* it, or, more properly, because of its own failure of signification – its refusal to be read.<sup>65</sup> The meaning of the cross (and, by extension, of the confessional poem) as understood by its donor (the confessing subject) is always and already lost to the reader.

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<sup>64</sup> *The History of Sexuality*, p. 62.

Furthermore, the cross itself is only ever a sign of something else, of something that is not there. It is a metonym for the absent Christ (who is, in turn, perhaps a metonym for God). It delivers its message at one remove, from a distance:

I have worn  
your cross, hung with package string around my throat.  
It tapped me lightly as a child's heart might.  
tapping secondhand, softly waiting to be born.

In like manner, the confessional text is only ever a sign of something absent: an unverifiable and unrepresentable subjectivity. In this respect, cross and poem are metaphors for the 'Sacrament of Confession' which is, too, a mere sign or token of salvation and *not* salvation itself. In a Crawshaw Lecture, Sexton asks: 'How do I resolve my guilt? How do I confess? What is my sacrament? (the poem itself)'<sup>66</sup> – a self-generating circularity (the poem both laments and satisfies the speaker's need) which undermines any sense of spiritual or therapeutic gain and emphasises, once again, the primacy of the text. In 'With Mercy for the Greedy', the already metonymical cross proves inadequate, as the speaker takes yet another step away from the original faith which this long chain symbolises. Unable to pray either to God or to His son or to His son's sign, she prays to these metonyms' own metonym – the cross's mark (or 'shadow') on the page: 'that gray place / where it lies on your letter...deep, deep.' The pun of 'lies on your letter' should also be noted as it signifies a deep scepticism about the efficacy of language or any other code of signification.

As the reflective, even resigned, final stanza of the poem suggests, need is endlessly variable and impenetrable. The speaker's final response to the gift of the cross reads:

My friend, my friend, I was born  
doing reference work in sin, and born  
confessing it. This is what poems are:  
with mercy  
for the greedy,  
they are the tongue's wrangle,  
the world's pottage, the rat's star.

Sexton's defence and manifesto encompasses all of the contradictions and complexities of the confessional situation (the appeal for understanding, the recognition of the importance of the personal past, the reference to the process of rendering textual account, the give and take which characterises confessional dialogue). Most importantly, it acknowledges the bitter discontent, the ugly, painful messiness of the act of confession, which, like the aesthetically

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<sup>65</sup> As Hillis Miller argues, 'a true gift can never be returned [. . .] The final realm in which rational equivalence and exchange breaks down is [. . .] that of language itself.' *Tropes*, p. 143.

<sup>66</sup> Crawshaw Lectures (9) p. 17, HRHRC.



pleasing cross, may appear promising, but may mask a more profound confusion. The cumbersome gutturals and plosives of ‘the tongue’s wrangle, / the world’s pottage’ form an obstruction, denying any soothing resolution. The reference to ‘pottage’ (the allusion is to the Biblical story of Esau’s poor exchange of his birthright for his brother Jacob’s ‘pottage’, or stew)<sup>67</sup> signifies an early, but nevertheless persistent doubt about the value of confessional poetry and its ability to achieve the kind of individual and social salvation which Alvarez, Rosenthal, and Cox and Jones expect of it. The final palindromic (and thus circular) ‘rat’s star’ has a similar effect. As with Sexton’s reference to the poem itself as simultaneously a cry for, and sign of, sacrament, it forces the text back on itself, confirming its self-referentiality.

Thom Gunn, rather uncharacteristically, fails to comprehend the significance of these last few lines, arguing that

The transition “this is what poems are” is too easy (she was not born writing poems, after all), the special relevance of “greedy” to the passage or the poem is not clear, and the last two lines appear to be there more for the suggestion of the words than for the meanings.<sup>68</sup>

‘With Mercy for the Greedy’ is about writing, about language (hence, ‘the tongue’s wrangle’) and about the ‘suggestion of the words’. It evokes a lifetime’s struggle for understanding (hence ‘born / doing reference work’), a struggle which is not spontaneous and irrepressible but involves challenging and intellectual labour. Moreover, the product of this labour is a ‘work’ of ‘reference’ – that is, a public document, a comprehensive and accurate source of information for others. The relevance of ‘greedy’ is that it connects with the reference to ‘pottage’ and invokes Esau’s poor exchange (symbolic, in turn, of the confessional poet’s Faustian pact, or, as will be discussed in Chapter Three, her exploitation of her experience for personal gain). The metaphor questions whether the recompense (a sacrament which never comes) justifies the process. ‘Rat’s star’, as I have suggested, is a circular trope indicating the endlessness of this search for salvation. As for Gunn’s curious distinction between ‘the suggestions’ and the ‘meanings’, this, arguably, is one of the points which the poem makes. The confession is only ever suggestive; it offers itself for reading and interpretation but cannot provide any finite meanings.

In one of her Crawshaw Lectures, Sexton cites the final lines of ‘With Mercy for the Greedy’ to support a crucial point about the fundamentally discursive nature of confession. There is no single meaning, possessed by the author (and symptomatic of her trauma or

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<sup>67</sup> Genesis 25. 29-34.

<sup>68</sup> ‘On *All My Pretty Ones*’, in McClatchy, ed., pp. 124-26 (p. 125) (first publ. in *Yale Review*, LIII.i (1963)).

‘need’). Rather, there are multiple and diverse meanings (or, conversely, moments of aporia) produced in the process of reading:

Rat’s star, by the way, is a palindrome. It reads backwards the same way as it reads forwards. Rats is star spelled backwards [. . .] It means something to me. My husband thinks its crazy and has no meaning.<sup>69</sup>

Sexton makes a similar point more explicitly in her poem ‘Is It True?’ (discussed in Chapter Five): ‘To one shit is a feeder of plants / to another the evil that permeates them.’ The language of the confessional text (*contra* Rosenthal, for example, who speaks explicitly in terms of the transparency of the poem) is non-referential, opaque, and differential. The words which she uses, although clear and expressive to her, may bear a profoundly different meaning – or, indeed, no meaning – to the reader.

The difficult relationship between confessional speaker and reader is at the heart of one of Sexton’s best-known works. In ‘Her Kind’ (the poem which she read at the beginning of every public performance of her work, and which consequently became ineluctably identified with her particular confessional poetics), Sexton explores the perceptions, or more properly misperceptions, held by her audience. Crucial to the poem and its depiction, in Sexton’s words, of ‘what kind of poet I am’, is the line ‘A woman like that is misunderstood. / I have been her kind’. ‘Her Kind’ invokes, in order to refute, orthodox readings of her peculiar (I use the word advisedly) kind of poetry. The poem opens flamboyantly, defiantly, with the ‘I’ so disdained by critics of the mode: ‘I have gone out, a possessed witch / haunting the black air, braver at night.’ Typically accused of introspection, the speaker here explicitly reaches outwards (‘I have gone out’) and takes the wider view. She is proud of the madness or possession which seizes her, yet refuses to specify the source of her inspiration (compulsion?). Is she ‘possessed’ by madness? Or by poetry (motivated by the desire to write, to share, to go ‘out’ of herself)? Or, in the context of the very public, and repeated, performance of the poem, is she ‘possessed’ (in the sense of controlled) by the expectations of her audience?

Here, Sexton’s speaker explicitly claims the bravery so valorised in confessional poetry, yet her claim is undermined by the fact that she makes it only at night, under cover of darkness (perhaps a self-reflexive allusion to the courage fostered by the, usually evening, performances of her work). Of course, the claim to be ‘braver at night, / dreaming evil’ is a warning that Sexton and persona should be dissociated. The life of the imagination, the adoption of different personae, the role of the witch, belong to the realm of fantasy (to be played out at night and in dreams) and should not be confused with the real life of the poet. A

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<sup>69</sup> Crawshaw Lectures (9) p. 3, HRHRC.

similar ambivalence underpins the speaker's record of her night-time flight over the 'plain houses, light by light'. Is the witch obliterating the lights as she flies over the houses, or is she bringing light (insight, illumination) as she passes? It is clear, however, from the metaphor of 'twelve-fingered' (which, arguably, connotes the writing hands) that the speaker embraces her distinctive role as poet of disorder, extremity, and excess (we recall the speaker's turning round 'twice' in contrast to the necessary 'once', in 'Kind Sir: These Woods').

Stanza two proffers a further defence of Sexton's idiosyncratic and specifically female poetics. She defiantly celebrates her place as an outsider, ill at ease in the dominant poetic tradition. In this poem, as in 'Kind Sir', her place is beyond civilisation – in the woods. Most importantly, 'Her Kind' proposes, *contra* Patricia Meyer Spacks, James Dickey and others, that there is a 'certain sense of order there' (to adopt the words of Sexton's 'For John, Who Begs Me Not to Enquire Further', which explores similar themes and which will be discussed in the Conclusion). Although literally outside, and figuratively beyond, the recognition or understanding of a conventional, tacitly formalist, criticism, there is evidence in these 'caves in the woods' of a different, and distinctive, kind of creative process. Sexton accepted the label 'primitive', and the list of 'skillets' and 'carvings' in the poem celebrates a particular kind of naïve, primitive, folk art.<sup>70</sup> Confessional poetry, then, is a skilled, deliberate and functional act:

I have found the warm caves in the woods,  
filled them with skillets, carvings, shelves,  
closets, silks, innumerable goods;  
fixed the supper for the worms and the elves:  
whining, rearranging the disaligned.

It is also, potentially, a mode of disguise or concealment. The caves are secreted in the woods, there are closets to hide in, and 'silks' are fabricated (elsewhere, for example in the letter quoted earlier, Sexton uses metaphors of 'costume' and camouflage).

The poem also concedes the important – indeed vital – role played by the confessional audience (the 'disaligned'). If there is a compulsion or imperative behind confessional poetry, might it not be the imperative to respond to, and alleviate, the demands and needs of the audience? That the beneficiaries of this confession (the 'worms and the elves') are 'whining' (the syntax is ambiguous, rendering 'whining' applicable to subject and object alike) is an early indication of the ambivalence about the audience which emerges more explicitly in later poems (such as 'Talking to Sheep' (MSt.) and 'Making a Living' (DN), discussed in Chapter Three).

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<sup>70</sup> In her interview with William Heyen and Al Poulin Sexton explains: 'I was just what one would call a primitive' (p. 141), and, to Gregory Fitz Gerald: 'I'm what they call a "primitive," because I don't know much' (p. 180).

In the final stanza, the speaker proclaims – and the emphatic use of the past tense confirms – her transcendence of the prohibition against confessional poetry:

I have ridden in your cart, driver,  
waved my nude arms at villages going by,  
learning the last bright routes, survivor  
where your flames still bite my thigh  
and my ribs crack where your wheels wind.

The punctuation and enjambment of ‘routes, survivor / where’ (addressed either to the witness/survivor who survives her or, self-referentially declaring herself as the ‘survivor / where [. . .]’) confirm that she has weathered public ridicule and condemnation (‘ridden’ with its aural pun on ‘written’ indicates that it is the writing which invites punishment) and lives to tell the tale (hence the shift to the present tense in the last lines). That she waves her ‘nude arms’ is, again, a provocative and defiant gesture, invoking the metaphors of nakedness, self-revelation and shame which are typical of confessional criticism (Jones, for example, argues that ‘the persona is naked ego’ and Phillips suggests that confession ‘gives the naked emotion direct’).<sup>71</sup> Yet as the circular, perpetual and repetitive nature of these metaphors suggests (‘still bite’ and ‘wheels wind’ are significantly described in the present tense), the risk of punishment is ever-present. The penalty for writing in a new and distinctive way (for being ‘twelve-fingered’), for writing about inner or psychological experience (‘out of mind’), for being ‘a woman like that’, is played out, finally, on the woman’s body in images of torture (being burnt at the stake, stretched on the rack or broken on the wheel).

‘Her Kind’ is, I would suggest, an entirely characteristic Sexton poem. It problematises the process of writing, showing it to be subject to particular, and persistent, pressures. Although it evokes freedom, liberation, spirit and independence, it is predicated on images of containment, circumscription and punishment. Sexton’s own comments about the poem replicate this tension:

I have never given a reading without reading ‘Her Kind’ first off. I always say “I’ll read you this poem, and then you’ll know just what kind of a poet I am, just what kind of a woman I am. And then if anyone wishes to leave, they may do so”.<sup>72</sup>

This is a defiant statement of identity, indicating to the audience that they should ‘take me or leave me’. Yet it also anticipates hostility (‘scorn’ perhaps), revealing a latent anxiety about the audience’s potential response to her writing self. Indeed, Sexton proceeds to recall the first occasion when she used this introduction, and someone did walk out. The fact, first, that

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<sup>71</sup> Jones, p. 14; Phillips, p. 8.

<sup>72</sup> Crawshaw Lectures (5) pp. 1-2, HRHRC.

Sexton is willing publicly to admit this, and second, that being taken so literally did not dissuade her from offering the audience this ‘get out’, suggests a self-mocking uncertainty about what otherwise reads as a poetic credo.

It is significant that Sexton presents herself in this ‘signature’ poem in the persona of a witch. In 1971, the poet C.K. Williams wrote to her about new developments in her work: ‘there’s a feeling that your poetry has *earned* something through the years; some kind of wise, sorceress-like objectivity towards yourself and words.’<sup>73</sup> Sexton replied: ‘You are right. I have earned it. From now on I will see myself as a sorceress. Great, Great!’ However, there are a number of contradictions here. First, in ‘seeing’ herself as a sorceress, Sexton indicates that this is merely a perception, a mask or a façade. It is not a true identity to be assumed, but a superficial appearance to be appropriated (reminiscent of ‘I say that I’m the only confessional poet’, quoted earlier). Second, how ‘wise’ (rational, coherent) is a sorceress? If Sexton is ‘sorceress-like’ is she not irrational, possessed rather than ‘objective’ (hence the latent sarcasm of Sexton’s ‘Great, Great!’)? Finally, there is irony in Sexton’s ‘From now on I will [. . .]’ for, of course, the suggestion that she should assume the role of sorceress is not a new one, and merely takes her back to what is, surely, her most long-lived persona. The success of this mask, incidentally, is confirmed in William Pritchard’s recollection of Sexton’s reading ‘with spellbinding intensity’ and Barbara Kevle’s description of Sexton’s performance in an interview: ‘her answers sounded like incantations, repetitious chants.’<sup>74</sup>

The Crawshaw Lectures, referred to on several occasions above, give an important insight into Sexton’s understanding of confessionalism as a mode and of her place in it. Coming towards the end of her career, some thirteen years and five books after her first publication, these lectures (grouped under the title ‘Anne on Anne’) provide a retrospective summary of what, to Sexton, was either significant or ‘misunderstood’ – or possibly both – about her work. They may be read as an attempt to set the record straight.

It is apparent, from the first of the lectures alone, that Sexton is keen to dispel the view that her poetry is autobiographical, that it is the spontaneous expression of her own prior lived experience. Thus she implicitly takes issue with many of the founding definitions of confessionalism (and thereby with subsequent views, such as those of Thomas P. McDonnell who argues that Sexton’s poetry ‘is not only personal but clearly the autobiography of the psyche itself’).<sup>75</sup> Indeed, it may be more accurate to say that Sexton, given the opportunity to reflect and comment at length on her own work, is keen to dispel any and all preconceptions

<sup>73</sup> C.K. Williams, Letter to Anne Sexton, 13 November 1971, HRHRC; Anne Sexton, Letter to C.K. Williams, 1 December 1971, HRHRC.

<sup>74</sup> William H. Pritchard, ‘The Anne Sexton Show’, *Hudson Review*, 31.2 (1978), 387-92 (p. 390); Anne Sexton, interview with Barbara Kevles, in *Women Writers at Work: The Paris Review Interviews*, ed. by George Plimpton (New York: Modern Library, 1998), pp. 307-37 (p. 309).

of it. From the tone of her 'Prefatory Remarks' at the beginning of the lecture series, it is evident that Sexton is acutely aware of, and determined to confound, her audience's reading of her and her writing: 'today we meet only for a few minutes, and in those few minutes I will give you warnings and intimations. You might wonder what an Anne on Anne class could be about.'<sup>76</sup> Thus, with Sexton, what you see may not be what you get. We are reminded of her comments about reading 'Her Kind'. With a similar prefatory note of tension and watchfulness, Sexton alerts her audience to be on its guard, to tread carefully. There is something simultaneously playful, self-dramatising, and deceitful about such an introduction: a depiction of the self as elusive, enigmatic, uncontainable, requiring concentration and attentiveness but promising no sureties.

Such comments also make apparent Sexton's own sense of her writing self as constructed or artificial. The assignment which she sets for the course involves the students 'reading the various critiques of my work as well as my five books'. Thereafter, they are required to formulate questions to ask Sexton but, before asking them of her, to anticipate her likely responses: 'You 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.' So 'Anne on Anne' is asking the students to write 'Anne', to authorise her, in a process which replicates that by which the confessional persona is constructed by her audience. Sexton develops this idea further by suggesting that the 'Anne' who is both the subject and the object of these lectures is not only a construction of her present audience, but also a product of her previous and potential audiences. Admitting to her own doubts and uncertainties about how to introduce the lectures, she depicts herself as subject to the ideas and initiatives of others: 'Bruce [the lecture organiser] reasoned that [. . .]'; 'my students at Boston University persuaded me [. . .]'; 'they reasoned [. . .]'. Thus the final format of the lectures represents a consensus of views on 'Anne' rather than *Anne* on 'Anne'. Anne is effaced from Anne. As Sexton concludes: 'I hope from this class to learn as much about myself that startles as you will learn about me.' In so privileging the dramatic, fictive or fabricated nature of the experience typically identified as biographically accurate, Sexton provides an important insight into her own poetics.<sup>77</sup> Here, she makes a subtle, but repeated and extremely important, distinction between the 'I' as subject and the 'I' as object of the text (the 'I' who is speaking and the 'I' who is being spoken about, or the subject of the enunciation and the subject of the enounced). The effect of this distinction is to confound the kinds of readings which might instantly, and unthinkingly, conflate the two – which would seek in the 'I' of the

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<sup>75</sup> 'Light in a Dark Journey', in Wagner-Martin, ed., pp. 40-44 (p. 40) (first publ. in *America*, 116 (13 May 1967)).

<sup>76</sup> *Crawshaw Lectures* (1) p. 1, HRHRC.

<sup>77</sup> *ibid.* pp. 1, 3.

poem 'evidence' about the 'I' of the writer. Sexton reminds us that there is not necessarily or always an identification between them.

Sexton continues this theme in the first lecture where, significantly, she takes issue with one of the most important of the critical essays which defined 'confessionalism' (A. R. Jones's 'Necessity and Freedom'). Literally, the first thing which Anne says about Anne is in refutation of orthodox views of her writing. She quotes Jones's view of the "unmistakably autobiographical impact" of her work and his contention that "the 'I' of Sexton's poems [which Sexton, incidentally, misquotes as 'eye'] is clearly related intimately and painfully to the poet's autobiography", and then disdainfully comments 'I would like for a moment to disagree'.<sup>78</sup> She proceeds by emphasising the fictionality and the artifice of autobiography which, it emerges, is a simulation: 'It is true that I am an autobiographical poet most of the time, or at least so I lead my readers to believe.'<sup>79</sup> It is clear that the techniques of autobiographical writing are easily assimilated, transposing the impression of autobiographical truth (a cornerstone, according to Jones and others, of confession) to the entirely fictional. Thus, far more important in Sexton's writing than the autobiographical 'I' (although not necessarily more important than the autobiographical 'eye'), is what she calls the persona 'I'.

The figures employed to describe the appropriation of this persona 'I' help to establish the reasons for Sexton's earlier warnings and intimations. The metaphors are of disguise ('I use the persona "I" when I am applying a mask to my face'), of malicious deceit ('a rubber mask that the robber wears'), and of dramatic evasion (Sexton twice mentions a clown putting on his face for the show). Yet we find that the use of the persona 'I' simultaneously, and in contradiction, permits her to access new experiences, not only to evade or mask her own. Thus, in a reversal of the way in which an older man would become youthful – even infantile – in the guise of a clown, in Sexton's example it is the young man who adopts the persona of the older: 'I use the persona "I" [. . .] somewhat like a young man applying the face of an ageing clown.' The use of the persona 'I' is crucial to the imaginative process, offering a screen behind which to hide, and a blank canvas on which to project new identities. Sexton's discussion of her work demonstrates that different masks, or different 'I's', may be slipped on and taken off at will: 'I like to put on my clown face and become an old, old woman as in "Old Woman on the College Tavern Wall"'; 'On to another persona. Now let my masks of my own age slip off me.'<sup>80</sup> As she confirms in the second of her

<sup>78</sup> *ibid.* p. 1, HRHRC. The pun on Eye / I is found elsewhere in Sexton's poetry, for example, in 'February 16, 1960' from the 'Letters to Dr. Y.' sequence.

<sup>79</sup> *ibid.* p. 6. In her interview with Gregory Fitz Gerald, Sexton explains: 'I love to read journals, biographies (but I prefer *autobiography*, though I think then one has to lie more than otherwise)', p. 198 [Sexton's emphasis].

<sup>80</sup> Crawshaw Lectures (1) pp. 2, 3, HRHRC.

lectures: ‘It was an early part of my development to adopt a persona and it is not one that I have quit. It is intriguing to me to become another person.’<sup>81</sup> As her earlier ‘warnings and intimations’ should have alerted us, any search for the real ‘Anne’ is futile.

In the final Crawshaw lecture, as in the first, Sexton explicitly refutes one of her major critics. She questions Robert Boyers’s reading of her work (and implicitly, his view that “her one true subject [is] herself and her emotions”):

I would like to make a few comments about Robert Boyers’s article in *Salmagundi* entitled ‘The Achievement of Anne Sexton’ [. . .]. In the poem ‘Two Sons’ I am taking on a persona of an old woman whose 2 sons have married. He seems to think I’m speaking in my own confessional voice. Likewise in ‘The Legend of the One-Eyed Man,’ although I admit I identify with him. In ‘Protestant Easter’ the persona is an eight-year-old. He thinks it is me.

It is interesting that Sexton qualifies the reference to ‘my own [. . .] voice’ by specifying that this is her ‘confessional voice’, as though this were just one of many voices available to her. The distinction which Sexton makes between ‘I’ and ‘persona’ is an important one. It replicates John Berryman’s disclaimer at the beginning of *The Dream Songs*:

Many opinions and errors in the Songs are to be referred not to the character Henry, still less to the author, but to the title of the work [. . .] The poem then, whatever its wide cast of characters, is essentially about an imaginary character (not the poet, not me) named Henry [. . .] [who] talks about himself sometimes in the first person, sometimes in the third, sometimes even in the second; he has a friend, never named, who addresses him as Mr Bones and variants thereof.<sup>82</sup>

In an interview with Lois Ames, discussing the process (and rewards) of writing her play, *Mercy Street* (produced off-Broadway in 1969), Sexton indicates that her use of disparate personae beguiles rather than reveals:

With the play, I became each person – I love doing this. I think it’s something I can do, too. I do it pretty well. I become someone else. I tell their story. I love to write in the first person, even when it isn’t about me, and it’s quite confusing to my readers, because they think everything I write – sometimes I am talking about myself and sometimes not.<sup>83</sup>

The implication of this is that there is no ‘true’ autobiographical ‘I’ beyond a succession of personae or masks. Does the clown continue to be a clown once the mask is removed?

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<sup>81</sup> Crawshaw Lectures (2) p. 23, HRHRC.

<sup>82</sup> *The Dream Songs* (London: Faber and Faber, 1990), p. vi [subsequent references are to this volume].

<sup>83</sup> ‘Anne Sexton: From “Bedlam” to Broadway’ [interview with Lois Ames], *Boston Sunday Herald Traveler Book Guide*, 12 October 1969, pp. 1, 2-16 (p. 2).



Sexton's manipulation of these personae, her assumption and disposal, at will, of these myriad identities, while somehow imparting an impression of authenticity, indicates that identity is altogether more fluid and more impenetrable than, say, A.R. Jones's search for a persistent autobiographical 'I' would suggest. Even the most perspicacious of recent commentators on confessionalism – in ignorance of Sexton's 'warnings and intimations' – is persuaded by the impression that there is a real 'I' somewhere behind the text. Steven K. Hoffman, notwithstanding his otherwise persuasive defence of confessionalism ignores the suggestion – made in Sexton's poetry and paratextual comments – that there may be no underlying self at all. He concludes his essay, 'Impersonal Personalism', with the rousing contention that the confessional poets 'thrust against the multitudinous dehumanizing forces in twentieth century existence to emerge with that most precious prize, a multifaceted, independent self'.<sup>84</sup>

As we have seen, it is a commonplace of Sexton criticism to describe the writing of confessional poetry as 'an imperative', as an 'intolerable compulsion', and as the product of 'uninhibited autobiographical impulses'. Implicit in such readings is the belief that at the bottom of the pit or reservoir which is being dredged, or beneath the layers of experience or memory which are being laid bare, there is an 'original' – a 'true' Anne Sexton trying to get out, a self-present subject simply awaiting her moment of release or revelation. As Candace Lang summarises conventional readings of autobiographical writing:

Traditional criticism has been primarily preoccupied with the "man-behind-the-work," yet insofar as it has proceeded on the assumption that the literary work is the expression (however inadequate) of an anterior idea originating in the writing subject and for which that subject was the sole authority, to discern what the writer "really meant to say" has been tantamount to approaching the "core" of the author's being to grasp the truth of the writing subject.<sup>85</sup>

I would contend that subjectivity, instead of being understood as the source or origin of the text must, in Antony Easthope's words, 'be approached not as the point of origin but as the effect of a poetic discourse.' By reading confession as discourse, as I am proposing here, we can 'explain the author as a product or effect of the text, whereas conventional criticism accepts the notion of the author as unquestionable and pre-given in order to be able to define how the text should be read'.<sup>86</sup>

Sexton's manipulation of the persona 'I' raises crucial questions about the authenticity and credibility typically regarded as characteristic of confessionalism. It becomes impossible to read her poems in order to identify or evaluate the degree of (particularly

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<sup>84</sup> Steven K. Hoffman, p. 705.

<sup>85</sup> 'Autobiography in the Aftermath of Romanticism', *Diacritics* 12 (1982), 2-16 (p. 10).

<sup>86</sup> *Poetry as Discourse*, pp. 31, 7.

biographical) truth implicit in each. Instead, we must acknowledge that just as there are many 'I's (none of which is to be identified with the historical author), there are multiple truths. Sexton offers the example of her poem 'Unknown Girl in the Maternity Ward' (TB) in order to demonstrate that it is possible for the writing 'I' to identify with the experience of another, to adopt a mask or persona, and thereby to be truthful *and* false. She is truthful in the sense that, as she explains, the mask offers the opportunity to explore personal feelings of loss on the abandonment of her own small child, and false in the sense that the narrative of the poem traces a fictional story of illegitimacy:

It might be noted that after I published 'Unknown Girl' people in the town where my husband was brought up said, "Wasn't he a fine boy to marry Anne after she had had that illegitimate baby?" So much for confession. So much for persona.<sup>87</sup>

This idea of the confessional writer as victim of the confession and its repercussions, although treated jokingly here, forms a sinister undertone in poems such as 'Talking to Sheep' (discussed in Chapter Three). Throughout her Crawshaw lectures, Sexton works hard to shift the critical emphasis from an evaluation of the putative authenticity of the confessional voice to an understanding of its potential inauthenticity – its tangentiality to the poet's subjective experience. Yet in a supreme double bluff, having established the equal validity of confessional truth and confessional artifice (the autobiographical and persona 'I's), Sexton undercuts the reliability of this distinction, suggesting that, in fact, the whole debate is predicated on uncertainty. Truth and artifice are not so much equally valid as equally equivocal, and her own authority to determine such questions about her own work, her own value as a witness, are thrown into doubt. As Sexton concludes her second lecture: 'All this was merely my fictions made up out of snatches of my life, lyric instances that I developed, other masks that I pulled over my face and voices who spoke for me. Never, never, never. All a lie.'<sup>88</sup> Notwithstanding her attempt to rationalise her work and to foreground the proactive process of exploring new personae, the complexity of the poetry, and its irreducibility to simplistic and schematic evaluations, resists exposition.

It is significant that the confident and explanatory rhetoric displayed in the first two lectures, once it has reached this aporic crisis, degenerates into contradiction, confusion and inconclusiveness. The remaining eight lectures of the series are characterised by a tendency to ask numerous rhetorical questions about the poems, punctuated by the occasional inadequate attempt at a response. For example, speaking about 'The Interrogation of the Man of Many Hearts' (LP), Sexton asks: 'What other things could you go to the interrogator for? Would he be good for any other confessors? (Yes but I can't think what).' There are also numerous

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<sup>87</sup> Crawshaw Lectures (1) p. 12, HRHRC.

examples of uncertainty, of a failure of authority. The original typescript of the beginning of lecture three ('Narrative Poems') features long and subsequently deleted comments on the tradition of narrative poetry: 'The eddas were a kind of national saga. I've forgotten what the eddas are exactly. I'd like someone else to look it up', and erroneous accounts of the origins of the English novel.<sup>89</sup> It is as though the attempt to theorise, to contextualise the indeterminate (her own writing), has defeated her. More generally, though, in categorising some of her poems as 'narrative', and in attempting to place them in a long and honourable tradition (the Norse sagas, the English novel, and Frost's poems are all referred to as antecedents), Sexton again contradicts typical views of confession as a predominantly personal and lyric mode (as 'a lyric utterance' characterised by 'explicit autobiographical connection')<sup>90</sup> and as an essentially modern movement (a product of 'Post-Christian, post-Kennedy, post-pill America').<sup>91</sup>

A further perception of confessionalism which Sexton seems determined to confound is the rather disapproving expectations of confessional subject matter (exemplified by James Dickey's 'it would be hard to find a writer who dwells more insistently on the pathetic and disgusting aspects of bodily experience', quoted earlier). As Sexton recalls, 'I remember when I first wrote poems about mental illness, I was told it was not a fit subject for poetry.'<sup>92</sup> To explore the boundaries of what is permissible, she draws on the example of her poem 'Cripples and Other Stories' which, treated in this way, becomes open to reading as a provocative pastiche of the confessional poem. It knowingly plays into the hands of confessionalism's detractors (and indeed anticipates some of the themes and images of 'Hurry Up Please It's Time', discussed in the next chapter).

'Cripples and Other Stories' opens with a mocking appeal to the speaker's Doctor: 'my doctor, the comedian / I called you every time.' This recalls the first lines of Sexton's 'You, Doctor Martin' (mentioned earlier): 'You, Doctor Martin, walk / from breakfast to madness', and instantly confirms hostile critics' views of the pathological fixation of confessional poets. In the first stanza alone we have the essential ingredients of confessionalism as conventionally received: Doctor, self and text (here labelled self-deprecatingly, 'this silly rhyme'). The 'silly rhyme' also refers, specifically, to the refrain which punctuates the poem:

*Each time I give lectures  
or gather in the grants*

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<sup>88</sup> Crawshaw Lectures (2) p. 10, HRHRC.

<sup>89</sup> Crawshaw Lectures (3) p. 1, HRHRC.

<sup>90</sup> Steven K. Hoffman, p. 689.

<sup>91</sup> Phillips, p. xiii.

<sup>92</sup> Crawshaw Lectures (4) p. 1, HRHRC.

*you send me off to boarding school  
in training pants* [Sexton's italics].

Here, we see the relationship of control between Doctor and patient, confessor and penitent; a relationship which is predicated on the desire to please and on the withholding of pleasure. The confessing subject wishes to swap roles, to gratify or amuse the confessor (Doctor/comedian), instead of being the recipient of his favours: 'I called you every time / and made you laugh yourself.' The subject, in 'calling' the Doctor 'every time', indicates a desire to wrest back control, a desire which is thwarted because it is the Doctor/confessor (the person spoken to) who retains authority, who has the ultimate power to call the shots: 'you send me off to boarding school in training pants.' As Leigh Gilmore argues (here confirming Foucault's point about the authority of the confessor):

The vow, "So help me God," seals the courtroom and the confessional account in the presence of a witness authorized to return a verdict, to determine veracity or perjury, to judge innocence or guilt, to decide on absolution or damnation. Some higher authority or recourse to its function is a fixture in scenes where truth is at issue, for it is necessary in this construction of truth telling to speak to someone.<sup>93</sup>

Such a requirement is conceded in a rhetorical question which Sexton poses in the last of her Crawshaw Lectures: 'How did I come to writing about myself? How did I come to be a confessional poet who vomits up her past every ugly detail onto the page?' The answers which she offers are tentative and ambiguous:

I started to write about myself because it was something I knew well [...] With every poem it is as if I were on trial, pleading my case before the court of angels and hoping for a pardon [...] Mind you, I really have no idea why I do what I do.<sup>94</sup>

By claiming and then denying authority over her experience, Sexton implies that she does not, after all, know herself 'well'. As the reference to the penitent's arraignment before the 'court of angels' intimates, instrumental to the success of this confession is the 'court', or confessor, or audience.

In 'Cripples and Other Stories', the scatological metaphor (of the '*training pants*') infantilises the speaker, rendering her – as is typical of the confessing subject – powerless and abject. The 'ballad-like nursery rhyme-like technique', as Sexton describes it, helps to 'underscore the horror' of the action:<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> Gilmore, p. 121.

<sup>94</sup> Crawshaw Lectures (10) p. 1, HRHRC.

<sup>95</sup> Crawshaw Lectures (4) p. 1, HRHRC.

I'm really thirty-six.  
I see dead rats in the toilet.  
I'm one of the lunatics.

The mundane and the extraordinary are thrown into startling and memorable relief, thus drawing attention to one of the ways in which confessionalism achieves its effects. Subsequent rhymes of 'shame' with 'nickname', 'this' and 'orifice', 'fever' and 'leave her', 'tell' and 'hell', represent a précis of the confession. The final incestuous horror of the poem is rapidly realised, and brought to a clanging conclusion by the end rhymes:

Father, I'm thirty-six,  
yet I lie here in your crib.  
I'm getting born again, Adam,  
as you prod me with your rib.

Doctor, Father and first man (Adam) are here synthesised into one dominant, controlling, and most importantly, surveillant figure. The pun on 'lie here in your crib', with its latent allusion to the truths – or 'lie[s]' – which emerge on the Doctor's couch ('the crib'; itself offering a punning allusion to plagiarism), and the sense that self-scrutiny will lead to rebirth, a fresh start in life, form a knowing, and critical, commentary on confessional and psychiatric therapy.

The cast of characters in 'Cripples and Other Stories', in addition to the Doctor and the disappointed and disappointing parents ('Disgusted, Mother', 'father was fat on scotch'), features a mutilated self harbouring an awful secret ('Would the cripple inside of me / be a cripple that would show?'). The speaker is full of self-loathing, and her self-portrait offers a striking metaphor for the figure of the confessional poet:

My cheeks blossomed with maggots.  
I picked at them like pearls.  
I covered them with pancake.  
I wound my hair in curls.

We find the suffering, vilified, abject self relentlessly scrutinising that self, and therein finding emotional and material rewards ('pearls' of wisdom and wealth).<sup>96</sup> The subject, in scratching away at her psychic wounds, leaves the scars perpetually open; constantly the focus of attention. The image of masking the 'maggots' with 'pancake' invokes the speaker's application of masks, of the persona 'I', which may or may not disguise unpalatable truths. The final reference to hair wound in curls suggests, perhaps, a Shirley-Temple-like

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<sup>96</sup> The commercial rewards of confession are considered in the next two chapters in my discussion of 'Hurry Up Please it's Time' and 'Making a Living'.

performance, an overly sexualised attempt by a child to appeal to an adult (recalling the speaker's relentless desire to please the Doctor/Father, and the infantilisation of the mature woman in the incest scene of the poem's final stanza).<sup>97</sup> It also connotes the awful power of Medusa, threatening the audience with the dreadful consequences of their persistent gaze.

These multiple horrors read, as I have suggested, as a gross parody of confessionalism. In its extreme appropriation of excess, manipulation of disgust and flamboyant disregard of aesthetic convention, 'Cripples and Other Stories' dramatises the point which Sexton, in a rather more restrained tone, puts to her students: 'Do you think outhouses and enemas are fit subjects for poetry? We all go to the bathroom. Is it an experience that should be written about?' Of course, by entitling her poem 'and Other Stories' and mentioning within the text that 'those are just two stories / and I have more to tell', Sexton is also acknowledging the fictive nature of confession. As Sexton asks in her lecture: 'What would you think the poem would be like from that title? How does "Other Stories" change it?'<sup>98</sup> The point here is that, however harrowing the subject matter (in this case, 'the enemas of childhood / reeking of outhouses and shame'), the confession is, at heart, a narrative, a construction, one of many made-up 'stories'. Notwithstanding having structured her lecture series according to formal generic boundaries ('lyric', 'narrative', etc.), all confessions are ultimately also narratives: 'This poem could as easily be in the section on confessional poetry as in this section on narrative poetry.'<sup>99</sup> Equally, in her discussion of 'The Double Image' ('the major confessional poem', as Sexton describes it), it is the fictionality of the text which is foregrounded. Confession achieves its effects by strategies of negation, silence and denial, by equivocation and invention (it is 'made up') rather than by frank and truthful expression:

I never mowed the lawn, but I did have my portrait painted. I never mailed her [the daughter to whom the poem is addressed] a picture of a rabbit or a postcard of motif number one, but I wish I had. On April Fools she never fooled me, we never laughed, it was never good [...] Otherwise every single word is the way it was, and the things I made up were also the way it was in my head.<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> To refer again to Leigh Gilmore: 'The power of confession persists primarily through the psychoanalytic interest in the "self," the construction of that self through a specific discourse, and the power relationship between analyst and analysand which produces "truth".' p. 124.

<sup>98</sup> Crawshaw Lectures (4) p. 1, HRHRC.

<sup>99</sup> *ibid.* p. 2.

<sup>100</sup> Crawshaw Lectures (9) p. 9, HRHRC.

## Chapter Two

## 'My Sweeney, Mr. Eliot': 'Personal' and 'Impersonal' Poetry

Anne Sexton infrequently used the term 'confessional' to describe her poetry, preferring the term 'personal'.<sup>1</sup> In an interview with Harry Moore, she rather self-deprecatingly comments, 'Well my poetry is very personal (*laughing*). I don't think I write public poems. I write very personal poems', and to Gregory Fitzgerald, she explains: 'I was writing personal poetry, often about the subject of madness.' However, this claim to write personally is often couched in negative terms, that is, it is expressed in terms of somebody else's prohibitions (or, more specifically, in terms of her transgression of these). Thus Sexton characterises her work as being resistant to contemporary perceptions of what is appropriate: 'everyone said, "You can't write this way. It's too personal; it's confessional; you can't write this, Anne," and everyone was discouraging me. But then I saw Snodgrass doing what I was doing, and it kind of gave me permission.'<sup>2</sup> Sexton's appropriation of the adjective 'personal' makes a clear statement about her place in contemporary debates about personal, as opposed to impersonal, writing. It explicitly positions her poetry in opposition to T.S. Eliot's enormously influential 'impersonal theory of poetry', his advocacy of the 'process of depersonalization' and his admonition that there should be a complete separation between 'the man who suffers and the mind which creates'.<sup>3</sup> The poems discussed in this chapter ('Sweeney' (BF), 'Hurry Up Please It's Time', 'Gods' (DN), and the unpublished 'Dog-God Fights the Dollars' and 'Dog-God's Wife Adopts a Monkey') explore the relationship between the two forms.

The presence of T.S. Eliot (and, in particular, of the comments made in his essay 'Tradition and the Individual Talent') is implicit in the accounts of the origins and nature of confessional poetry discussed thus far in this thesis. When Rosenthal, Alvarez, Jones and others insist on confessional compulsion, on the subject's need to obtain relief through expression, and on a clear relationship between speaker and poet, textual and 'real' experience, they establish an opposition between confessionalism and the modern poetry

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\* Anne Sexton, 'Sweeney'.

<sup>1</sup> Other synonyms include Steven G. Axelrod's 'domestic', *Sylvia Plath: The Wound and the Cure of Words* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), p. 59; Helen Vendler's 'Freudian lyric', 'John Berryman: Freudian Cartoons', in *The Given and the Made: Recent American Poets* (London: Faber and Faber, 1995), pp 29-57 (p. 31) and T.S. Eliot's 'meditative verse', 'The Three Voices of Poetry', p. 98.

<sup>2</sup> Anne Sexton, interview with Harry Moore, in Colburn, ed., *No Evil Star*, pp. 41-69 (p. 50) (first publ. in *Talks with Authors*, ed. by Charles F. Madden (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1968)); interview with Gregory Fitzgerald, p.181; interview with Patricia Marx, in Colburn, ed., *No Evil Star*, pp. 70-82 (p. 79) (first publ. in *Hudson Review* 18, (1965/6)).

<sup>3</sup> T.S. Eliot, 'Tradition and the Individual Talent', in *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism* (London: Faber, 1997), pp. 39-49 (pp. 44, 45).

which is Eliot's concern.<sup>4</sup> In place of Eliot's 'the more perfect the artist, the more completely separate in him will be the man who suffers and the mind which creates',<sup>5</sup> we are introduced to a poetry in which 'private humiliations, sufferings and psychological problems' are dominant, and in which 'the literal Self [is placed] more and more at the center of the poem'.<sup>6</sup> Whereas for Eliot, 'the poet has not a personality to express, but a particular medium, which is only a medium and not a personality',<sup>7</sup> for Robert Phillips, the 'direct expression of the self' and the 'expression of personality' are essential.<sup>8</sup> Where Eliot insists that 'poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion, it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality', conventional views of confessionalism propose that its subject is incapable of escape.<sup>9</sup> She is figured as the passive victim of her effervescent emotions, subject to inescapable compulsions, in thrall to her experience.

These early accounts of confessional poetry construct and consolidate a dichotomy between the 'new' poetry and the old, the compulsive and the restrained, the confessional and the impersonal, a dichotomy which Sexton's poetry refutes – or at the very least, problematises.<sup>10</sup> Her work interrogates Eliot's distinction between poetry which is the expression of personality and poetry which is an escape from it, and refuses to be restricted to either pole. To paraphrase Eliot's 'East Coker', her writing takes the 'middle way', ranging across boundaries, effacing the distinction between personal and impersonal, private and public, inside and outside, truth and lies, revelation and disguise.

Sexton's poetry, while seeming to be 'personal', while seeming to exemplify Eliot's despised 'turning loose of emotion', may in fact be paradigmatic of the opposite tendency. Caroline Hall suggests that:

In its use of apparently biographical personae and speakers and in its themes of sexual love, oedipal hate, personal anguish, unbearable suffering, and emotional breakdown, this poetry represents not an escape from personality but an expression of it.<sup>11</sup>

However, it is arguable that the 'apparently biographical personae and speakers' in Sexton's

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<sup>4</sup> Eliot's notion of 'meditative verse' similarly invokes this idea of compulsion and release. The writer of such poetry suffers under a non-specific, but nevertheless onerous and enervating 'burden which he must bring to birth in order to obtain relief'. 'The Three Voices of Poetry', p. 98.

<sup>5</sup> Eliot, 'Tradition', p. 44.

<sup>6</sup> Rosenthal, *The New Poets*, pp. 26-7.

<sup>7</sup> Eliot, 'Tradition', p. 46.

<sup>8</sup> Phillips, pp. 8-9.

<sup>9</sup> Eliot, 'Tradition', pp. 48-9.

<sup>10</sup> The dichotomy is further polarised around the distinctions between individual or private or personal expression (freedom) and social, or public, or impersonal imperatives (necessity): a dichotomy which is encapsulated in the title of Jones's essay.

<sup>11</sup> Caroline Hall, p. 34. By 'biographical' I am assuming that Hall means related to, or expressive of, the life and thus, in this context, *autobiographical*.



work, while seeming to ‘express personality’ and ‘emotion’ (to paraphrase Eliot), may disguise, obliterate, or license an escape from it. The key word (used unwittingly by Hall) is ‘apparently’, for these personae (even the personae of ‘I’ or ‘Anne’) are, indeed, only ‘apparently’ biographical. In a supreme double bluff, they establish an unimpeachable impression of authenticity, frankness and intimate revelation, while bearing no necessary relationship to the experience of the poet. We think that we see the real Anne Sexton, whereas all that we actually have in our sights is a substitute, or persona, of the kind that Eliot might approve. Although it seems that the ‘[wo]man who suffers’ dominates Sexton’s writing, it is, the ‘mind which creates’ which retains control.

Paul Lacey, too, sets confessional poetry in a dialectical relationship with the modernist aesthetic which preceded it:

After a generation of criticism which insisted that the “I” of a poem was not to be identified with the writer, the *real* John Keats, T.S. Eliot, or W.B. Yeats, but was to be seen strictly as a persona in the poem, we have returned – in some of our most vital poetry – to first person utterances which are intended to be taken as autobiographical.<sup>12</sup>

Like Hall, Lacey inadvertently controverts his own argument. For if these personae are ‘*intended* to be taken as autobiographical’ then it is possible that they are not ‘autobiographical’ at all, that the ‘apparent’ (Hall) or ‘intended’ (Lacey) personal referentiality of the poems is a device – a sleight of hand which misleads the reader into believing that they have access or insight to the lived experience of a real author. In pretending to overturn conventional doctrines about the importance of impersonality in poetry, in faking a return to the heart of personal experience, Sexton’s confessionalism in fact steers us further away. It invokes a misplaced confidence in its own authenticity and expressiveness; it posits immediacy and presence while discretely consolidating its own indeterminacy and distance.

In a great many respects, Sexton’s relationship to Eliot’s principles is more complex and fluid than has hitherto been allowed. For example, notwithstanding the best efforts of critics and commentators to identify confessional speaker with poet, text with lived experience, Sexton insists repeatedly on the importance of distinguishing between the two. Sexton’s assertion that ‘to really get to the truth of something is the poem, not the poet’ and ‘the poem counts for more than your life’<sup>13</sup> confirms Eliot’s view (that ‘honest criticism and sensitive appreciation is directed not upon the poet but upon the poetry’) and, indeed, that of Wimsatt and Beardsley: ‘the design or intention of the author is neither available nor

<sup>12</sup> Paul A. Lacey, ‘The Sacrament of Confession’, in Wagner-Martin, ed., pp. 94-113 (p. 94) (first publ. in *The Inner War: Contemporary Poets in Review* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1972)).

<sup>13</sup> Interview with Patricia Marx, pp. 74, 75.

desirable as a standard for judging the success of a work of literary art.’<sup>14</sup> Further, it is possible to read Sexton’s poetry (in terms of the abjection of many of its voices) as exemplary of Eliot’s imperative: ‘the progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality.’ Throughout her work, Sexton responds to the challenge of Eliot’s statement, displaying a multitude of voices in various states of decline, attenuation and fragmentation.<sup>15</sup> She evokes a hitherto inadmissible similarity between the process of self-effacement proposed by Eliot, and that which is evidenced in her own poetry. It is a misguided, indeed perverse reading which would fail to notice the significance, in Sexton’s work, of metaphors of violence and murder, of images of writing as ‘blood letting’, of subject as vulnerable prey.<sup>16</sup> As these indicate, the confessional poet, in accordance with the requirements of the poetics of impersonality, extinguishes or sacrifices herself again and again in her work (this is reflected in Sexton’s use of synecdoche, discussed in Chapters Four and Five).

In addition to this general positioning of her own writing in opposition to, or dialogue with, Eliot’s, Sexton specifically draws on his poetry on a number of occasions.<sup>17</sup> For example, her ‘A Little Uncomplicated Hymn’ (LD), with its long examination and exemplification of its own failure to say what was intended (this is what ‘I wanted to write’) invokes Prufrock’s ‘It is impossible to say just what I mean!’<sup>18</sup> Her ‘O Ye Tongues’ (DN) considers the same problem of origins as Eliot’s ‘East Coker’. ‘Sweeney’ (written in 1969) explicitly and defiantly invokes Eliot’s Sweeney poems. Further, like ‘February 20<sup>th</sup>’ (DY), one of the ‘Horoscope Poems’ discussed below, it reads as a precursor to, or draft of, the longer process of engagement with Eliot’s work exemplified in ‘Hurry Up Please’ and thus as a measure of Sexton’s sustained interest in the relationship. ‘Sweeney’ provocatively pits personal experience (hence the defiant ‘My Sweeney’) against authority and impersonality (hence the mocking formality of ‘Mr. Eliot’):

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<sup>14</sup> W.K. Wimsatt and Monroe C. Beardsley, ‘The Intentional Fallacy’, in W.K. Wimsatt, *The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry* (London: Methuen, 1970), pp. 3-18 (p. 3).

<sup>15</sup> ‘He Do the Police in Different Voices’ was, at one time, Eliot’s title for *The Waste Land*. See *The Waste Land: A Facsimile and Transcript of the Original Drafts including the Annotations of Ezra Pound*, ed. by Valerie Eliot (London: Faber and Faber, 1971), p. 4. References in this thesis are to: *The Waste Land and Other Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 1940; repr. 1942).

<sup>16</sup> Anne Sexton, Letter to Mrs. F. Peter Scigliano, 7 February 1973, HRHRC.

<sup>17</sup> Although a number of critics (for example, Steven K. Hoffman) have argued that Eliot is a precursor of confessionalism (that he has deceptively ‘personal’ elements in his writing), none have argued for Sexton as a successor to Eliot (that it, as having ‘impersonal’ elements in her work).

<sup>18</sup> T.S. Eliot, ‘The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock’, in *Collected Poems 1909-1962* (London: Faber and Faber, 1974; repr. 1989). [Subsequent references, with the exception of *The Waste Land*, are to this volume]. Sexton studied Eliot’s writing at Brandeis University in 1960, and mentions his *The Cocktail Party* as one of the few plays which she had seen (the other being *South Pacific*) before commencing work on her own play *Tell Me Your Answer True*. Anne Sexton, ‘Reactions of an Author in Residence’, unpublished draft article for ‘The Charles Playbook’, [1964(?)], HRHRC.

My Sweeney, Mr. Eliot  
 is that Australian who came  
 to the U.S.A. with one thought –  
 My books in the satchel, my name.

This Sweeney, unlike Eliot's 'apeneck', is a cosmopolitan; a man of means, a creature of the mind (and thus 'impersonal'?) rather than of the body.<sup>19</sup>

In 'Sweeney', as in 'Hurry Up Please' and Eliot's *The Waste Land*, we have a juxtaposition of voices (those of the speaker and Sweeney), of places ('U.S.A.', 'Zurich', 'London'), of the religious and the secular ('a liturgy / of praise', 'a big dollar man'). Here, as in Eliot's 'Sweeney Among the Nightingales', we witness the impact on private life of sudden and impersonal trauma (both poems contemplate or anticipate the impact of violent death). In Sexton's poem, as in Eliot's, it is the life of the creative mind (language, writing, the persistence of 'the word') which offers a means of transcending this personal suffering. Sexton's 'Sweeney' opens by foregrounding 'books', the 'name', and closes by confirming the authority of language (here, its power to determine meaning and truth; her protagonist dismisses the sudden death represented in the poem as a dishonest travesty: 'her death lied'). The poem offers a final riposte to the 'Mr. Eliot' of its opening line by invoking his poem, 'Mr. Eliot's Sunday Morning Service'. 'Sweeney', like 'Mr. Eliot's Sunday Morning Service' (with its initial and insistent 'in the beginning was the word') makes explicit the primacy of language, its capacity to transcend experience of suffering. As Sexton's poem concludes: 'Surely the words will continue, for that's / what's left that's true.'

The dialogue is continued in 'February 20<sup>th</sup>' one of the 'Horoscope Poems' in Sexton's 'Scorpio, Bad Spider, Die' sequence (written in 1971, and published posthumously in *Words for Dr.Y.* in 1978). 'February 20<sup>th</sup>' specifically pits Sexton's work against that of a range of other writers (here represented by their books on her shelf):

My books hypnotize each other.  
 Jarrell tells Bishop to stare  
 at the spot. Tate  
 tells Plath she's going under.<sup>20</sup>

The prominent figure in this eminent group is Eliot who, in the subsequent lines, is both pitied (he 'remembers his long lost mother') and feared (his 'tongue' is 'like thunder'). According to

<sup>19</sup> By foregrounding Sweeney's Australian identity, Sexton playfully invokes the cultural cringe (the disparagement of Australian culture and identity) and thus implicitly challenges the kudos which Eliot is thought to represent. Her poem trumpets its Australian connections just as Eliot's discreetly, and with some disdain, buries its own. In his notes to *The Waste Land* (explaining the reference to Mrs. Porter in line 199), Eliot delicately demurs: 'I do not know the origins of the ballad from which these lines are taken: it was reported to me from Sydney, Australia.'

<sup>20</sup> 'Going under' is also, perhaps, an allusion to the hypnotherapy which Sexton requested during her psychiatric treatment (but which her Doctor refused). Middlebrook, *Biography*, pp. 55-6.

Diane Middlebrook, Sexton had, early in her career, claimed an affinity with Eliot, as with a number of other renowned writers (Lowell, Berryman, Plath, Rimbaud, Coleridge) because they had at some time, like her, suffered what she termed a “psychotic break”. As Middlebrook explains: ‘Sexton was positioning herself among all those poets whose careers had included, in Rimbaud’s widely applied phrase, “a lengthy, immense, and systematic derangement of the senses”.’<sup>21</sup> A further source of influence (and ally) – Sylvia Plath – is also noted, not just by name (as in the lines quoted above), but specifically in connection with Eliot (hence the allusion to ‘Lady Lazarus’ in the lines evoking his life and work):

Eliot remembers his long lost mother,  
St. Louis and Sweeney who rise out of thin air,  
Mr. Boiler Man, his mouth a mountain,  
his tongue pure red, his tongue pure thunder,  
Hurry up please it’s time. Again. Again.

Sexton subtly postulates an intertextual relationship not only between herself and Eliot and herself and Plath, but also between Eliot and Plath, thereby confirming the potential contiguity of the markedly personal and the avowedly impersonal.

It is in ‘Hurry Up Please It’s Time’, however, that Sexton’s contemplation and negotiation of Eliot’s writing is at its clearest. Picking up where ‘February 20<sup>th</sup>’ leaves off, the poem (as its title might suggest) enters into a critical dialogue with Eliot’s *The Waste Land*. It makes sophisticated and purposive use of multiple personae, self-reflexively contemplates questions about memory, language and subjectivity, and juxtaposes private introspection and public display. It raises questions about spirituality and secularisation, innocence and experience, male and female identity and, ultimately, about life and death. The poem offers a sustained exploration of personal writing, and in so doing, offers a riposte to Eliot’s influential – and to her antagonistic – dictum.

‘Hurry Up Please’ was written in the winter of 1972 and was published in Sexton’s 1974 volume *The Death Notebooks*. It is divided into six sections of varying lengths, against *The Waste Land*’s five, as though to claim the last word. It is impossible to overstate the importance of ‘Hurry Up Please’ to an understanding of Sexton’s work. First, it functions as a manifesto of her poetics. Second, it provides a résumé or reappraisal of many of the themes, concerns and conclusions of earlier poems. Finally (and relatedly), it invokes and challenges the terms of the assumed dichotomy between Sexton’s ‘personal’ poetry and Eliot’s impersonalism. Yet the poem has barely been considered by other Sexton critics – and this notwithstanding Sexton’s own claim (in a letter to Peter Davison, editor of *Atlantic Monthly*,

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<sup>21</sup> *ibid.* p. 65.

that 'it is a major').<sup>22</sup> Diane Middlebrook does not mention it at all, it is referred to only once in Linda Wagner-Martin's edited collection of Sexton scholarship, and then only briefly in the context of a memoir by fellow-poet Kathleen Spivack.<sup>23</sup> Similarly, there are brief and cursory references in the volume edited by Diana Hume George, and in her own study *Oedipus Anne*. Caroline Hall offers a short reading and points to Sexton's 'ironic use of the Eliotic mode' (although as will become clear below, Hall's view of the affirmative nature of Sexton's poem is not one with which I would concur).<sup>24</sup> Sandra Gilbert, in a review of *The Death Notebooks*, dismisses the poem as symptomatic of 'all those weaknesses familiar to Sexton's readers' (thus acknowledging, albeit negatively, the poem's relationship with the rest of Sexton's work). And McClatchy, in his essay 'Somehow to Endure', decries the poem as 'a sort of long hallucinatory diary entry'; a comment which, surely, misreads the poem's complex and sophisticated structure.<sup>25</sup>

'Hurry Up Please' dramatises an urgent (hence the title) quest – not for an answer to the questions posed in the opening lines ('What is death, I ask. / What is life, you ask'), but for an appropriate discourse in which to contemplate them. The idiom changes repeatedly throughout the poem: from the simple and childlike (the appeal to the mother in section four, and the nursery rhyme rhythms and allusions throughout) to the learned and contemplative ('learning to talk is a complex business'). The narration shifts tenses, moving from the present ('This is the rainy season') to the past ('Once upon a time we were all born') to anticipation of the future ('One noon as you walk out to the mailbox / He'll snatch you up'). The many different voices of the poem are shifting and elusive. They oscillate between the interrogatory and the declamatory, the defensive and the assertive, the reverential 'Forgive us, Father, for we know not' and the irreverent: 'I am God, la de dah.' The voices are violent ('Them angels gonna be cut down like wheat') and vulnerable ('I am sorrowful in November') in turn. They are repeatedly taxed by questions and doubts about language, about poetry and about the role (or meaning *in* life) of the poet.

The poem is allusive (*contra* Alvarez who distinguishes between Eliot's modernism and 'Extremist poetry' on the grounds of the allusiveness of the former, and the introspection and circumscription of the latter: for Alvarez, modernist poetry alone is 'difficult, disciplined, complex, aware, elliptical').<sup>26</sup> Sexton's poem refers to the Old and New Testaments of the

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<sup>22</sup> Anne Sexton, Letter to Peter Davison, 28 December 1972, HRHRC. Sexton's poem was offered to, and rejected by, the *Atlantic Monthly* and *Critical Quarterly*. In her submission letter to C.B. Cox (editor of the latter), Sexton wrote: 'It is very different from my regular work and may not appeal to you with its many voices.' Letter, 10 January 1973, HRHRC.

<sup>23</sup> Kathleen Spivack, 'In Memory of Anne Sexton', in Wagner-Martin, ed., pp. 231-33 (p. 233) (first publ. in *American Poetry Review*, (May/June 1975)).

<sup>24</sup> Caroline Hall, pp. 137-41.

<sup>25</sup> McClatchy, pp. 165, 229.

<sup>26</sup> 'Beyond All This Fiddle', p. 229.

Bible, to the sibyls of classical mythology, and to Buddhist texts. Like Eliot's 'The Hollow Men', her poem inserts incomplete fragments of prayer or Gospel, borrowing a line from the Book of Common Prayer ('Forgive us, Father, for we know not'), which is, itself, a borrowing from the Gospels ('Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do' [Luke 23. 34]). In both poems, these allusions are typographically set apart, as though to imply that they are spoken as an aside, or that we are in the presence of several simultaneous voices or levels of contemplation. That the quotations in both cases are incomplete suggests failure and confusion, and foreshadows the lack of resolution in the text as a whole. Sexton's poem juxtaposes the intense and mystical and the superficial and mocking, hence the refrain 'La de dah' which mimics Eliot's 'Weialala leia / Wallala leialala' and in so doing subverts its serious and incantatory potential. Indeed, Sexton's line parodies the presumptuous erudition of Eliot's phrase, mimicking its intonation and transforming it into a slang reference to snobbery (*Brewer's Dictionary Of Phrase and Fable* has 'la di dah' as an adjective for affectation).

'Hurry Up Please' combines the popular, the contemporary, the emphatically and purposefully American (as, for example, in section two: 'Peanut butter is the American food / We all eat it, being patriotic') with the spiritual and transcendent. It posits that the American dream (the 'Holy Grail' of domestic bliss) is, in fact, a nightmare, hence the lament: 'Milk is the American drink. / Oh queen of sorrows.'<sup>27</sup> Later in the poem, Sexton returns to this theme, again identifying America with consumption (hence the references to 'jello', 'milk', 'juice' and 'peanut butter') and thereby inevitably with expulsion (hence the scatology of sections one and two, a point to which I will return):

Good morning life, we say when we wake,  
hail mary coffee toast  
and we Americans take juice,  
a liquid sun going down.

The shocking and sacrilegious juxtaposition of 'mary' (we should note the demeaning lower case initial) and the American breakfast emphasises the loss of faith characteristic of contemporary American society.<sup>28</sup> Here there are rituals for the feeding of the body – rituals which promise health and happiness – but no longer any rituals for the feeding of the soul. An early draft of Sexton's poem is entitled 'Play it again, Sam', an Americanism which, while mirroring the secular and idiomatic status of Eliot's refrain 'Hurry Up Please' significantly inverts its purpose. Eliot's phrase urges haste and invokes the sense of an impending ending.

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<sup>27</sup> Betty Friedan refers to this as the American equivalent of "*Kinder, Küche, Kirche*" in *The Feminine Mystique* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1963; repr. Pelican, 1982), p. 33. In her interview with Barbara Kevles (pp. 309-10), Sexton describes herself as 'the victim of the American dream'.

<sup>28</sup> In 'Dog-God's Wife Adopts a Monkey', discussed below, the 'madonna' is similarly written with a lower case initial.

Sexton's draft title implies continuation, circularity, and endless repetition. The line, quoted earlier, from Sexton's 'February 20<sup>th</sup>', conflates the two: 'Hurry Up Please It's Time. Again. Again.'

The first two lines of 'Hurry Up Please' foreground the dialogic or discursive nature of confessional poetry; the fact that, for the confession to be realised, there must be an 'I' and a 'you,' a speaker and a reader, a penitent and a confessor. These lines also make explicit the concerns about the meaning of life and death which remain implicit in Eliot's poem: 'What is death, I ask. / What is life, you ask.'<sup>29</sup> The insistence and juxtaposition of the opening antitheses ('death' and 'life') invite us to anticipate a further one. We expect to find the verb 'ask' completed with 'answer' ('What is death, I ask. / What is life, you answer') and we are disconcerted when we realise – particularly at such an early stage – that there may not be any answers. This introduces a primary uncertainty, one which persists throughout – even motivates – the whole poem. It also dispels any confidence which we might have in the power of poetry, or language in general, to communicate, or convey meaning. The speaker asks a question (of the reader, Eliot, a therapist, a spiritual advisor, God?) but is unable to invoke a response. The inability or refusal of the addressee to offer any answers signifies a general loss of faith in the power of religion, or of the secular religion of psychotherapy, none of which can provide the satisfaction which they had once seemed to promise.

The implied dialogue with which 'Hurry Up Please' opens is made explicit at the end of the first section with the emergence of an 'Interrogator' (perhaps a religious or psychiatric confessor, hence the reference to 'seven days' which connotes the weekly rite of confession to the priest, and the weekly therapeutic hour). The interrogator's role is to question 'Anne':

Interrogator:  
What can you say of your last seven days?

Anne:  
They were tired.

Interrogator:  
One day is enough to perfect a man.

Anne:  
I watered and fed the plant.

This scripted exchange serves to unsettle our sense of the identity of the speaker of the poem (the 'I' with which it opened) and of the relationship between 'I', 'Anne' and the poet 'Anne Sexton'. For 'Anne', like the 'Interrogator', is playing a role (as indeed is 'I', 'Ms. Dog' and

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<sup>29</sup> We recall these lines from Eliot's 'East Coker': 'That was a way of putting it – not very satisfactory: / A periphrastic study in a worn-out poetical fashion, / Leaving one still with the intolerable wrestle / With words and meanings [. . .].'

the subsequent voices in the poem). This tacitly confirms the dramatic, or theatrical nature of confession which is not a 'true' reflection of lived authorial experience, but a staged spectacle (a point which I will discuss in more detail in the next chapter).

The interrogator's insistence that 'One day is enough to perfect a man' is an attempt to reassure 'Anne' about the therapeutic promise of confession (spiritual, psychiatric, judicial and poetic). It also confirms the benefits (identified by Michel Foucault in 'Technologies of the Self') of taking care of oneself (perfecting oneself and, metaphorically, watering and feeding the plant).<sup>30</sup> The metaphor relates to the Biblical parable of Jonah (which, as we see in the next chapter, forms the basis of Sexton's poem 'Making a Living'). At the end of the parable, God proves his power to Jonah by creating and then destroying a great plant (which 'came into being in a night, and perished in a night' [Jonah 4. 6-11]). The point which Sexton is making, I would argue, is that 'Anne' (unlike Jonah who lacks faith in God's wishes) respects the plant (metaphorically God's or the interrogator's will). Moreover, the allusion reiterates the death wish of the poem's opening lines, and of the Sibylline voice in this section; for Jonah too is tormented by his longing for death, complaining repeatedly: 'it is better for me to die than to live.'

Indeed, the opening couplet is most significant in respect of its subtle allusion to the Sibyl of Cumae (the subject of the epigraph to Eliot's *The Waste Land*). Eliot's epigraph derives from the mythological story of the Sibyl who, granted a wish by Apollo, asked for prolonged life, but neglected to ask for continued youthfulness.<sup>31</sup> Eliot quotes Trimalchio ('a filthy-rich ex-slave and extravagant party host')<sup>32</sup> and a witness of the Sibyl's plight: "'For indeed I myself have seen, with my own eyes, the Sibyl hanging in a bottle at Cumae, and when those boys would say to her: 'Sibyl, what do you want?' she replied, 'I want to die'"'.<sup>33</sup> Sexton's speaker's insistent opening question, which evidences a preoccupation with death rather than an interest in life, places her firmly on the side of the Sibyl; she assumes her voice, her longing for death. An earlier Sexton poem, 'Wanting to Die' (LD), pities those born with the suicidal desire within them (and similarly pictures them, like the Sibyl of Cumae, as the object of awed scrutiny by the innocent):

<sup>30</sup> 'Technologies of the Self', in *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault*, ed. by L. H. Martin and others (London: Tavistock, 1988), pp. 16-49 (p. 19).

<sup>31</sup> See Ovid, *The Metamorphoses of Ovid*, trans. by Mary Innes (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1955), pp. 314-15.

<sup>32</sup> Claudia Roth Pierpont, 'For Love and Money: An early version of Fitzgerald's Great American Novel is resurrected', *The New Yorker*, 3 July 2000, 77-83 (p. 78). Pierpont examines the relationship between Eliot's use of the Trimalchio anecdote and F. Scott Fitzgerald's appropriation of the story in *The Great Gatsby* (and indeed of *Trimalchio* or *Trimalchio at West Egg* as possible titles). Fitzgerald sent a copy of his novel to Eliot, addressing it to the "'Greatest of Living Poets from his enthusiastic [sic] worshipper'" (p. 82).

<sup>33</sup> Trans. in *The Norton Anthology of Poetry*, ed. by Margaret Ferguson and others, 4<sup>th</sup> edn. (New York and London: Norton, 1996), p. 1236 n. 9.



Still-born, they don't always die,  
 but dazzled, they can't forget a drug so sweet  
 that even children would look on and smile.<sup>34</sup>

The speaker in 'Hurry Up Please', like the Sibyl of Cumae, is caught between life and death. She is tormented by the scrutiny of her audience (the 'executioners' and 'interrogator' in Sexton's poem, the young boys in Eliot's epigraph). That she is displayed like an anatomical specimen in a glass bottle replicates Sexton's metaphor of the inverted glass bowl in 'For John, Who Begg Me Not to Enquire Further' and indeed Plath's image of the 'Bell Jar'. In each case, the glass jar signifies the control and public display of the (female) subject.

The confessional poet, like the Sibyl of Cumae, is caught and objectified by the gaze of her audience and resorts to what seems to be the only comprehensible language – the language of the body:

I give them both my buttocks,  
 my two wheels rolling off toward Nirvana.  
 They are as neat as a wallet,  
 opening and closing on their coins,  
 the quarters, the nickels,  
 straight into the crapper.

The gesture mocks the self-exposure of confessional writing (developed subsequently in this poem, and elsewhere, in metaphors of sexual display and prostitution) and treats the corrupting business of poetry with contempt.<sup>35</sup> The dual meaning of 'Nirvana' (a Buddhist state of peace, where individual existence ceases to signify, or the site of Hedonistic pleasure and individual gratification) conflates the spiritual and the vulgar (that is, common, popular) promise of confessionalism. In addition to entering into a dialogue with Eliot, Sexton's speaker draws on James Joyce's writing. The allusion to the display of the buttocks mimics Molly Bloom's posture in Joyce's *Ulysses*. As Declan Kiberd notes: 'Leopold Bloom makes a fetish of [Molly's] bottom, a privilege for which she considers charging him money in the

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<sup>34</sup> Sexton made extensive reference to the Sibyls, and Sibylline leaves in poems (such as 'May 5 1970' (DY)) and interviews (explaining to Barbara Kevles (p. 331), that 'the leaves talk to me every June'). Gilbert and Gubar use the story as a metaphor for the work of the woman artist, describing their own book as 'an attempt at reconstructing the Sibyl's leaves, leaves which haunt us with the possibility that if we can piece together their fragments the parts will form a whole that tells the story of the career of a single woman artist'. *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1984), p. 101.

<sup>35</sup> As Freud suggests in 'Character and Anal Erotism' (1908): 'An invitation to a caress of the anal zone is still used today, as it was in ancient times, to express defiance or defiant scorn [. . .] an exposure of the buttocks represents a softening down of this spoken invitation into a gesture.' *On Sexuality: Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality and Other Works* [PFL 7], ed. by Angela Richards, trans. by James Strachey (Harmondsworth: Pelican, 1977; repr. Penguin, 1991), pp. 207-15 (p 213).

future.’<sup>36</sup> One of Sexton’s fiercest critics, Mona Van Duyn (more of whom in the next chapter), can tolerate Sexton’s volume *Live or Die* (which she claims has ‘as little to do with believable sexuality as an act of intercourse performed on stage for an audience’) only by reading it as fictional (or, in Sexton’s terms, as “Molly Bloomish”). As Van Duyn insists: ‘Only when the “I” is a character separate from the author does the woman become as innocent of exhibitionism as Molly Bloom.’<sup>37</sup>

Naked self-revelation (of the buttocks and their waste products; connoting a possible pun on *The Waste Land*) is commercialised (a price is put on it) and thus rendered sordid. The speaker in these lines is both child-like and sexually knowing (hence the provocative display). Most importantly – and this is in contradiction to conventional readings of the distasteful lack of control of the confessional poet (in Spacks’s words, ‘how can one properly respond to lines as grotesquely uncontrolled as these?’)<sup>38</sup> – she is fully in command of her faeces (‘coins’ or, in Freudian terms, her ‘gift’). Freud describes the relationship between faeces (‘the gift’) and money (‘the connection between the complexes of interest in money and defecation [. . . ] appear to be the most extensive of all’) and relations of power (‘its faeces are the infant’s first gift, a part of his body which he will give up only on persuasion’).<sup>39</sup> If, as Robert Phillips, for example, argues, confessional poetry is a ‘purgation’, then this is a purgation which is controlled (hence ‘neat’), productive (financially lucrative) and willingly entered into by the subject.<sup>40</sup>

The rhetoric here becomes defensive, as though anticipating criticism of such self-display and testing the limits of confessional discourse. How far can the speaker go before the audience (‘executioner’/Eliot?) tires of her?:

Why shouldn’t I pull down my pants  
and moon at the executioner  
as well as past raisins on my breasts?  
Why shouldn’t I pull down my pants  
and show my little cunny to Tom  
and Albert? They wee-wee funny.  
I wee-wee like a squaw.  
I have ink but no pen.

<sup>36</sup> *Ulysses*, ed. by Declan Kiberd (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1992), p. 1182. Sexton alludes to Molly Bloom on a number of occasions. Polly Williams, a student in one of Sexton’s creative writing classes, recalls Sexton asking her to remove the final two words of the line ‘the why of yes we can’ from a poem she had written. Sexton explained: “‘it’s so nice to break it. Kind of Molly Bloomish . . . will you please, for me, take out ‘we can?’” ‘Sexton in the Classroom’ in McClatchy, ed., pp. 96-101 (p. 99).

<sup>37</sup> ‘On *Love Poems*’, in McClatchy, ed., pp. 139-41 (p. 140).

<sup>38</sup> Spacks, ‘On *45 Mercy Street*’, p. 186.

<sup>39</sup> Freud, ‘On Transformations of Instinct as Exemplified in Anal Erotism’ (1917), *On Sexuality*, pp. 292-302 (p. 299); ‘Character and Anal Erotism’, *On Sexuality*, p. 213.

<sup>40</sup> Phillips, p. 8.

The metaphor of undressing invokes the contemporary consensus against confessional self-revelation (or the ‘unbuttoned style of reminiscence’, as Jonathan Raban has termed it).<sup>41</sup> ‘Tom’ is, of course, Thomas Stearns Eliot (here addressed with more familiarity, and more contempt, than the apostrophe ‘Mr. Eliot’ in Sexton’s ‘Sweeney’) and ‘Albert’ is an assimilation of Eliot’s character of that name in section two of *The Waste Land*. In ‘Hurry Up Please’, as in this section of Eliot’s poems, there is an implied imperative for women to be presentable, to attract and please the men: ‘Now Albert’s coming back, make yourself a bit smart.’ Yet this is an imperative which Sexton’s speaker resists. The repetition of ‘Why shouldn’t I’ in lines nine and twelve indicates that the speaker is aware of her transgression, that she is testing the boundaries of what is acceptable, for women – and specifically, for women as writers (hence ‘ink’ and ‘pen’).

The excremental imagery (‘wee-wee’) indicates, among other things, the speaker’s own ambivalence about her writing – an ambivalence perhaps born of the incorporation of others’ repeated condemnation (a process similar to that by which the girl child is taught that her genitals are not only different, but inferior). Notwithstanding the lack (absence, and also loss, in the Lacanian sense) of the penis (power), the speaker still wishes, in a supreme effort of will and physical (writing) energy, to make her mark, or to retaliate against the regime which would leave her pen(is)-less: ‘still / I dream that I can piss in God’s eye.’ The pettiness of the seemingly trivial, yet deeply symbolic, difference between the sexes is mocked in the subsequent line: ‘I dream I’m a boy with a zipper. / It’s so practical, la de dah.’

The shifting, and thus foregrounding, of gender (‘I dream I’m a boy’) and, most importantly, the allusion in the lines quoted above to the ‘raisins’ and the ‘breasts’ invokes two figures from Eliot’s poem. First, Mr. Eugenides (‘unshaven, with a pocket full of currants’) and thereafter, Tiresias (‘old man’ with his/her ‘wrinkled female breasts’, whose presence immediately succeeds Mr. Eugenides’s in Eliot’s poem). In like manner, Sexton’s short story, ‘All God’s Children Need Radios’, reports her Doctor’s prediction: “‘You’ll be an old hag in three years!’” and asks: ‘What does he mean? [. . .] An old hag, her breasts shrunken to the size of pearls?’<sup>42</sup> In ‘Hurry Up Please’, Sexton’s speaker, like Tiresias, experiments with these different gender positions. She exploits archetypal metaphors for women’s (personal) and men’s (impersonal) writing – metaphors similar to those in her poem ‘The Black Art’ (PO) where women ‘feel too much’ and are preoccupied with ‘cycles and children’ and men ‘know too much’ and are concerned with ‘erections and congresses and products’. Yet this is only in order to draw attention, by contrast, to what unites the sexes:

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<sup>41</sup> Robert Lowell’s *Poems: A Selection*, ed. by Jonathan Raban, (London: Faber and Faber, 1974), p. 169.

<sup>42</sup> In Colburn, ed., *No Evil Star*, pp. 23-32 (p. 28) (first publ. as ‘A Small Journal’ in *Ms.* magazine (November 1973)).

I have swallowed an orange, being woman.  
 You have swallowed a ruler, being a man.  
 Yet waiting to die we are the same thing.

‘Waiting to die’ recalls the plight, and the desperation, of the Sibyl in Eliot’s epigraph (who, as we have seen, ‘want[s] to die’) and the sibylline voice with which Sexton opens her poem. We are all – women and men – on a journey towards death. There is more contiguity between the sexes (and perhaps by extension, between the kinds of writing produced by each, between the personal and the impersonal) than might be realised: ‘Skeezix, you are me. La de dah. / You grow a beard but our drool is identical.’ Here the polarised ‘you’ and ‘me’ of the opening lines are brought into proximity – even synthesised (hence the pronoun ‘our’). As Eliot comments in the notes to *The Waste Land*:

Tiresias, although a mere spectator and not indeed a ‘character’, is yet the most important personage in the poem, uniting all the rest [. . .] all the women are one woman, and the two sexes meet in Tiresias. What Tiresias *sees*, in fact, is the substance of the poem.

The voice of Tiresias emerges again in section three of ‘Hurry Up Please’: ‘There’s a sack over my head. / I can’t see. I’m blind.’ Eliot’s Tiresias, ‘though blind [. . .] / [. . .] *can* see’ [my emphasis].<sup>43</sup> Sexton’s tautology establishes that in her poem, unlike in Eliot’s, the speaker is both literally and figuratively blind: she lacks the metaphorical insight which is Tiresias’s consolation for his physical loss of sight. What Eliot’s Tiresias ‘sees’ is the comforting view of the sailors’ safe return ‘home from sea’ and the familiar domestic routine (the typist laying out her tea) [lines 221-23]. What Sexton’s Tiresias fails to see is an antithetical scene, one where the ‘sea collapses’, where the fishermen (metaphorically the predatory audience, hence the distinction between them and the speaker: ‘If I were a fisherman I could comprehend’) are determined and vicious. They dredge insight (‘eyes’) from someone else’s pain. Here, as in the ‘Memoir’ poems discussed in Chapter Four, writing necessitates metaphorical immersion in deep and dangerous waters:

They fish right through the door  
 and pull eyes from the fire.  
 They rock upon the daybreak  
 and amputate the waters.  
 They are beating the sea,  
 they are hurting it,  
 delving down into the inscrutable salt.

<sup>43</sup> Implicit in Sexton’s use of the metaphor is Tiresias’s role in the story of Oedipus. See Sophocles, *King Oedipus* in *The Theban Plays*, trans. by E. V. Rieu (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1947). Tiresias appears, too, in the story of Narcissus (see Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, pp. 82-3) – an important source for Sexton, as the Conclusion to this thesis demonstrates.

A similar sense of vulnerability and victimisation is found in the texts discussed in the next chapter, and in images of fragmentation (represented by the figure of synecdoche) in Chapters Four and Six. The metaphor of ‘the door’, and of invasion, alludes to a warning proffered by Sexton’s tutor, the poet John Holmes. Holmes was deeply antagonistic towards Sexton’s ‘self-centred’ poetry, and advised her (in a letter which inspired the poem ‘For John, Who Begs Me Not to Enquire Further’ and which is considered in more detail in my conclusion) that:

[Richard] Wilbur has a paragraph in *Mid-Century Poets* about art as a window or as a door. If it is thought of by the artist as a door, he says, he takes away all walls between himself and the world and becomes the world; this, he says, is not only bad esthetics [sic], but bad morals. Instead, the window frames, limits, gives a selected view of a part of the world, does something with the material. I’m afraid that you live by the open-door policy in poetry – to make a lousy pun – and I don’t believe in it.<sup>44</sup>

In a 1973 interview, Sexton explains: ‘apparently, I guess, I was the door or something . . .’<sup>45</sup> Her ellipsis indicates something about her own ambivalence about this role. The door leaves the poet vulnerable, open to attack: ‘they [predatory readers] fish right through the door.’

In the second stanza of section two, Sexton’s speaker adopts a dramatic role; that of ‘Ms. Dog’. Caroline Hall speculates that ‘Ms. Dog’ is inspired by Eliot’s waste land dog (line 74) and although this is one possible influence, we should also note that Sexton had likened herself to a dog (servile, inhuman) on a number of other occasions.<sup>46</sup> For example, in ‘All God’s Children Need Radios’ (mentioned earlier), she asserts: ‘I am a dog.’ Later, referring to mishearing a word spoken on the radio, she explains: ‘I *heard* dog [. . .] *Dog* stands for me.’<sup>47</sup> In ‘Is It True?’ (discussed in Chapter Five), she writes:

I have,  
for some time,  
called myself,  
Ms. Dog.

Given Sexton’s fondness for palindromes (see ‘rat’s star’ in ‘With Mercy For the Greedy’ discussed in the previous chapter, and ‘An Obsessive Combination of Ontological Inscap, Trickery and Joy’, discussed in the Conclusion), the significance of ‘Dog’ as a sinister – reading it from right to left – inversion of ‘God’ is worthy of note. The persona has much in

<sup>44</sup> John Holmes, Letter to Anne Sexton, 8 February 1959, HRHRC.

<sup>45</sup> Interview with William Heyen and Al Poulin, p. 135.

<sup>46</sup> Hall, p. 137. Ms. or Mrs. Dog is, of course, also a bitch. See Jacqueline Rose for a discussion of the application of the ‘bitch-goddess’ epithet to Sylvia Plath, *Haunting*, p. 169.

<sup>47</sup> ‘All God’s Children Need Radios’, pp. 27, 29 [Sexton’s emphases]. We should also recall that Molly Bloom in Joyce’s *Ulysses* is addressed in a postcard as ‘Doggerina’, p. 985.

common with that developed by another ‘giant’ of contemporary poetry (and a profound, albeit usually unrecognised, influence on Sexton): W. H. Auden. Auden notoriously began to refer to ‘Miss God’ – a persona which he credited as the source of his poetic inspiration, or blamed for his own irrational behaviour, as occasion demanded.<sup>48</sup>

Immediately before writing ‘Hurry Up Please’, Sexton had drafted three poems (which remain unpublished) in which the character ‘Dog God’ appears. Two of these (‘Dog-God Fights the Dollars’ and ‘Dog-God Adopts a Monkey’) are of compelling interest in their evocation and examination of themes subsequently explored in ‘Hurry Up Please’.<sup>49</sup> The first, ‘Dog-God Fights the Dollars’ (originally entitled ‘Commerce’), was written on October 4, 1972, some two months before ‘Hurry Up Please’. Its opening lines read like a draft of the first two sections of the latter:

Dog-God was out fighting the dollars.  
He wanted to conquer them, the large  
green hearts, the sharp black numbers

Thereafter, there is a ten-line section (crossed through in Sexton’s hand), which makes clear the vicissitudes of the relationship between ‘Dog-God’ (a metaphor for the confessional poet, encapsulating the mixture of disdain and reverence, contempt and adoration in which she is held) and audience:

Dog-God was a bandit, he was a mugger,  
he was a friar praying to their faces,  
the ones, the fives, the fiftys [sic], the hundreds.

The abjection and self-loathing indicated by the designation of self as ‘Dog’ surfaces in the final section of the poem, along with the dreadful admission that the speaker’s work (the production and performance of confessional poetry) is done purely for financial gain: ‘Dollars / were his cure.’ Monetary recompense is product and evidence of the audience’s attention and admiration (or sympathy) and is necessary to the speaker’s sense of identity. If the attention ceases, so does the money and so, too, does the subject:

The rain  
of bucks would not come and his life  
was vanishing.

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<sup>48</sup> Richard Davenport-Hines, *Auden* (London: Heinemann, 1995), pp. 215, 245. Auden, too, was fond of devising palindromes and, according to Charles Osborne, was particularly proud of “‘T. Eliot, top bard, notes putrid tang emanating, is sad, I’d assign it a name: gnat dirt upset on drab pot toilet’”. *W.H.Auden: The Life of a Poet* (London: Eyre Methuen, 1980), p. 316.

<sup>49</sup> See Appendix One.

Without an audience there can be no discourse, and the confession will remain incomplete, the penitent dissatisfied. Dog-God and his wife:

lived together in the shadow,  
each day falling downward into the money machine  
until they could make no noises, except  
with their tap shoes, clicking like dimes.<sup>50</sup>

‘Dog-God’s Wife Adopts a Monkey’ is a disturbing and intense dream poem. A deleted line part-way through the typescript speculates ‘this must be a dream’, and the extant final lines confirm as much: ‘she woke up.’ Like ‘Dog-God Fights the Dollars’, it suggests a number of themes, images and voices which re-emerge in ‘Hurry Up Please’. The poem opens with the overheard voices of two women (a pastiche, perhaps, of the reported dialogue between ‘Lil’ and her friend in section two of *The Waste Land*) discussing how to treat a visiting monkey (perhaps a displaced metaphor for the visiting / ‘demobilised’ husband in Eliot’s poem and a covert allusion to Eliot’s ‘apeneck Sweeney’):

I couldn’t really keep the monkey,  
the mother-in-law said, if he wouldn’t  
stand there waiting for his bottom  
to be wiped, I’d take him.

Of course, one of the functions of the monkey is to confirm the bestiality of the subject’s (the Dog’s) experience. We should note the specific resonance of the monkey as a performing animal and the source of amusement and entertainment because of its assimilation of ostensibly human traits. A number of the poems about performance, discussed in the next chapter, similarly draw parallels between the condition of the confessional poet and that of the performing animal. Both are cruelly trapped by their audience’s demands for a spectacle. In ‘Hurry Up Please’, the speaker ‘blurring in the mike’ is at once ‘dog’, ‘turtle’ and, in a punning metaphor – ‘turtle green / and monk black’ – a monkey. A ‘monk’, like a ‘monkey’, bears only a tangential – but nevertheless a recognisable and undeniable – relationship with the ‘normal’. In ‘Is It True?’ (mentioned earlier, and considered more fully in Chapter Five), the speaker explains that she calls herself ‘Ms. Dog’ because ‘I am almost animal’.

In respect of the origins of ‘Hurry Up Please’, this dream poem suggests a source for the biological distinction between the sexes encapsulated in the former’s ‘They wee wee funny. / I wee wee like a squaw’. ‘Dog-God’s Wife’ is more explicit, and more transgressive. In a gesture which again implicitly draws on the figure of the man/woman Tiresias in Eliot’s

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<sup>50</sup> The latent connection between tapping (siphoning or beating), performance, and financial accumulation is worthy of note. See my reading of ‘For John, Who Begs Me Not to Enquire Further’ in the Conclusion.

poem, Dog-God's wife appears to be both male and female. Speaking to the monkey, she declares:

But I won't  
love you if you don't use the toilet  
like the rest of us and she pulled down  
her pants and showed him how. Then she  
took her own cock in her hand, her own  
visionary spout, and showed him how to go  
the other way.

Suddenly, and finally, the monkey becomes 'six feet tall' and is 'fully clothed' (that is, he becomes humanised), yet something is missing. As Dog-God's wife explains:

he had never been to school.  
His manners were perfect and his speech  
correct but he had never been to school.  
You've wasted your life, she said, you're  
twenty now and have nothing to do.

Sexton, as has often been noted, was poorly educated (she was an intermittent student at a succession of public schools and at a finishing school in Boston) and was conscious, throughout her life, of her academic disadvantage.<sup>51</sup> The role of the literary ingenue is just one of the personae or masks which Sexton experimented with in her negotiation of the standards and expectations of contemporary poetry.<sup>52</sup> Hence the significance of the opportunity offered to her in adulthood of a Fellowship at Harvard University's Radcliffe Institute (a special project established by Radcliffe College to give opportunities to gifted women):

To belong to the Institute that's a pretty big thing for a girl who went around and people would ask what college you went to, and I'd say I didn't go to college and I'd have to go through this long thing about I really don't know anything and I'm very dumb and I had this big mask so that everyone would stop asking me. Now it's just like I've graduated [. . .] I don't have to keep saying I'm nothing.<sup>53</sup>

The dream-monkey's lack of learning symbolises Sexton's own educational failings – an identification which is confirmed in the final lines of the poem. Here, the contiguity of monkey and poet is confirmed:

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<sup>51</sup> See Middlebrook, *Biography*, Chapters One to Four, and Maxine Kumin, 'How It Was', in *Anne Sexton: The Complete Poems*, pp. xix-xxxiv.

<sup>52</sup> Middlebrook cites 'Dog-God's Wife Adopts a Monkey' as evidence of Sexton's (autodidactic) relationship with the academic milieu which she, like the monkey, newly inhabits. *Biography*, p. 362.

<sup>53</sup> Anne Sexton, interview with Martha White, audiotape (July 1963), Radcliffe Institute Archives.



In this case, she resolved, you could  
 be a poet, a kind of seer, a kind  
 of monkey, and she woke up, trailing  
 her tail.

A slightly earlier poem, 'Gods' (written in June 1971) also foreshadows 'Hurry Up Please'. Here, before the discovery (or creation) of 'Ms. Dog', we have a 'Mrs. Sexton' who 'went out looking for the Gods'.<sup>54</sup> 'Gods' condenses the tortuous quest of 'Hurry Up Please' and *The Waste Land* into a sequence of couplets: 'She looked next in all the learned books / and the print spat back at her', 'she went to the Buddha, the Brahma, the Pyramids / and found immense postcards.' In anticipation of the failure of the search in 'Hurry Up Please', the persistent enquiry in 'Gods' meets only with the refrain 'No one'. Notwithstanding the scale and scope of her search, 'Mrs. Sexton' discovers, finally, that the answer which she seeks may be found closer to home, in the fundamentally private and personal (here, again, represented by scatological metaphors):

Then she journeyed back to her own house  
 and the gods of the world were shut in the lavatory.

At last!  
 she cried out,  
 and locked the door.

In section two of 'Hurry Up Please', as in 'Dog-God Fights the Dollars', Ms. Dog (in the shameless way regarded as typical of the confessional poet) collects money with her body; rolling in the dollars as a dog rolls in mud: 'Ms. Dog is out fighting the dollars, / rolling in a field of bucks.' The aural contraction here of 'bucks' (from 'buttocks' in the earlier scene of self-display) emphasises the relationship between the 'I' of that section and 'Ms. Dog' of this. Here the confessional poet – specifically the female confessional poet – is likened to a prostitute ('bucks', we should note, is also a slang reference to men), and the poetic confession is perceived as a profanation of its supposedly sacred roots:

You've got it made if  
 you take the wafer,  
 take some wine,  
 take some bucks

The connection between money, poetry and the sacrament of confession is here made explicit. 'You've got it made' signifies the making/construction of the confessional text and, simultaneously, the acceptance of absolution. Again it confirms the reciprocal nature of the

confession (the giving and taking which we saw in 'With Mercy to the Greedy' in the previous chapter). This itself connects in complex and crucial ways with earlier images of incorporation and ejection. There is an ambivalence here about the process of accepting the sacrament for profane ends ('bucks'), a process which simply generates a new sin to be confessed.

There is also a profound ambivalence about the commercial exploitation of personal experience in confessional poetry. In 'Hurry Up Please', Sexton is frank about the relationship, even similarity, between the text (in particular the performed text, hence 'song') and money: 'take some bucks / the green papery song of the office.' Indeed, she confesses: 'I wish I were the U.S. Mint, / turning it all out.' The metaphor of 'turning it out' indicates that confession is not, after all, some sacred calling or irrepressible release, but a fabrication, a manufactured product of American consumer society. Why bother to turn out poetry, she proceeds to ask, in order that the poetry be simply converted into money? Why not simply print money? Or, to be more direct still, why not produce goods for consumption?

What a jello she could make with it,  
the fives, the tens, the twenties,  
all in a goo to feed to baby.

'Ms. Dog' is at the heart of this chain of production and consumption, the one responsible for supporting the economy by means of her own physical labour – that is, her performance as confessional poet:

Who's that at the podium  
in black and white,  
blurting into the mike?  
Ms. Dog.  
Is she spilling her guts?  
You bet.

'Ms. Dog', like 'Anne' in earlier sections, is represented in the third person, and thereby emphatically dissociated from the speaker. Indeed, the speaker is not certain who this performing subject is, hence: 'Who's that at the podium?' This emphasises the autonomy of the public persona: the performing/reading subject is to be understood as quite distinct from, even unrecognisable by, the writing subject (the 'I'). The 'I' of section one, moreover, even though she tacitly invited us to witness the 'performance' of her bodily functions, was predominantly a private figure. She also retained a modicum of control (hence the neatness of her 'productions', in which she took great pride). 'Ms. Dog', however, is a public figure, seen

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<sup>54</sup> Polly C. Williams recalls Sexton expressing the wish, after the poem's publication, that 'Mrs. Sexton' could be changed to 'Ms.'. 'Sexton in the Classroom', p. 100.

always from the outside (she is mediated by the vision of the speaker, and presented in a public context). She is out of control; ‘blurting’ into the mike, ‘spilling’ her guts.<sup>55</sup> This is not the neat and orderly regime of section one, but perhaps precisely because it is public, and therefore outside the subject’s control, an unpredictable spectacle.

This is also a visceral performance. The image of the speaker ‘spilling her guts’ corresponds with Sexton’s view, expressed in a letter of 1973, that poetry readings are a ‘blood letting’.<sup>56</sup> We should note the metaphor of ‘spilling’ which subtly reinforces readings of confessionalism as an irrepressible release of pent-up emotion. Moreover, the question ‘is she spilling her guts?’, spoken in the voice of an onlooker, indicates the seeds of the understanding (refined in ‘The Freak Show’, discussed in the next chapter) that the audience for ‘personal’ poetry is predominantly interested in the physical spectacle, specifically in physical calamity. They want to see the confessional poet ‘vomit on stage’ – a visible signifier of inner trauma.<sup>57</sup>

Even the affirmation ‘You bet’ positions Ms. Dog as the object of a wager, of some kind of monetary promise or exchange. Here, as in Sexton’s poem ‘The Play’ (AR), which imagines a nightmare performance, during which the actor falters and ‘the audience rushes out’, there is a break or aporia in the performance. The actor loses her momentum (hence the ellipses after ‘cough’ and ‘November’) and is barely able to proceed with the show:

Otherwise they cough...  
The day is slipping away, why am I  
out here, what do they want?  
I am sorrowful in November...  
(no they don’t want that,  
they want bee stings).<sup>58</sup>

The confessional performer is under pressure to keep on ‘turning it out’, to maintain her level of production in order to keep the audience’s attention: ‘otherwise they cough . . .’ The speaking subject is isolated and vulnerable, the objectified victim of her audience. The lines confirm the importance, posited by Foucault, Gilmore and others, of the importance of the confessional audience in the construction of the subject’s identity and in establishing the truth

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<sup>55</sup> In a letter to a student, Sexton refers to herself as “the me who is known for spilling her guts”. Qtd in Alex Beam, ‘Anne Sexton’s Awful Wish’, *Double Take* (Summer 1999), 130-40 (p. 135).

<sup>56</sup> Anne Sexton, Letter to Mrs. F. Peter Scigliano, 7 February 1973, HRHRC.

<sup>57</sup> Anne Sexton, ‘The Freak Show’, *American Poetry Review* (May/June 1973), 38-40 (p. 38) (repr. in Colburn, ed., *No Evil Star*, pp. 33-38).

<sup>58</sup> The signification of bees and bee stings as a metaphor for the unpredictability and potential dangerousness of language is discussed in Chapter Six. It is arguable that Plath’s writing is a referent here. Sexton felt that her work had been eclipsed by Plath’s spectacular exit (she responds to news of her death with what she calls ‘shock (envy?)’, Letter to Dudley Fitts, 1 May 1963, HRHRC. Her audience do not want to hear the ponderous news that she was ‘sorrowful in November’, they want to see something altogether more Plath-like, more sudden and painful (bee stings).

of the confession.

Indeed, in contradiction to orthodox readings of confession, which see the subject as always and necessarily revealing personal and traumatic truths, 'Hurry Up Please' warns us that what we see and hear may be as much a product of the audience's desires as a reflection of the subject's putative experience. The speaker is pressurised into presenting, not the 'true' story of her experience, but whatever is required to keep the audience satisfied (the sexual connotations are intentional). Throughout this section, attention shifts forwards and backwards from the experience of the persona 'Ms. Dog' to that of the first-person 'I'. The interchangeability suggests that both 'Ms. Dog' and 'I' may be performative identities, that each

has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality [. . .] if that reality is fabricated as an interior essence, that very interiority is an effect and function of a decidedly public and social discourse.<sup>59</sup>

Here (as in 'The Freak Show'), the poem describes the process by which experience is commodified, yet is itself, in relating this process, complicit in it. Sexton's writing, then, may be said to be profoundly self-reflexive. Under such contradictory and veiled imperatives, the confessional performance degenerates into fragmentation and nonsense:

Toot, toot, tootsy don't cry.  
Toot, toot, tootsy good-bye.  
If you don't get a letter then  
you'll know I'm in jail . . .

Yet this fragmentation is, paradoxically, controlled and allusive, drawing specifically on the 'Goodnight, ladies, goodnight' lines of Eliot's *The Waste Land* (lines 169-172).

Section three of 'Hurry Up Please' reverts to the urgent tone of the poem's title:

Ms. Dog, how much time you got left?  
Ms. Dog, when you gonna feel that cold nose?  
You better get straight with the Maker  
cuz it's a coming, it's a coming!

The idiom here is reminiscent of John Berryman's 'Dream Songs' (the voices of 'Ms Dog' and the first-person speaker are, perhaps, to be compared with his 'Henry' and 'Mr. Bones'). The casual contractions ('gonna', 'cuz') signify the haste and urgency with which the subject writes. The repetition of 'gonna' in subsequent lines also draws on Eliot's 'Fragment of an Agon' which, like *The Waste Land* and 'Hurry Up Please', foregrounds the contiguity between life and death ('Death is life and life is death'). As Eliot's subject comments:

We're gona sit here and drink this booze  
 We're gona sit here and have a tune  
 We're gona stay and we're gona go

The end which Sexton's speaker expects, and which – in a manner reminiscent of Eliot's 'East Coker' – is anticipated in its beginning, is figured in section three as a violent act of punishment. The speaker is to be judged and condemned both as a woman ('they're gonna stick your little doll's head / [. . .] / and your clothes a gonna melt') and as a writer. As the speaker warns Ms. Dog:

Hear that, Ms. Dog!  
 You of the songs,  
 you of the classroom,  
 you of the pocketa-pocketa.<sup>60</sup>

Yet this, although spoken in the second person, is also a *self*-admonishment, for the referent is, in part, Sexton's own poetry. Her poems 'The Fallen Angels' (AR), 'Housewife' (PO), 'Telephone' (DY), 'Self in 1958' and 'Crossing the Atlantic' (LD), amongst others, are all indicted:

Them angels gonna be cut down like wheat.  
 Them songs gonna be sliced with a razor.  
 Them kitchens gonna get a boulder in the belly.  
 Them phones gonna be torn out at the root.  
 There's power in the Lord, baby,  
 and he's gonna turn off the moon.  
 He's gonna nail you up in a closet  
 and there'll be no more Atlantic,  
 no more dreams, no more seeds.

In section four of 'Hurry Up Please', however, Ms. Dog fights back, delighting in her nakedness (metaphorically, her poetry's public revelation of private concerns) and revelling in her performance:

Ms. Dog prefers to sunbathe nude.  
 Let the indifferent sky look on.  
 So what!

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<sup>59</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York and London: Routledge, 1990), p. 136.

<sup>60</sup> A metaphor, perhaps for the sound of the type-writer, and a pun on pocket book? That the sound recalls the retort of gun fire is probably no accident, given the recurrence of military metaphors for language in Sexton's work (see Chapter Six). The phrase is used in James Thurber's 'The Secret Life of Walter Mitty', *The Thurber Carnival* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965), pp. 69-74.

That Ms. Dog *prefers* to sunbathe nude (metaphorically, to expose herself in her writing) indicates that this is a choice. It is not an inadvertent compulsion which requires defence or apology, but a specific and effective strategy. Sexton celebrates her development and freedom as a woman writer (in terms which recall her notorious poem 'In Celebration of My Uterus' (LP), condemned by a number of critics, including the anonymous reviewer for the *Times Literary Supplement* who complained about its 'Whitmanic feminism').<sup>61</sup> Specifically, this section of 'Hurry Up Please' celebrates the speaker's liberation from domestic routine and her new-found right to reveal all (to peel off her clothes); to make the once private and restricted public and shared:

because I've come a long way  
from Brussels sprouts.  
I've come a long way to peel off my clothes  
and lay me down in the grass.  
Once only my palms showed.  
Once I hung around in my woolly tank suit,  
drying my hair in those little meatball curls.

Now I am clothed in gold air with  
one dozen halos glistening on my skin.  
I am a fortunate lady.

Similarly, section five acclaims the ability of the speaker (here metaphorically presented as 'Middle-class lady') to construct something (a poem?) from every seemingly insignificant and personal event (perhaps an acknowledgement of the Freudian notion of sublimation):

If someone hands you a glass of water  
you start constructing a sailboat.  
If someone hands you a candy wrapper,  
you take it to the book binder.

The metaphor celebrates the confessional poet's ability to transform rubbish into writing (in the terms of 'An Obsessive Combination', discussed in my Conclusion, to turn 'RATS' into 'STAR'). Subsequent stanzas of this section are introduced with the phrase 'Once upon a time' which foregrounds the potential fictionality of the text. The use of the rhetoric of fiction permits the speaker to project her vision far into the future, and then speculatively to look back on events ('Once upon a time Ms. Dog was sixty-six. / She had white hair and wrinkles as deep as splinters').<sup>62</sup> We are reminded that this is not a documentary account of lived experience. 'Once Upon a time' signifies the process by which we tell and read stories about

<sup>61</sup> 'Presences and Processes', *Times Literary Supplement*, 12 March 1970, p. 279.

<sup>62</sup> The analepsis recalls the opening lines from Eliot's 'Burnt Norton': 'Time present and time past / Are both perhaps present in time future / And time future contained in time past.'

our personal and collective pasts in order to divine their meaning. Indeed, the next stanza in this section emphasises the shift from the specific to the general, widening the perspective from isolation to communal experience: ‘Once upon a time we were all born, / popped out like jelly rolls.’ As in ‘For John, Who Begs Me Not to Enquire Further’, the point is to emphasise the shared nature of that which is otherwise regarded as purely personal or narcissistic.

Section five confronts this, the fundamental question for confessionalism: how can personal, individual experience be brought to bear? How can it be made meaningful in the public world? Conversely, it asks how ordinary, shared, communal life can continue – seemingly regardless – in the face of private suffering. Drawing, perhaps, on Eliot’s ‘Preludes’ (‘The winter evening settles down / With smell of steaks in passageways’), Sexton comments:

Often there are wars  
yet the shops stay open  
and sausages are still fried.

The reproduction of the species (‘People copulate / entering each other’s blood’) and the maintenance of routine (evidenced earlier in respect of the rituals of American domesticity) function, it is suggested, as a panacea or strategy of displacement in order to ensure that the public is distracted from the terrifying vulnerability of the individual:

It doesn’t matter if there are wars,  
the business of life continues  
unless you’re the one that gets it.  
Mama, they say as their intestines  
leak out. Even without wars  
life is dangerous.

The pun on ‘the business of life’ confirms the commercialisation of experience. Further, the image of the ‘intestines / leak[ing] out’ on the battlefield suggests a relationship between that scene of violent attrition and the experience of the confessional speaker, who ‘spill[s] her guts’ to the confessional audience (earlier, the ‘executioner’). Notwithstanding this personal – and also political – crisis, the poem insists that everyday life can and must continue. There are shades here, of course, of Sexton’s ‘Sweeney’ (discussed above) and ‘To a Friend Whose Work Has Come to Triumph’ (PO), itself a contemplation of Auden’s ‘Musée des Beaux Arts’, where suffering ‘takes place / While someone else is eating or opening a window or

just walking dully along'.<sup>63</sup> Sexton's subject in 'Hurry Up Please' is, we find, still seeking an answer. This represents a triumph of hope over experience, given the rebuttal of the poem's opening lines:

Ms. Dog stands on the shore  
and the sea keeps rocking in  
and she wants to talk to God.

Her position replicates that of Eliot's speaker in *The Waste Land*:

I sat upon the shore  
Fishing, with the arid plain behind me  
Shall I at least set my lands in order?

However, the increasing urgency of Ms. Dog's quest is signified by her 'stand[ing] on the shore' (while Eliot's speaker sits) and by her determination (she 'wants') while Eliot's speaker exhibits only passive hesitancy ('shall I?').

The sixth and final section of Sexton's poem attempts to bring together the multiple strands of the earlier sections by means of a contemplation – or rather, an interrogation – of the single characteristic which unites them: their identity as language. Like Eliot in 'East Coker' and 'Burnt Norton', Sexton is concerned with the nature, origins and capacity of language: concerned with the processes by which it constructs (rather than reflects) meaning (a point which will be explored in more detail in Chapter Six). The section begins:

Learning to talk is a complex business.  
My daughter's first word was *utta*,  
meaning button.

It asks questions about language acquisition, problematises the received relationship between thought and language, experience and its expression, and raises the possibility that language precedes and dominates the speaker:

Before there are words  
do you dream?  
In utero  
do you dream?  
Who taught you to suck?  
And how come?

Sexton's questions about language are, in part, questions about origins and this takes us back to the questions ('What is death, I ask. / What is life, you ask') at the beginning of the

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<sup>63</sup> *The English Auden: Poems, Essays and Dramatic Writings 1927-1939*, ed. by Edward Mendelson (London: Faber and Faber, 1986). For a discussion of the relationship between Sexton's and Auden's poems, see my 'Well, I guess this didn't travel very well across the Atlantic'.



poem. The specific connection with the opening section is reinforced by the half-rhymes of ‘utta’, ‘button’, and ‘utero’, which invoke the ‘buttocks’ of section one – a noun which figures again in the next stanza of this final section as though to reinforce the syntactical and figurative connection. It also returns us to the point raised earlier about the chasm which divides experience from innocence, private from public. In the face of the speaker’s profound confusion (hence this section’s repeated, and never-answered questions about language and thereby representation), public, impersonal life goes on:

Somewhere a man sits with indigestion  
and he doesn’t care.  
A woman is in a store buying bracelets  
and earrings and she doesn’t care.  
La de dah.

Paradoxically, and highly significantly, the passage which expresses this uncertainty and anxiety is itself an exemplification of the way in which writing does, in fact, succeed. The chain of signification (‘utta’, ‘button’, ‘utero’, ‘buttocks’) and subsequent artful rhymes, associations and oppositions (‘help’/‘hello’, ‘crow’/‘know’, ‘beautiful’ v. ‘ugly’) emphasise contradiction by means of their own internal coherence.

The awful consequence of this linguistic stalemate is that the subject’s plaintive cry is incomprehensible:

Is the cry saying something?  
Does it mean *help*?  
Or hello?  
The cry of a gull is beautiful  
and the cry of a crow is ugly  
but what I want to know  
is whether they mean the same thing.

Sexton’s questions exemplify the modern crisis of faith in the structure and power of language. What does come first: thought (‘dream[s]’) or ‘words’? Do two distinct cries, uttered in different contexts, ‘mean the same thing’?<sup>64</sup> In essence, Sexton is questioning the orthodox creed (and the basis of Western theology and ontology): ‘in the beginning was the word’ and asking what, if anything, came before this word. She imagines an ‘old man’s last words: / More light! More light!’. This, or a similar, inversion of the creation myth appears in a number of Sexton’s poems (for example, ‘O Ye Tongues’, discussed in Chapter Six) and is invariably used as a circular trope, as a way of returning from ends to beginnings (these are

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<sup>64</sup> Certainly, in Saussurean terms, as we will see later in this thesis, language is a system built on opposition and difference. The birds’ cries are meaningful by virtue of their relative positions in a larger system. Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, ed. by Charles Bally and others, trans. by Wade Baskin (New York: McGraw-Hill: 1966).

the old man's last words, pleading for a new beginning) and thus of forcing a re-evaluation, or even dismissal, of the whole teleology.<sup>65</sup>

She is also, of course, reiterating points made earlier about the inside and the outside, the private and the public, and pleading for an accommodation, or for more sympathy, between the two regimes. The Richard Wilbur argument (employed against her confessional writing by her mentor John Holmes) about poetry's responsibility to act as a window (a framing and distancing device) rather than a door (a route in and out) is again invoked, and refuted: 'When the dog [Ms. Dog?] barks you let him in. / All we need is someone to let us in.' In a final Biblical allusion, Sexton incorporates lines from Matthew 6. 28-30 ('consider the lilies in the field'), a passage which is addressed to 'men of little faith', offering reassurance and counselling against anxiety. The Biblical passage proceeds to deliver two – perhaps contradictory – messages to Ms. Dog: “Do not give dogs what is holy” and “seek and you will find”. The second sentiment is echoed in Sexton's poem in lines which emphasise the futility of seeking on Earth or in the far reaches of the mind (metaphorically, the depths of the 'sea') that which can only be found – and made comprehensible – in and through God:

And one other thing:  
to consider the lilies in the field.  
Of course earth is a stranger,  
we pull at its arms  
and still it won't speak.  
The sea is worse.

Sexton's poem asks, finally, for an end to the (clearly futile and redundant) questioning with which it opened. It advocates, instead of enquiry, acquiescence:

It is only known that they are here to worship,  
to worship the terror of the rain,  
the mud and all its people,  
the body itself.

Yet in a complex and seemingly paradoxical move, we find that what Sexton is, in fact, advocating is a continuation of the questioning, albeit one which is undertaken for its own sake rather than in order to divine any answers: 'But more than that, / To worship the question itself.' Sexton proposes (and in this respect, she returns again to the template of *The Waste Land*) that we should worship the question regardless of the answer, that we should see life as an endless quest, one without resolution, one in which we should be happy to live in a state of not knowing, but with faith that God is in command. There is no answer, no closure, no end

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<sup>65</sup> See also the epigraph to *Love Poems*, which quotes Yeats's 'everything that has been shall be again.'

(and this, of course, runs contrary to liberal-humanist perceptions of the teleology of the literary text). Life requires us to endure the quest and to accustom ourselves to the process of searching. In a supreme metaphor for Sexton's poetics (more on which in the Conclusion), it is the *process* of looking which is more important than any possible answer.<sup>66</sup> 'Hurry Up Please' finally closes in on itself (even diminishing typographically), gradually losing the orchestra of images and voices which has reverberated throughout until only 'Ms. Dog' remains. Her 'shantih shantih shantih', or 'peace which passeth understanding' (to quote from *The Waste Land*) derives from a reconciliation with uncertainty, with the state of not and never knowing the answer to 'what is life' or 'what is death':

Bring a flashlight, Ms. Dog,  
and look in every corner of the brain  
and ask and ask and ask  
until the kingdom,  
however queer,  
will come.

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<sup>66</sup> Here I disagree with Caroline Hall. She argues that the poem 'offer[s] a solution' and achieves a 'carefully wrought affirmation' (pp. 140, 141), whereas I propose that it reaches an accommodation with uncertainty, with never knowing the truth.

## Chapter Three

## 'A kind of freak show': Confession as performance

The early accounts of confessional poetry discussed thus far postulate a mutually beneficial relationship between poet and reader. The suffering and over-burdened subject is said to experience relief as a consequence of releasing her emotions, and the audience identifies with the subject and is thereby vicariously relieved of its own anxieties about modern experience. Even a poststructuralist theorist such as Foucault – notwithstanding his recognition of the power differential which underpins the confessional process – sees it, finally, as a purposive and beneficial act, as

a ritual in which the expression alone, independently of its external consequences, produces intrinsic modifications in the person who articulates it: it exonerates, redeems, and purifies him; it unburdens him of his wrongs, liberates him, and promises him salvation.<sup>1</sup>

However, I would argue that, in Sexton's poetry, the relationship between speaker and reader is neither as positive nor as productive as any of these critiques suggest. Indeed, as the striking and typically overlooked texts discussed in this chapter indicate, there is a fine line between collaboration and exploitation, symbiosis and parasitism.

It is in staged readings or performances of Sexton's work that the pressure on both parties (poet/performer and observer) is most acute, and that the problematics of the confessional process are thrown into sharpest relief.<sup>2</sup> Paradoxes and contradictions are here foregrounded – even exaggerated. The paralysing double-bind, in which the audience is both necessary and despised, in which the penitent's own punishment must be first enticed and then laid bare, is – in public performances – dramatically writ large. New questions arise: is the Anne Sexton on the stage the 'real' Anne Sexton? Is the 'I' performed on the stage a scripted (that is, constructed, pre-scribed) 'I'? Does the speaker's physical presence and her vocalisation of experience offer a guarantee of truth? Who benefits from the dramatic re-enactment of the scene? Is it any more than a spectacle? (Sexton's mentor, John Holmes, complained that Sexton's writing was 'all a release for you' and asked 'what is it for anyone else except a spectacle of someone else experiencing release?'.)<sup>3</sup> If the writing of the

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\* Anne Sexton, Letter to Nancy Lehnhardt, 10 February 1973, HRHRC.

<sup>1</sup> *The History of Sexuality*, pp. 61-2. The identification of the power differential (between sinner and priest, defendant and judge, patient and doctor) is not a novel one, although it has been overlooked in Sexton's contemporaries' accounts of the mode.

<sup>2</sup> As this chapter makes clear, Sexton makes repeated use of metaphors of drama, theatre, spectacle, display, even striptease and prostitution to represent literal performances or readings of her work and, more subtly, to signify the staged, theatrical, and artificial nature of the confessional process.

<sup>3</sup> John Holmes, Letter to Anne Sexton, 8 February 1959, HRHRC.

confession is a compulsive, necessary and therapeutic act, what status does the recapitulation of the confessional moment, on the stage, have?<sup>4</sup>

Sexton's 1974 poem 'Talking to Sheep' (first published in *The Death Notebooks*) foregrounds the spectacular – and deceptive – nature of confession, or, more properly, of confessional *performance*. 'Performance' is an accurate term in that it signifies the fundamental artificiality of the mode, it confirms that the 'I' of the poem may be a persona or dramatic mask, and it invokes the crucial relationship between poet/penitent/performer and reader/confessor/spectator. This is one of the few poems in which Sexton explicitly refers to 'confession', and is interesting not least because it offers a sustained critique of the audience's expectations of the mode and an account of the speaker's attempt to escape its demands. Like 'Cripples and Other Stories' (discussed in Chapter One), it manipulates – in order to challenge – the conventions of confessional poetry (for example, it concedes but then problematises the compulsiveness assumed to be at the heart of confessional discourse: 'Yes. It was a compulsion / but I denied it, called it fiction'). The first line of the poem reads, simply: 'my Life.' Thus the text dramatically, even melodramatically, announces itself as a personal confession of the subject's life story. However, as it proceeds to make clear, 'my life' is not representable in the magnificent isolation promised by the syntax of this opening line. Rather, 'my life' can only be revealed within a fraught framework of power and punishment. It cannot be 'confessed' without the involvement and finally the assent (by whatever strategies these might be obtained) of the hostile auditor.

Most importantly, 'Talking to Sheep' dispels any residual notions of the satisfaction which the confessional speaker achieves in the act of confession. She is subject to the exact same sense of shame and revulsion as has repelled critics of the mode (Dickey and Spacks, to name but two), and achieves neither sympathy nor absolution. The naked self-revelation thought by some to be a narcissistic indulgence on the part of the speaker is shown (specifically by Sexton's use of the passive mode) to be a regrettable source of violence and humiliation – a relentless rape (hence the repetitions in line three and four) rather than an exhibitionist gesture:

My life  
has appeared unclothed in court,  
detail by detail,  
death-bone witness by death-bone witness,  
and I was shamed at the verdict.

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<sup>4</sup> J. Hillis Miller asks a similar question in his analysis of the Biblical parables: 'Do the citations of the parables by the authors of the Gospels have the same efficacy as the parables had when they were originally spoken by Jesus to his auditors, or are they only the report of a form of language that has its efficacy elsewhere?' *Tropes*, p. 148.

It is a telling indictment of the disproportionate power relationship which underpins the confession that although the speaker is stripped bare and fully exposed, the confessors ('invisible priests') remain anonymous and thereby dominant:

But nevertheless I went on  
to the invisible priests,  
confessing, confessing  
through the wire of hell  
and they wet upon me in that phone booth.

The speaker is in a subordinate position (in 'hell') while the 'priests' are superior – able to 'wet [down] upon' her. In this disturbing picture, we see that the act of confession incites violence and repression from the very people whom one might expect to give absolution.<sup>5</sup> Sexton uses similar rhetoric to that in the lines quoted above in her 1968 interview with the *Paris Review*. Responding to a question about her revelation of 'painful experiences' she explains: 'on the one hand I was digging up shit; with the other hand I was covering it with sand. Nevertheless I went on.'<sup>6</sup>

'Talking to Sheep' is significant for its shameless acknowledgement of the confessional poet's complicity in inviting the observers' attention. Despite her naked vulnerability and her humiliation in the courtroom, 'I went on / [. . .] confessing, confessing.' 'I went on' yields a pun, both on the speaker continuing to speak notwithstanding the imperative to stop, and on her taking the stage ('she goes on' and 'the show must go on'). It transpires that this is no simple victimisation of vulnerable subject by predatory others. Rather, it is a product of the symbiotic – verging on the parasitic – needs of poet and audience alike:

Then I accosted winos,  
the derelicts of the region,  
winning them over into the latrine of my details.

The confessional poet's desperate thirst for an audience is presented as an addiction. Like an alcoholic (hence the image of 'the winos'), she is forced to take aggressive and debased steps ('the latrine') to fuel her habit (to find an auditor or confessor). In an interview, Sexton explains that poets 'dig right into the heart and let it spurt out and I think this kind of life makes alcoholics of them'.<sup>7</sup> Yet the metaphor also signifies the contempt in which the confessional speaker holds her audience. The image of 'winos' connotes their addiction to her

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<sup>5</sup> As Leigh Gilmore has remarked: 'telling the truth may be a form of punishment, as well as an effort to stave it off' p. 107.

<sup>6</sup> Interview with Barbara Kevles, p. 313.

<sup>7</sup> Anne Sexton, interview with Charles Balliro, *Fiction*, [June (?) 1974, p. 13.

trauma as much as her addiction to its public display. And her contempt notwithstanding, it is these debased creatures who retain power and who must thus be ‘accosted’ and ‘w[on] over.’<sup>8</sup>

In stanzas three and four, the speaker draws back in order to contemplate the aesthetic process of, and historical precedents for, this painful and problematic confession (‘summing [sic] for her defense,’ as Margaret Honton describes it).<sup>9</sup> Sexton’s speaker concedes that the confessional text may – like the fabrication of ‘carvings’ and ‘silks’ in ‘Her Kind’ – be a sublimation, a product of unconscious processes (hence the metaphors of sleep and dreaming: ‘I keep making statues / of my acts, carving them with my sleep’). She also indicates that the ‘I’ of the confession may not be identical with the identity of the historical author but may, instead, be a costume or disguise (the phrase ‘not my life’ here belies the ostentatious ‘my life’ of the opening line):

or if it is not my life I depict  
then someone’s close enough to wear my nose –  
My nose, my patrician nose,  
sniffing at me or following theirs down the street.<sup>10</sup>

Just as, in Sexton’s words (mentioned in the previous chapter), there is ‘a long history of confessional writing’, so too there is a long ‘history’ of critical condemnation, one which is persistently preoccupied with feelings of anxiety, distaste, and revulsion:

Yet even five centuries ago this smelled queer,  
confession, confession,  
and your devil was thought to push out their eyes  
and all the eyes had seen (too much! too much!)

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<sup>8</sup> Alicia Ostriker uses similar metaphors in ‘Anne Sexton and the Seduction of the Audience’, in *Sexton: Selected Criticism*, ed. by Diana Hume George (Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1988), pp. 3-18.

<sup>9</sup> ‘The Double Image and the Division of Parts: A Study of Mother-Daughter Relationships in the Poetry of Anne Sexton’, in George, ed., pp. 99-116 (p. 99) (first publ. in *Journal of Women’s Studies in Literature*, 1.1 (1979)).

<sup>10</sup> ‘Patrician’ is, conceivably, a veiled allusion to Robert Lowell’s privileged background (see ‘Antebellum Boston’ and ‘91 Revere Street’ in *Robert Lowell: Collected Prose*, ed. by Robert Giroux (London: Faber and Faber, 1987), pp. 291-308; 309-45). As Elizabeth Bishop wrote in a letter to Lowell: ‘all you have to do is put down the names! And [. . .] it seems significant, illustrative, American, etc.’ *One Art: Letters*, ed. by Robert Giroux (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1994), p. 351 (14 December 1957). Sexton’s poem, arguably, responds to allegations about Lowell’s influence on her work (Sexton’s subject ‘follows’ the Patrician Lowell) by positing an opposite influence (the ‘Patrician’ nose ‘sniff[s]’ at her). In a letter to Steven Axelrod, responding to a request for more information about the issue, she explains: ‘I have to turn you down. My sources are not reliable enough. Robert Lowell never told me I influenced him. It was told me by a close, intimate friend, who does not wish to be quoted, and I have consulted with several literary critics, such as Philip Rahv, a good friend of Robert Lowell, and he has said, “Don’t spill the beans.”’ 27 May 1973, HRHRC. In ‘The Bar Fly Ought to Sing’, her memoir of Plath, Sexton alludes to the Plath/Sexton/Lowell influence and explains: ‘Her poems do their own work. I don’t need to sniff them for relatives of some sort.’ In Colburn, ed., *No Evil Star*, pp. 6-13 (p. 11) (first publ. in *Tri Quarterly* 7 (1966)).

The concern about smell brings to mind Ostriker's argument (mentioned in Chapter One) that confession has come to be regarded as 'a nasty odor'.<sup>11</sup> So, too, the final line quoted above expresses an anxiety about seeing 'too much', about being harmed or corrupted by the object of the gaze.<sup>12</sup> Witnessing a confession is both historically and more recently – as we saw in the case of Dickey and Bogan – thought to taint the auditor, burdening them with traumas which they then need to confess or discharge (we recall that Dickey's response is to relieve himself of his newly-acquired burden by depositing it in the nearest 'ashcan'):

And the only cure for such confessions overheard  
was to sit in a cold bath for six days,  
a bath full of leeches, drawing out your blood  
into which confessors had heated the devil in them.

The metaphor of 'leeches' sucking the confessors' blood significantly echoes the image Sexton uses elsewhere to describe the penitent's role ('a kind of blood letting'; a crucial metaphor, and one to which I shall return).

In 'Talking to Sheep', the only way of avoiding the condemnation which – 'five centuries' of historical precedence show – will greet the act of confession is by escape into disguise (the 'mongoloid hood' below recalling the false nose of the earlier stanza), silence or incomprehensibility:

It was wise, the wise medical man said,  
wise to cry *Baa* and be smiling into your mongoloid hood,  
while you simply tended the sheep.  
Or else to sew your lips shut  
and not let a word or a deadstone sneak out.

Silence, or the refusal to speak sense, becomes a form of power – indeed, the only power remaining to the speaker. Meanwhile, the text (the cry '*Baa*') and its performance ('smiling into your mongoloid hood') function as a screen, a 'wise' strategy by which simultaneously to appease and deflect the audience.

The conceit of the 'cry *Baa*' functioning as a masquerade is borrowed by Sexton from a medieval French farce – a copy of which (in French and English) remains among the

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<sup>11</sup> The allusion, as with the earlier reference to the 'nose / sniffing at me', invokes Freud's account of the case of 'Miss Lucy R.' (1893) whose hysterical symptoms included being 'almost continuously pursued by one or two subjective olfactory sensations'. *Studies on Hysteria* [PFL 3], ed. by Angela Richards, trans. by James Strachey (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974; repr. Penguin, 1991), 169-89 (p. 169).

<sup>12</sup> In Sexton's copy of Dostoevsky's *The Possessed* (chapter three), she has underlined Karmazinov's paraphrased words: "Why look at that drowned woman with the dead child in her dead arms? Look rather at me, see how I was unable to bear that sight and turned away from it. Here I stood with my back to it; here I was horrified and could not bring myself to look". HRHRC.



manuscript drafts of *45 Mercy Street*.<sup>13</sup> The farce confirms that the seemingly nonsensical ‘*Baa*’ represents a technique for evading scrutiny, a means of tricking the gullible but nevertheless dangerous audience, and a supreme double bluff. It consciously addresses the audience with a contempt which they cannot credit, and are only able to interpret as a sign of the subject’s insanity. Central to the farce (and Sexton’s revision of it) is the speaker’s knowing disdain for her interrogators (she does indeed ‘mock the Court’ as the medieval manuscript suggests). This reads also as a metaphor for the larger relationship between confessional speaker and auditor. The speaker mocks her needy and predatory audience. She speaks nonsense (metaphorically, the poem which may not be ‘true’, but ‘fiction’) and the audience accepts her word as evidence of her condition, rather than as a conscious and sardonic indictment of theirs.

This strategy becomes the only option open to the speaker in her attempt to escape the attentions of the demanding ‘populace’. The onlookers are described now in more pressing detail (‘the multi-colored, / crowded voices’), which emphasises the distinction between the speaker’s singular and vulnerable nakedness (‘unclothed in court’ and ‘death-bone witness’) and the listeners’ dense, protected elusiveness:

I feel I must learn to speak the *Baa*  
of the simple-minded, while my mind  
dives into the multi-colored,  
crowded voices.

In ‘Talking to Sheep’ (*contra* the views of, say, Ostriker about the benefits of the ‘expressive-purgative’ process), giving voice offers no escape from traumatic experience. Although the audience is described in terms which implicitly invoke Pentecostal tongues of fire, for the speaker, liberation only comes through an inversion of this motif; through inhibition and silence: ‘I am the flame swallower’ she declares.

Contempt for the audience becomes, finally, contempt for the self (an indication, perhaps, of the contiguity between the two positions) – a contempt born of the speaker’s complicity in the dialectic of display, punishment, deceit and retribution. The woman exposed in the witness-box in the first stanza is, in the final section of the poem, still vulnerable – here, spotlit on the stage. The emphatically repeated verb ‘plays’ confirms that the confessional role is a mere masquerade:

Yes! While my mind plays simple-minded,  
plays dead-woman in neon,  
I must recall to say  
*Baa*

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<sup>13</sup> ‘From the 15<sup>th</sup> Century Farce of Maistre Pierre Pathelin’, trans. by Kenneth Thomson, HRHRC. See Appendix Two.

to the black sheep I am.

*Baa. Baa. Baa.*

The nursery-rhyme allusion suggests that the poem carries no more inherent meaning than the child's song, thus the confessional poem is belittled and the poet disaggrandised. Further, the speaker – like the sheep in the children's rhyme – is destined to give of herself to everyone who demands it (the master and the dame). The depiction of the self as the 'black sheep' (the odd-one-out, the disgraced and shameful member of the family) demonstrates the speaker's own self-loathing (or her assimilation of other people's condemnation). The final '*Baa. Baa. Baa.*' spat out as though in disgust is, arguably, addressed both to the audience and to the self. Linda Wagner-Martin reads 'Talking to Sheep' as an 'apology for that personal element' in Sexton's poetry and Caroline Hall suggests that it forms 'a confessional manifesto'.<sup>14</sup> However, I wish to suggest that the poem offers a condemnation of the dynamics of the confession (articulating a strategy for confusing, repelling or escaping the overly intrusive audience) and of the latent artificiality of the mode.<sup>15</sup>

Sexton's short story, 'The Letting Down of the Hair', although described by her as 'an allegory for my devotion to poetry', in fact, similarly offers an indictment of her imprisonment *by* poetry, and of the restrictions of her designated role as 'personal' or 'confessional' poet.<sup>16</sup> The religious connotations of the word 'devotion' ('the fact or quality of being devoted to religious observances, etc.' [*Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*]) should be noted; connotations which encapsulate both the rigorous demands made of the subject and the sense that the object of attention (here the poet/poetry) requires close scrutiny ('observances'). The figure of Mary Magdalene who is reputed to have cleaned Jesus's feet with her hair (Luke 8. 36-51) is a possible referent. Religious metaphors for the practice of confession – or, specifically, for the performance of the role of confessional poet – figure repeatedly in Sexton's work (as we see below in connection with 'The Passion of the Mad Rabbit' (MSt.) and 'Making a Living'). These are sustained in the opening section of 'The Letting Down of the Hair' by the simile of self as nun ('like a novice'). The subject, like a new nun, is learning the regulatory framework which will, in time, define her identity.

<sup>14</sup> '45 Mercy Street and Other Vacant Houses', in Wagner-Martin, ed., pp. 156-66 (p. 161) (first publ. in *American Literature: The New England Heritage*, ed. by James Nagel and Richard Astro (New York: Garland, 1981)); Caroline Hall, p. 155.

<sup>15</sup> One can argue that the subject's strategy is akin to that described in Joan Riviere's 'Womanliness as a Masquerade'. The vulnerable subject adopts a mask in order to 'avert disaster', the double bluff of 'the cry *baa*' replicates Riviere's notion of the woman's flamboyant appropriation of certain gestures in order to pre-empt 'reprisals'. Riviere's description of women's public performance of a role finds echoes in Sexton's appropriation of the mask of the 'primitive' (previous chapter) and of the 'housewife' (later and in Chapter Four). In *Psychoanalysis and Woman: A Reader*, ed. by Shelley Saguaro (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000), pp. 70-78 (p. 73).

<sup>16</sup> Qtd in Middlebrook, *Biography*, p. 359.

'The Letting Down of the Hair' was drafted and revised during the early to mid-1960s, and published first in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1972 and subsequently in *The Book of Folly*.<sup>17</sup> The story (or 'prose poem' as Sexton called it)<sup>18</sup> is spoken in the first-person, and tells the story of a reclusive woman's retreat to a 'stone room' at the top of the house where her only activity is the care, and daily display, of her long hair.<sup>19</sup> Like 'With Mercy for the Greedy', the story features a character named 'Ruth'. Indeed, 'The Letting Down of the Hair' explores many of the concerns of the earlier poem – specifically those relating to the conflicting needs of penitent and confessor.

The narrative is divided into eight sections, the first of which opens with the heading: 'Attracting Thousands', itself a barely disguised metaphor for Sexton's role as popular poet (observed by the whole 'populace' as we saw in 'Talking to Sheep'). The speaker begins by describing her paradoxical isolation: 'I live in a stone room. Far from the luxury of draperies and transistors, far from the movie theaters and coffee houses, far from the men in their business suits.' Yet such negative invocation of her own asceticism serves only as a disavowal of the latent importance of such objects in her life. It is significant that what are missing are the signs of communication (radio, film and theatre, coffee house conversation, business/publishing transactions). The subject speaks but is never spoken to (she cannot listen to the radio); she performs, but is unable to watch a performance (she cannot see a film) – surely metaphors for the situation of the confessional poet who tells all, but gains little or nothing in return. The specifically literary context is confirmed by the reference to the newspapers and letters which are her only sustenance ('I have only the daily newspapers and letters from Ruth') and by the allusion at the end of this short opening section to Emily Dickinson: 'To tell the truth, I'm a recluse. I'm as hesitant as Emily Dickinson. Like a novice I'm all dressed in white. A recluse, yes. Yet each day I attract thousands.'<sup>20</sup>

This seemingly self-evident comparison begs its own questions, however. How 'hesitant' is Dickinson (and by implication the speaker)? Does the label 'recluse' define

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<sup>17</sup> From a letter of 16 March 1960, in which Sexton refers to having sent a story called 'Hair' to her friend Ruth Soter, it is clear that the narrative existed in some form at this date. However, Soter died in 1964, and the story closes with contemplation of her death, thus, it appears that 'The Letting Down of the Hair' was completed after this time. *Letters*, p. 102 (16 March 1960).

<sup>18</sup> Qtd in Middlebrook, *Biography*, p. 359.

<sup>19</sup> It is arguable that the story offers a revision of Tennyson's 'Lady of Shalott'. It features a 'virgin-artist of the shadows' (as Anne Stevenson describes her) isolated in a tower. The 'Lady of Shalott' weaves her tapestry/'web' as Sexton's speaker weaves her hair (metaphorically, her lines of poetry). In both cases catastrophe strikes when reality (the sight of Lancelot, news of Ruth's death) intrudes. Anne Stevenson, 'The Lady and Gentleman of Shalott: The Early Poems of Elizabeth Bishop', *Critical Survey*, 11.3 (1999), 85-91 (p. 87).

<sup>20</sup> Sexton may have obtained this image from a journalist who described her as 'the loveliest recluse since Emily Dickinson'. Herbert A. Kenny, 'Commitment Necessary to be a Poet', *Boston Sunday Globe*, 19 May 1963, [n.pag].

Dickinson's entire identity (a doubt implied by Sexton's qualifying 'yes. Yet [. . .]')?<sup>21</sup> As Alicia Ostriker suggests, the position of 'recluse' was, for Dickinson, a mask or disguise: 'the persona of the shy recluse, delicately afraid of strangers, too sensitive for the market place.'<sup>22</sup> To what extent should we identify Emily Dickinson with the voice of her poems (and, by implication, Sexton with the voice of hers)? As Dickinson averred in a letter of 1862: 'When I state myself, as the Representative of the Verse – it does not mean me – but a supposed version.'<sup>23</sup> The comparison between self and Dickinson is found elsewhere in Sexton's writing, notably in a letter of June 1965, in which she draws a distinction between her own need of an audience (dramatised in this story and in 'Talking to Sheep') and Dickinson's apparent disinclination to be published: 'Emily Dickinson never bothered with the whole thing. She was content to write them. I would not be only content to write and never to publish or share . . .'<sup>24</sup>

The metaphor also indicates a deep ambivalence about privacy and publicity. It can be likened to Sexton's persistent appropriation of the marginal and silent 'suburban housewife' persona ('I am actually a "suburban housewife" only I write poems and sometimes I am a little crazy').<sup>25</sup> Sexton uses the persona as a way of opting out of metropolitan literary fights, as a way of disavowing interest or involvement therein, and of feigning absorption in a different sphere. The voice of the 'suburban housewife' (like that of the 'primitive', mentioned in the previous chapter) self-effacingly denies, or undercuts, any claim to cultural kudos. The persona also permits Sexton to claim the local and domestic as a source, to make a virtue out of the necessity of her everyday role as wife and mother. However, as in the claim to kinship with Emily Dickinson, the metaphor is deeply ambivalent. In both cases, the assumed identity announces contentment, while masking the abject horror of what lies beneath. As Betty Friedan had recently shown in *The Feminine Mystique* (first published in 1963), beneath the public face of the 'suburban housewife' is a

<sup>21</sup> As Suzanne Juhasz suggests, however, this was a 'choice' not a 'retreat from "real life".' Qtd in Nancy Walker, "'Wider Than the Sky": Public Presence and Private Self in Dickinson, James and Woolf', in *The Private Self: Theory and Practice of Women's Autobiographical Writings*, ed. by Shari Benstock (London: Routledge, 1988), pp. 272-303 (p. 272).

<sup>22</sup> Alicia Ostriker, *Stealing the Language*, p. 38. These concerns are reminiscent of Susan Howe's preoccupations in *My Emily Dickinson* (Berkeley, Calif.: North Atlantic Books, 1985).

<sup>23</sup> Qtd in Camille Paglia, *Sexual Personae: Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson* (London and New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), p. 638. Paglia analyses Dickinson's appropriation of personae, arguing that she 'thinks in theatrical or masquelike terms', p. 648.

<sup>24</sup> *Letters*, p. 263 (June 1965). Polly Williams mentions Sexton setting her students an assignment entitled 'Emily's Dreams' and commenting: "'Poets come to no good end, we all know that. Except some do – Emily, she seemed to take care of herself"'. 'Sexton in the Classroom', p. 98.

<sup>25</sup> *Letters*, p. 143 (16 July 1962). This persona, like so many of Sexton's (the witch, or the primitive), gains authority, and indeed power, by its repetition – a function of performativity as defined by Judith Butler: 'a performance that is repeated [. . .] a stylized repetition of acts', p. 140 [Butler's emphasis].

private narrative of violence, breakdown, failure and resentment – a secret life which Sexton’s poetry exposes.<sup>26</sup>

The second section of the story expands the description of this particular ‘room of one’s own’ (Woolf’s essay, the ‘mad woman’s attic’, and the Lady of Shalott’s tower are all subtexts of this sardonic account of the female artist’s life).<sup>27</sup> The stone room is likened simultaneously to a barrier (‘the craggy rocks of Gloucester, that desperate sea coast’) and to a sacred and aesthetic space (‘the steps of Rome’, ‘Michaelangelo and his stone creatures’). Moreover, the room is a ‘cupola’ – permitting the speaker a privileged view, and tacitly replicating a series of images in other poems of belligerent surveillance (the ‘gunsights’ in ‘A Little Uncomplicated Hymn’, for example).<sup>28</sup> In terms of Sexton’s poetics, it is significant that the room is spherical (‘the shape of a merry-go-round, and eleven feet in circumference. A chalice, a cave, a perch’). Like the ‘inverted glass bowl’ in ‘For John, Who Begs Me Not to Enquire Further’ or Plath’s ‘Bell Jar’ or the glass jar which traps the Sibyl of Cumae (discussed in the previous chapter), the dome simultaneously contains, and offers for display, the female object of scrutiny.<sup>29</sup> Moreover, this circular stone room could be read as an archetypal creative space: it is described as ‘a hidden place like the inside of a seedpod.’ It is a womb-like site of gestation; the place where the speaker nurtures the seeds of her inspiration (in this respect, it recalls the image of the cave in ‘Her Kind’ and anticipates that of ‘the belly’ of the whale in ‘Making a Living’, discussed below).

However, we should note that this ‘cupola’ is experienced as a prison (the speaker explains that ‘like a lion in a zoo I adjust to my environment’).<sup>30</sup> The simile of the ‘lion’ is doubly telling. First, it confirms the speaker’s experience of being inhumanly treated, and of being put on display for the entertainment and education of the public (the animal imagery recalls the metaphor of the performing monkey in the ‘Dog-God’ poems, and anticipates the circus of freaks in Sexton’s article, ‘The Freak Show’).<sup>31</sup> Second, it subtly revises one of Sexton’s own habitual metaphors for her poetry – or, specifically, for poetic form – in order to make a larger point about the role of the poet. Speaking about her own early use of such

<sup>26</sup> Sexton read and annotated *The Feminine Mystique*. As her daughter recalls, Sexton then gave the book to her: ‘complete with her scribbled notes across the pages – notes that showed her identification with the problems Friedan described.’ Linda Gray Sexton, *Searching*, p. 98.

<sup>27</sup> Asked about the benefits brought by her Fellowship to Radcliffe College, Sexton exclaimed: ‘it got me this room’ (her house was extended with the benefit of her grant), interview with Martha White, audiotape (July 1963), Radcliffe Institute Archives.

<sup>28</sup> A cupola is a ‘rounded vault or dome’ or ‘an armour-plated revolving turret to protect mounted guns’ (*Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*). Foucault’s study of the Panopticon is brought to mind, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. by Alan Sheridan, (Harmondsworth: Peregrine, 1979; repr. 1987).

<sup>29</sup> Gilbert and Gubar trace the importance of the image of the glass coffin (and of escape from it) from ‘Snow White’ to works by Emily Bronte and Emily Dickinson in *The Madwoman in the Attic*, p. 44.

<sup>30</sup> Elsewhere, Sexton likens herself to ‘a caged tiger’, qtd in Middlebrook, *Biography*, p. 36.

<sup>31</sup> Sexton responded with enthusiastic identification to a letter from Alta: ‘it will be a long time before I forget your phrase “artist as trained seal”. Zap!’ Anne Sexton, Letter to Alta, 8 July 1974, HRHRC.

form, Sexton explains that the presence of a secure and restraining poetic structure paradoxically permits her the freedom to release the 'wild animals' of her unconscious.<sup>32</sup> Here, similarly, the woman poet is allowed to speak, but only if she restricts herself to certain spheres – the immediate, the personal, the familiar (metaphorically the 'stone room'). Again the tacit presence of other women writers – Dickinson, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Woolf, and Plath – is apparent.<sup>33</sup>

If 'The Letting Down of the Hair' is to be read as 'an allegory for my devotion to poetry', then the speaker's retreat to the 'stone room' should be read as a metaphor for the confessional writer's characteristic introspection. Sexton's speaker describes her room (metaphorically, her writing sphere) as: 'A room to crawl into and hide [. . .] as a child I would enter through a closet, standing tiptoe on a chair, up through the trapdoor into the forbidden – .' This is a resolutely private world, inaccessible to others (and thus, of course, intriguing). Indeed, in a Foucauldian sense, the desire to see is constructed by the barriers to/prohibitions against seeing: the stone wall provokes our yearning to look beyond it, the external image of the suffering poet stimulates our desire to peer into her mind. In a later section ('The Death of Everyone Except Myself'), we learn that the speaker's reclusiveness (the retreat into the stone room, or metaphorically, the retreat into the self) corresponds with the acquisition of painful knowledge and experience. It is after a period of hostility and rejection by the speaker's parents and brother, and the parents' sudden death, that the speaker 'came up to my stone room for good'. The pun on 'good', signifying both 'for ever' and 'for some beneficial purpose', is noteworthy. It is this introspective act which heralds the audience's voyeuristic fascination; it is her reclusiveness and apparent self-containment which, paradoxically, attracts a crowd: 'each day I attract thousands.' The traumatised victim (orphaned speaker) becomes the object of other people's obsessive interest, recipient of multiple 'envelopes addressed to the Lady of the Hair. And so forth. Letters from the people'.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Interview with Patricia Marx, p. 80. As Sexton explained to Tillie Olsen: 'I am very uncontained and so try sometimes to put up measures, walls, rules, margins . . . That's why I can't write prose, I guess . . . it won't contain me as a poem will.' *Letters*, p. 139 ([Spring 1962 (?)]). This is ironic in the context of this short story, and perhaps relevant to Sexton's use of eight distinct, structuring sections.

<sup>33</sup> The presence of Sylvia Plath is apparent. The representation of self hiding away from the family by crawling into an obscure part of the house (and one shaped like a bell jar) reminds one of Esther Greenwood's suicide attempt in *The Bell Jar* (London: Faber and Faber, 1966; repr. 1989, pp. 178-9); an episode which, I would speculate, Sexton and Plath would have discussed. In 'The Bar Fly Ought to Sing' (p. 7), Sexton recalls: 'very often, Sylvia and I would talk at length about our first suicides.'

<sup>34</sup> In this respect, the story is uncannily premonitory. The subject's plight anticipates Sexton's experience as the recipient of hundreds of fan letters (see Janet Luedtke's "'Something Special for Someone": Anne Sexton's Fan Letters from Women', in Oliphant, ed., pp. 165-89 (p. 166)): 'The fan-mail collection [at the HRHRC] consists of thirteen folders of letters [. . .] the volume averages about eighty letters per year, culminating in a deluge of one hundred sixty-nine items in 1974, the year that Sexton committed suicide.'

In section three (subtitled ‘The Window That Watches the Pru’), we discover a possible key to the speaker’s incarceration, and to the public’s fascination with her: ‘I have never cut my hair. That’s something you ought to know right off. It fills the room the way ten giraffes would, twisting and twisting their long, innocent necks. My hair is innocent, too. It knows no better.’ Again, the metaphor of self as animal, and the rhetoric of innocence (and by implication, of guilt), is a measure of the judgmental, punitive gaze of the audience. The hair which has never been cut, and which is the object of the speaker’s own scrutiny and care (the story is punctuated by the refrain ‘Brush. Brush’), stands as a metaphor for personal experience. Acquired over time, carefully cultivated and, as we see later, put on public display, it signifies the confessional poem.

The allegorical relationship between poetry and hair is sustained in the lengthy central part of the story. Caring for the hair is, indeed, like contemplating the self.<sup>35</sup> It has its own routines and rituals, it requires structure and organisation, and it demands profound and sustained attention (‘devotion’?):

Here in my room I have my hair to care for. In the soapstone sink I wash from nine to eleven forty-five in the morning. [. . .] There is so much hair, so much sucked-up honey, that I must wash it in sections. The room becomes clammy like a sea cave, never dry. I am standing in my bare feet, dipping up and down over the sink probing the mystery.

Here, as in the ‘Memoir’ poems discussed in the next chapter, caring for the self/hair is figured as a process of dredging, or searching, or gleaning (‘dipping up and down,’ ‘probing’). Like autobiography, or confessional writing, ‘It is cumbersome and arduous and yet it is my work in life.’ Once washed (cared for, picked over and untangled, like knotted memories), the hair is released from the window of the cupola to dry: ‘I let it out to dry. I let it out to give it a life of its own.’ The image stands, too, for the moment of release or publication of a poem when, having been exhaustively worked over, it is free to make its own way in the world.<sup>36</sup>

In ‘The Letting Down of the Hair’, we find that the act of private self-scrutiny becomes public and ritualised. The letting down of the hair is a dramatic metaphor for confessional self-exposure (‘letting’ is a punning metaphor for the kind of release expected of confessional poetry):

Over the years the people have gathered to watch it fall down and dry out. They call out, just as the clock strikes twelve: LADY! LADY! LET DOWN YOUR HAIR! I am becoming a tourist attraction and there is nothing I can do about it.

<sup>35</sup> See Foucault on the relationship between care and knowledge of the self, ‘Technologies’, p. 19.

<sup>36</sup> The moment mimics the flight, through the casement, of the Lady of Shalott’s weaving.

Paradoxically, in revealing herself, the speaker loses control of her self, her identity, her authority over her own life. However, we should be aware that the hair is only tangentially connected with the subject of self-revelation. It is a synecdoche but never the thing itself. Access to the sight of the hair is not access to the subject's experience and we are misled if we believe otherwise. The erroneous conflation of subject and text, speaker and poem, is exposed in the speaker's admission: 'they often write to me. I don't answer them, of course, for my hair cannot speak and it is the hair they write to.' In a 1972 letter, Sexton explains of the story: 'It's really about the life of a poet and what it's like to have people like your poetry but not know you really.'<sup>37</sup> The 'Lady of the Hair' (or the confessional poet) is an identity constructed in and by the discursive process (by the letting down of the hair, or by the act of confession). Although the people think that they write 'to me', they are writing to the hair (which is a metonymic representation of 'me'). The analogy is with Sexton's fans who respond to the identity created in the poems, mistakenly believing that this poetic identity is identical with the writer's identity. As Sexton's speaker mockingly exclaims in her poem 'Self in 1958': 'They think I am me!'

The 'Lady of the Hair' has become pure spectacle: 'The Gray Line bus arrives daily with a taped recording of facts – usually false – about what I do and who I am.'<sup>38</sup> She is the object of other people's misinterpretations: 'And then there is the college crowd who seem to have adopted me' (the pun here is on the 'adopt[ion]' of her books as set-texts for students). More dangerously, she is the object of other people's misplaced and unwanted devotions. Like the onlookers in Plath's 'Lady Lazarus', they seek relics: 'there is [. . .] one obese woman who comes each day and beats out with a stick at the people who reach for the hair and want to tug it. The people have become very devoted or very disgusted.' Sexton, here, displaces her own alleged 'devotion to poetry' onto the audience, confirming the potential interchangeability of the roles of speaker and reader, penitent and confessor. The schism between the 'devoted' and the 'disgusted' stands, too, for the sharp divergence of opinion about this work of art (the spectacle of the letting down of the hair) and, by extension, about Sexton's poetry (represented, for example, by Charles Gullans's review of *Live or Die*: 'These are not poems at all', and Hayden Carruth's comments on the same volume: 'They are poems. They are the work of a gifted, intelligent woman').<sup>39</sup>

<sup>37</sup> *Letters*, p. 377 (1 February 1972).

<sup>38</sup> The pun on 'Gray' (Gray was Sexton's daughter's, Sexton's, her mother's and her maternal grandfather's middle name) would almost certainly have struck Sexton: representing both the literal bus company, and a figurative tour around the family roots, or lifelines. Moreover, as Linda Gray Sexton explains, 'To be a writer was a family tradition, silently conferred upon the bearer of the magical middle name "Gray"', *Searching*, p. 80.

<sup>39</sup> 'Poetry and Subject Matter: From Hart Crane to Turner Cassidy', *Southern Review*, 7.2 (1970), 497-98 (p. 497); 'In Spite of Artifice', p. 698.



As 'The Letting Down of the Hair' nears its conclusion, we learn more about the letters from Ruth which are alluded to in the story's opening section. It is apparent that this is the Ruth of 'With Mercy for the Greedy' – indeed, the story alludes to the poem: 'Today's mail brought a letter from Ruth, a letter and a crucifix.' Ruth, unlike the unfamiliar correspondents who conflate text (hair) with poet ('Lady of the Hair'), understands the distinction between the two, and the special identity of each. She possesses a privileged insight into the nature and significance of the speaker's life: 'Today's mail brought a letter from Ruth [. . .] P.S., she added, I've even discovered what your hair means. It is a parable for the life of a poet.' This explicit and self-referential comment stimulates the speaker again to contemplate her identity. In a question which returns us to the uncertain comparison with Emily Dickinson in the opening section, Sexton's speaker asks: 'Am I like a poet?' Moreover, read in conjunction with 'With Mercy for the Greedy', it confirms the speaker's reliance on the authority of her first auditor, Ruth, who – having found God – is perhaps his closest representative.<sup>40</sup>

In the final section of the story ('The Sickness Unto Death'),<sup>41</sup> the speaker receives the sudden and devastating news of Ruth's death by suicide. The knowledge leaves her bereft, isolated, terminally uncertain about her identity or the meaning of her life's work (her hair):

The clock strikes twelve and I just stand there. It's too late now. I wanted to ask Ruth what my life meant. Ask her about my tent. Ask her about the parable. Now there is no one to ask. There are the people down below calling up LADY! LADY! LET DOWN YOUR HAIR! but I could hardly ask them.<sup>42</sup>

The speaker is unable to ask her demanding and vociferous audience because they are already possessed of a defining, consuming, and above all erroneous, perception of her identity. Thus, rather like in 'Talking to Sheep', she is reduced to silence and paralysis. 'The Letting Down of the Hair' is, then, about the impossibility of 'letting down' or disappointing the audience. The spectators expect, and benefit from, a spectacular and regular display. There is no therapeutic gain for the speaker who is reduced merely to performing to their order. The story depicts the terrible imperative – a public pressure, rather than a private compulsion – to continue. The show must go on!

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<sup>40</sup> If 'The Letting Down of the Hair' is to be understood as an 'allegory' or a 'parable', it may be fruitful to consider Hillis Miller's notion of the performative dimensions of such a text – particularly in the light of Sexton's obfuscation of the referentiality or truth value of her writing. As he explains: 'Secular parable is a genuine performative. It creates something, a "meaning", that has no basis except in words or something about which it is impossible to decide whether or not there is an extralinguistic basis [. . .] The categories of truth and falsehood, knowledge and ignorance, do not properly apply to it.' *Tropes*, p. 139.

<sup>41</sup> The phrase derives from Kierkegaard's book *The Sickness Unto Death* (of which Sexton had a copy). She also wrote a poem of the same title (AR).

'The Letting Down of the Hair' marks a bruising realisation that what confessional poetry's audience is interested in is the spectacle of the speaker's presence, rather than what she has to say (this *contra* Sexton's game insistence, quoted in connection with 'Hurry Up Please It's Time', on the importance of 'the poem not the poet'). It is the body rather than the text which is subject to interpretation, which is being read. This is true of photographic images of the poet on book jackets (as exemplified by Thomas McDonnell's comment: 'Not so incidentally, by the way, Anne Sexton is a strikingly beautiful woman, as anyone can see from the photo on the back dust jacket of her latest volume').<sup>43</sup> But it is most apparent in responses to Sexton's physical appearance on the stage. As William Pritchard reports of a Sexton performance (in his pertinently-titled article 'The Anne Sexton Show'): 'she read with spellbinding intensity, to the extent that one wasn't quite sure just what one was responding to – the poems? Or something else – the life that was all tied up with them.'<sup>44</sup> Muriel Rukeyser notes the dramatic difference between the image on the stage and the voice of the text – a difference which Sexton, it may be argued, is aware of and exploits. Rukeyser recalls seeing her reading at the Guggenheim Museum: 'It was a beautiful woman standing there, in a beautiful dress. The expectation and the gossip around was one of confessional poetry.' Sexton concludes her reading, however, by admitting: "'It is not true'." As Rukeyser comments:

When Anne Sexton said, "But it is not true," a waver went through the audience. No, I cannot say that, I can speak only for myself. I thought, "It may very well be true." She had cut through the entire nonsense about confessional writing, and returned me to the poem.<sup>45</sup>

Marvin Carlson suggests that, in modern performance art, 'the emphasis is upon [. . .] how the body or self is articulated through performance, the individual body remains at the center of such presentations.'<sup>46</sup> In respect of the confession in particular – as the place where the private and the public most visibly collide – the body and its exposure assume a profound significance, to subject and viewer alike. Peter Brooks recognises the importance of the semiotics of the body in his study of Rousseau's *Confessions*: 'Rousseau radically invades privacy – most notably his own – and gives the body an importance in the generation and

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<sup>42</sup> Sexton's version of Grimms' fairytale 'Rapunzel' features a similar appeal. In Sexton's version, as in the original, the hair is the source of Rapunzel and her suitor's (literal and metaphorical) downfall.

<sup>43</sup> 'Light in a Dark Journey', p. 43.

<sup>44</sup> 'The Anne Sexton Show', p. 390.

<sup>45</sup> 'On *The Book of Folly*', p. 155.

<sup>46</sup> *Performance: A Critical Introduction* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), p. 6.

inscription of meaning.' The body becomes the place where 'meaning is enacted and a creator of meanings'.<sup>47</sup>

For Sexton, in a development of the metaphor of 'letting' or release which we saw in 'The Letting Down of the Hair', poetry readings are 'a kind of blood letting' – an ineluctably physical, even visceral spectacle. In a letter of 7<sup>th</sup> February 1973, in which Sexton cancels a speaking engagement, she explains her increasing reluctance to perform her work on the stage: 'I have given up readings. They are a kind of blood letting for me. They make me feel as though I were dancing in the combat zone (if you know what that is) naked in Boston.'<sup>48</sup> The combination of physical, sexual and religious metaphors here, and the implicit sense that confessional performance is both an entertainment and an act of violence, self-willed and forced, a celebratory gesture of defiance ('dancing') and a sign of vulnerability and victimisation ('the combat zone'), strikes at the heart of the dynamics of confession.

Sexton's assimilation of the rhetoric of nakedness and sexual display acknowledges while it rejects, or at the very least problematises, orthodox criticism of the exploitative and self-revelatory nature of confessional poetry. Jane McCabe complains of 'Sexton's flirtatious parading, her glamorous posing, her sexual exhibitionism',<sup>49</sup> and Donald Davie, in his response to Al Alvarez's 'Beyond All This Fiddle', alleges that confessional poets are 'self-hating stripteasers'.<sup>50</sup> Similarly, Donald Hall regrets that 'what began as a series of excruciating self-discoveries [. . .] dissipates in an orgy of exhibitionism'.<sup>51</sup> However, it must be said – and this, surely, is the point of Sexton's metaphor of 'dancing naked in the combat zone' – that such 'exhibitionism' presupposes an observer. Without an audience there is no display, without a witness, there is no spectacle, and, by extension, without a punter there is no stripper. As Peter Brooks suggests, privacy and the gaze are inextricably (and for Sexton, dreadfully) connected: 'we know privacy by way of its invasion.'<sup>52</sup> It may also be argued, of

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<sup>47</sup> Peter Brooks, *Body Work: Objects of Desire in Modern Narrative*, (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 1993), p. 38. The anxiety which predominantly – although not exclusively – male critics feel when encountering Sexton's work is an anxiety about how to read the female body (and a fear of being defiled by the woman writer's bloody wastes). Hence Louis Simpson's notorious complaint that Sexton's poem 'Menstruation at Forty' was "the straw that broke this camel's back". Qtd in Middlebrook, *Biography*, p. 264.

<sup>48</sup> Anne Sexton, Letter to Mrs. F. Peter Scigliano, 7 February 1973, HRHRC. John Mood unwittingly confirms the tendency to which Sexton objects. In a report on one of her readings, he describes her appearance: 'She is flat-chested by America's inflated standards for such things. And she has that suggestion of a stomach appropriate to all Aphrodites [. . .] she looked like a fruitful sixteen year old virgin.' "A Bird Full of Bones": Anne Sexton – A Visit and a Reading', *Chicago Review*, 23.4 (1972), 107-23 (pp. 110, 116).

<sup>49</sup> McCabe, pp. 216-7.

<sup>50</sup> Donald Davie, "Beyond All This Fiddle": A Rejoinder to A. Alvarez', *Times Literary Supplement*, 25 May 1967, p. 472.

<sup>51</sup> Introduction to *Contemporary American Poetry*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn. (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), pp 25-34 (p. 33).

<sup>52</sup> Brooks, pp. 37-8.

course, that where the gaze is invited, there can be no ‘invasion’ (or perhaps, only an act of self-invasion).

As much of this rhetoric will indicate, confession (and particularly the performance of the poems, and even more specifically, performance by a woman writer) becomes a form of sexual commerce or commodification (a ‘one night stand’, as Sexton describes her readings).<sup>53</sup> The body is offered, read, and finally sold. Sexton herself uses such metaphors repeatedly: ‘To begin with, I think it is a kind of prostitution [. . .] for the poet to try to tell how or why he might be distinctive.’<sup>54</sup> In a letter to Elizabeth Bishop, she complains about a forthcoming ten-day reading tour, describing herself as ‘rather like a whore, I think’. Ironically, the justification which Sexton offers for this self-prostitution is that she needs the money – surely a confirmation, rather than a denial, of such an identity: ‘And yet money drives me - - and in the end the “reading” is a gastly [sic] sort of show - - an act such as a comedian has. So next Monday I go on the road with my act.’<sup>55</sup> The speaker/prostitute’s exploitation of her self, and of her greedy and gullible punters, is foregrounded. Indeed, the speaker needs satisfaction from her audience to the same degree as they seek fulfilment from her. In her *Paris Review* interview, Sexton describes (here in contradiction to the antipathy she expresses elsewhere) some of the personal satisfaction – indeed the physical rewards – of public performance: ‘Then there is the love. . . . When there is a coupling of the audience and myself, when they are really with me, and the Muse is with me, I’m not coming alone.’<sup>56</sup> Thus the performance is neither a narcissistic (masturbatory) indulgence nor a one-sided exploitation, but rather a relationship of mutual pleasure.

The metaphor of ‘blood letting’ encapsulates the visceral nature of confession (as such, it has much in common with the scatological metaphors seen in previous chapters). The image figures repeatedly in Sexton’s work. In the ‘Big Heart’ (AR), she writes: ‘the artery of my soul has been severed / and soul is spurting out upon them’, and in ‘The Author of the Jesus Papers Speaks’ (BF) (which recalls a dream about milking a cow): ‘blood spurted from it / and covered me with shame.’ In interviews, Sexton explains that the poet ‘spurts images’ and ‘dig[s] right into the heart and let[s] it spurt out’.<sup>57</sup> The metaphor is resonant in a number of ways. It acknowledges the culpability of the audience in producing this painful spectacle,

<sup>53</sup> *Letters*, p. 304 (9 November 1966).

<sup>54</sup> Unpublished autobiographical sketch, [June 1965 (?)], HRHRC. Middlebrook records that in Sexton’s first interview with her psychiatrist in 1956, she had ‘told him that she thought her only talent might be for prostitution: she could help men feel sexually powerful’. *Biography*, p. 42. Maxine Kumin likens Sexton’s reading style to ‘pimping’ in ‘Kumin on Kumin and Sexton: An Interview’ [interview with Diana Hume George], *Poesis*, 6.2 (1985), 1-18 (p. 2).

<sup>55</sup> Letter to Elizabeth Bishop, 21 October 1965, HRHRC [Sexton’s ellipses].

<sup>56</sup> Interview with Barbara Kevles, pp. 334-5. Mōna Van Duyn (more of whom later) likens Sexton’s *Love Poems* to ‘an act of intercourse performed on stage for an audience’. ‘On *Love Poems*’, p. 140.

<sup>57</sup> Anne Sexton and Maxine Kumin, seminar on poetry, audiotape (13 February 1962), Radcliffe Institute Archives; interview with Charles Balliro, p. 13.

for one rarely, if ever, ‘lets’ or ‘leeches’ one’s own blood, but rather solicits the help of another. The image suggests (as Brooks argues of Rousseau) that it is the body, rather than the mind, which signifies or speaks. It draws on an important image from Dante’s *Inferno* (an influential text for Sexton) wherein the suicides (or ‘the violent against themselves’) can speak only through the body: ‘Only through their own blood do they find voice.’<sup>58</sup> And it plays on common (mis)perceptions of confessional poetry as some kind of ‘release’, as a way of tapping or leeching a febrile source. Again, Sexton takes to their logical (or perhaps illogical) conclusion orthodox notions of the instinctive, compulsive origins of the mode. Certainly, she recognises that there is a tension here – a dialectic which has not yet achieved resolution. As she commented in the journal which she wrote while struggling with her role as a high-school teacher for the ‘Teachers’ and Writers’ Collaborative’

I’ve had this worry that I’ll have to stop class . . . that I won’t be able to go anymore . . . that I can’t face it and yet I love it. It’s a paradox and it’s all inside my body. The body’s rebelling and the brain’s rejoicing.<sup>59</sup>

Most importantly, Sexton’s comparison of poetry readings with ‘a kind of blood letting’ signifies religious martyrdom (see the words of the Holy Communion: ‘this is the Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ which was shed for thee’). Hers is a gesture simultaneously of self-aggrandisement (I’m like Christ) and self-abnegation (this is only ‘a kind of blood-letting’). It is also very private (‘for me’), making no claims to be representative. Yet in both cases (confessional poet’s ‘blood letting’ and Christ’s shedding of blood), there is an implied audience which is asked to witness the act of suffering that is performed for its ultimate benefit. In her *Paris Review* interview, Sexton makes explicit the comparison between Christ’s ‘performance’ and her own. She explains: ‘That ragged Christ, that sufferer, performed the greatest act of confession, and I mean with his body. And I try to do that with words.’<sup>60</sup> Here, identity is created in the very act of being offered up. In contradiction to Christ’s joyous martyrdom, however, Sexton elsewhere complained that ‘when you write you wait three years and then they crucify you’ and that her writing is perceived as ‘the work of a victim, a passive sufferer, of the crucified man’.<sup>61</sup>

‘The Passion of the Mad Rabbit’, written in April 1974, makes a similar point. The

<sup>58</sup> *The Inferno: Dante’s Immortal Drama of a Journey through Hell*, trans. by John Ciardi (New York: Penguin, 1954), p. 112. Sexton had this edition in her library.

<sup>59</sup> Anne Sexton, ‘Journal of a Living Experiment’, 29 September 1967, HRHRC. For more on Sexton’s involvement with this project, see Middlebrook, *Biography*, pp. 274-5; 285-7.

<sup>60</sup> Interview with Barbara Kevles, pp. 333-4. Elsewhere, Sexton uses religious metaphors to describe her discovery of poetry: ‘it was a kind of rebirth at 29’, interview with Patricia Marx, p. 70. In a radio interview with George Macbeth, she explained: ‘I am very influenced by Christ, perhaps more attracted to the suffering than the rising.’ BBC Third Programme, 20 January 1968, National Sound Archive.

<sup>61</sup> ‘Journal of a Living Experiment’, 22 September 1967, HRHRC; Crawshaw Lectures (9) p. 2, HRHRC.

poem opens with a dramatic pastiche of confessional self-exposure: 'I underwent a removal, tearing my skin off me.' Liberated by this act of self-effacement, the speaker is free to assume a new persona – the nonsensical guise of 'Mr. Rabbit': 'a fool walked straight into me. / He was named Mr. Rabbit.'<sup>62</sup> Thereafter the poem parodies the martyrdom of this fool (metaphorically, of the confessional performer). Hers is a negation, in every respect, of Christ's glorious Passion. In the second stanza, we find that the 'Good Friday' of the Gospels has been transformed into 'Bad Friday'. The dignity demanded by the occasion is travestied in a sequence of bathetic images and bizarre juxtapositions (which, arguably, owe something to Plath's image of the 'peanut-crunching crowd' in 'Lady Lazarus'):

Next it was bad Friday and they nailed me up  
like a scarecrow and many gathered eating popcorn, carrying  
hymnals or balloons.

The significance of the body as a site and sign of the inscription of identity is reiterated in the speaker's comparison between her superficial appearance (of abnormality) and those of the other victims who are to share her Passion (to be crucified with her): 'There were three of us there, / though *they* appeared normal.' Significantly, it is the body which is being placed on display, and publicly punished. It is the (objectified) body which must suffer or atone for the sins of the – somehow dissociated – subject:

My ears, so pink like powder,  
were nailed. My paws, sweet as baby mittens, were nailed.  
And my two fuzzy ankles. I said, "Pay no attention. I am crazy."

The audience is complicit – and thus rendered explicit – in the performance of this spectacle. When the speaker declares that she is crazy, we find that 'some [of the audience] giggled and some knelt'. Thus Sexton dramatises, and indeed makes part of the action, the simultaneous fascination and mockery which typify responses to confessional writing.

The audience (the un-differentiated 'they' which is Sexton's enemy here and in a number of other poems) control the speaker's fate: 'they took me down and had a conference' (the psychiatric connotations of a case conference are germane). In the poem's final, nonsensical scene, the religious and the secular are brought together as the secular speaker (confessional poet), playing the role of the spiritual martyr, is handed the pagan symbols of a religious festival (Easter eggs). Thereafter she is committed to the flames (a symbol in other poems, such as 'Her Kind', of the creative or writing life):

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<sup>62</sup> The arrival of 'Mr. Rabbit', arguably, represents a pastiche of the visitation of the Holy Spirit (in the form of a dove) to Jesus at his baptism, and to the disciples after his crucifixion.

Fire lit, I tossed the eggs to them, *Hallelujah* I sang to the eggs,  
 singing as I burned to nothing in the tremor of the flames.  
 My blood came to a boil as I looked down the throat of madness,  
 but singing yellow egg, blue egg, pink egg, red egg, green egg,  
*Hallelujah*, to each hard-boiled-colored egg.

‘Singing’ (the pun is on singeing) is a metaphor for the persistence of writing, for the endlessly discursive nature of experience (if she does not sing, as we saw in ‘Talking to Sheep’ where the speaker is the ‘flame swallower’, there is no mark or sign of her identity, and therefore no self). As ‘singeing’, the metaphor signifies punishment (the immolation by fire of ‘Her Kind’, perhaps). The image also appears in a much earlier poem, ‘Music Swims Back to Me’ (1959), where ‘singing in the head’ simultaneously signifies insanity and its treatment by ECT.

Finally, in ‘The Passion’, comes the humiliating (hence the sudden, quiet change to a whisper) realisation that the whole spectacle has been just that: a ‘shamfull display’, a ‘little vaudeville act’, the work of a ‘clown’ (to quote a number of Sexton’s comments about her performances):<sup>63</sup>

In place of the Lord,  
 I whispered,  
 a fool has risen.<sup>64</sup>

From glorification and adoration to mockery and punishment, the trajectory of the confessional poet is encapsulated here. The metaphor of the ‘fool’ anticipates comments which Sexton made in the last poetry workshop which she taught at Boston University just two days before her death:

I have to play the fool [. . .] I mean I have to let myself be a fool, and say any damn thing that, you know, appears and blurt it out [. . .] That’s the hardest thing: to be a fool. You can be anything; you can be stinking, no good, a rotten poet – but to be a fool – nobody wants to be a fool.<sup>65</sup>

The image of the poet (in the classroom, at a poetry reading, even on the page) gives a distorted (because superficial) impression of her identity, yet one which she is forced to adopt (‘I have to play the fool’).

<sup>63</sup> Letter to Jon Stallworthy, 24 September 1965, HRHRC (the published *Letters*, incidentally, change this to ‘shameful’); *Letters*, p. 304 (9 November 1966); ‘The Freak Show’, p. 38. Vaudeville is a common, ‘primitive’ theatrical form, and it is thus significant that Sexton associates herself with it. Helen Vendler describes John Berryman’s *Dream Songs* as ‘Freudian vaudeville’. *Given*, p. 56.

<sup>64</sup> ‘Whispered’ is a trope for hidden truth – the truth which cannot be spoken yet will not remain silent. In ‘The Author of the Jesus Paper Speaks: ‘If they [people] want to say something bad, / they whisper.’ See Chapter Six.

<sup>65</sup> Qtd by Williams, ‘Sexton in the Classroom’, p. 101.

Sexton's ambivalence about public performance (realised in self-deprecating references to self as 'a little bit of a ham', 'whore' and 'comedian' and to readings as a 'gastly [sic] sort of show' and 'some sort of racket')<sup>66</sup> is finally realised in her bitter condemnation of what she terms 'The Freak Show'. Her essay of this title was first published in the *American Poetry Review* in 1973 and was written, according to the editors of Sexton's *Letters*, as a direct response to a 'traumatic' reading which Sexton had given earlier that year.<sup>67</sup> However, the essay should be read as the culmination of a longstanding anxiety about the spectacular, theatrical and finally exploitative nature of confession, and as an expression of Sexton's unease with the lascivious and predatory tendencies of the audience. As early as 1962, she can be seen disparaging the nature and purpose of poetry readings: 'readings are a show. Read all around now . . . big show . . . rather depressing [. . .] I now make (if you can stand *this*) 250 bucks a reading plus expenses. Kee rist !!!'<sup>68</sup> In her *Paris Review* interview conducted in 1968, Sexton replies to a question about poetry readings: 'It takes three weeks out of your life. A week before it happens, the nervousness begins and it builds up the night of the reading, when the poet in you changes into a performer.' In this interview, and in the opening paragraph of 'The Freak Show' ('I asked such preposterous sums that I gave fewer readings than most poets do'), it is the commercial nature of the operation which is foregrounded. The spectators pay money to see her, and she gives them a little part of herself in return. The confessional poet is, thus, a commodity, an object of exchange (as in 'Hurry Up Please'). As Sexton proceeds to explain: 'Readings take so much out of you.'<sup>69</sup> This is an exploitative situation (hence her use of metaphors of prostitution) and, as is the case with prostitution, it is sometimes arguable who is exploiting whom. Further, notwithstanding Sexton's declared reluctance, she continued to give readings. Thus we must ask whether the posture of angry, wronged, misunderstood poet is not merely another persona – another dramatic role used to entice sympathy, appreciation and attention.

'The Freak Show' opens with a subtle allusion to an earlier poem, 'Making a Living', (written in 1971).<sup>70</sup> In 'Making a Living', Sexton's speaker compares her plight as confessional poet to that of the biblical character, Jonah:

Jonah made his living  
inside the belly  
Mine comes from the exact same place.

<sup>66</sup> *Letters*, p. 163 ([May (?)] 1963); Letter to Elizabeth Bishop, 21 October 1965, HRHRC; *Letters*, p. 72 ([April (?)] 1959).

<sup>67</sup> *American Poetry Review*, (May/June 1973), 38-40; *Letters*, p. 397.

<sup>68</sup> *Letters*, p. 150 (18 December 1962) [unbracketed ellipses, Sexton's].

<sup>69</sup> Interview with Barbara Kevles, p. 109.

<sup>70</sup> First published in *The Death Notebooks*, the volume which is prefaced with a quotation from Hemingway's *A Moveable Feast*: "'Look, you con man, make a living out of your death".' This is a particularly resonant and subtle epigraph given that Hemingway's subject is the distinction between real (World War One) and fake suffering. *A Moveable Feast* (New York: Touchstone, 1996), p. 127.



Jonah, like the confessional poet and, indeed, like the speaker of 'The Letting Down of the Hair', gains his insights by introspection (enforced, for Jonah, by his entrapment in the womb-like whale; for the 'Lady of the Hair', by entrapment in the womb-like cupola; and for the confessional poet, by entrapment in the 'inverted glass bowl').<sup>71</sup> The reference to the 'belly' implies the potentially scatological nature of the confessional process (its revelation of the products of the belly and thereafter the bowels). Like 'The Letting Down of the Hair', 'Making a Living' offers an 'allegory' (or parable) for the life ('his living') of the poet.

Jonah, like the 'lady of the hair' and, metaphorically, like the confessional poet, invites the attention of the audience (the whale) which subsequently victimises him. He puts himself on display, and subsequently compromises his right to privacy:

Jonah opened the door of his stateroom  
and said, "Here I am!" and the whale liked this  
and thought to take him in.<sup>72</sup>

The audience/whale is all-consuming, all-destroying. Caught in its grasp, the subject's response is to perform according to its expectations, to attempt appeasement by acting out the confessional role. Thus, in the third stanza, Jonah interrogates his familial origins, strips off his clothes (metaphorically, peels back the layers to reveal his naked self), and scrutinises his fate. This is specifically for financial gain, hence the pun on 'profit' (the word also suggests 'prophet', a mocking allusion to the credulous reverence in which the confessional poet's words are held):

This is my death,  
Jonah said out loud,  
and it will profit me to understand it.

In the context of Sexton's poetics, Jonah's time under water, or in the murky depths (like the submerged, below-decks areas in the 'Memoir' poems discussed in the next chapter), signifies a necessary stage *en route* to the discovery of hidden memories. We should note the image of the fish (a metaphor for memory in Sexton's poetry) and of the light bulbs (a Platonic sign of illumination and understanding):<sup>73</sup>

Little fish swam by his nose  
and he noted them and touched their slime.

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<sup>71</sup> Sexton's poem, 'Housewife', reads: 'Men enter by force, drawn back like Jonah / into their fleshy mothers.' See also 'For John, Who Begs Me Not to Enquire Further', discussed in my Conclusion.

<sup>72</sup> Again, the words echo lines which Sexton had marked in Dostoevsky's *The Possessed*: Karmazinov's 'Look rather at me' (chapter three) and Stavrogin's 'I wish everyone would look at me' (from the suppressed chapter: 'Stavrogin's Confession'), HRHRC.

<sup>73</sup> In 'Magi', Sylvia Plath refers, disparagingly, to 'some lamp-headed Plato'. *Collected Poems*, ed. by Ted Hughes (London: Faber and Faber, 1981) [subsequent references are to this volume].

Plankton came and he held them in his palm  
Like God's littlest light bulbs.

These images also signify a regression to primary – even primeval – origins. The fish represent the creatures from which mammals are descended while ‘God's littlest light bulbs’ signify His primary act of creation (‘Let there be light’).

Crucially, if paradoxically, it is this invocation and contemplation of the past – instigated by the audience's attentions – which leads, in the end, to the speaker's rejection by that audience (in ‘Making a Living’, to Jonah's ejection by the whale). Thus the confessional poet, it can be argued, is destined to fail. Invited by a predatory audience to contemplate and expose herself, she finds that the predatory audience is dissatisfied with the results. A similar failure is described in ‘The Play’ wherein the ‘only actor’ acts out ‘a whole play. / The play is my life’, only to be met with ‘Many boos. Many boos’. In ‘Making a Living’, Jonah's performance renders him unpalatable (the audience's shock is displaced onto the ‘sky’ and ‘boats’):

At this point the whale  
vomited him back out into the sea.  
The shocking blue sky.  
The shocking white boats.  
The sun like a crazed eyeball.

Jonah's self-exposure is poison or anathema to his host – notwithstanding that it is this self-revelation (“‘Here I am!’”) which first attracted the whale to him. Clearly, this reads as an allegory for the confessional poet's rejection by a squeamish audience. In ‘Live’ (LD), Sexton makes a more explicit complaint about the antipathy of her audience to the revelations in her work, revelations which must, surely, come as little surprise:

People don't like to be told  
that you're sick  
and then be forced  
to watch  
you  
come  
down with the hammer.

Yet in ‘Making a Living’, even the experience of vulnerability and rejection (like the hostility of the audience in ‘The Play’) is grist to the mill for the confessional poet/Jonah. Neither can help but turn experience to account – in the figurative and in the commercial sense (recalling once again the line ‘it will profit me to understand it’ in stanza four and the metaphors of the coins in ‘Hurry Up Please’): ‘Then he told the news media / The strange

details of his death.’ Yet ultimately, the subject’s manipulation of the media/audience turns into her exploitation by them.<sup>74</sup> The subject becomes their object:

and they hammered him up in the marketplace  
and sold him and sold him and sold him.  
My death the same.<sup>75</sup>

The audience which creates the ‘story’ also assumes the power to bring it to an end.<sup>76</sup> Implicit in these insistent repetitions (‘sold him and sold him and sold him’) is the three-times betrayal of Christ by Peter.<sup>77</sup> What these lines also suggest (and this is a point which will be considered at more length in Chapter Five and the Conclusion) is that there is no real closure in confession. Each confession is accompanied by some para- or extra-textual experience or commentary. After the confessional ‘event’ there are perpetual repercussions – effects wrought on the audience, questions about, or clarifications of, the ‘truth’ of the experience. And these sustain the confession, seemingly endlessly. The penitent is not permitted to walk away from their confession for, having shared it, she becomes the object of everyone else’s hermeneutic endeavours.

‘The Freak Show’ draws on and develops the insights of ‘Making a Living’. The essay begins: ‘One way poets make a living, make it by their own wits [. . .] is by giving readings.’ The essay is dramatic (and thus, perhaps, deceptive) in its description of Sexton’s sudden rejection of this way of life: ‘On January 4, 1973, I stopped giving readings, and believe me, I needed the money.’ Indeed, and this is a point to which I shall return, the stance adopted in the essay (of victim) is as much a performance as the poetry readings which are its ostensible subject. The poet, Mona van Duyn, indicates as much in a letter to the *American Poetry Review*, in which she complains about Sexton’s article. She objects to Sexton’s dramatisation of her plight, and to her presentation of herself as a martyr to ‘the public’s cruel and insatiable demand’: ‘When some of us must give up readings, temporarily or permanently, we do so without regarding this as a tragic deprivation to the world.’<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Ironically, after her death, Sexton’s executors were accused of such an act. See ‘Rev. of *Words for Dr. Y.*’, *Choice*, 16.1 (1979), p. 81 on the posthumous exploitation of Sexton’s writing, or, the: ‘crass capitalisation on her saleable reputation as a personality, which is a disservice to her value as a poet.’

<sup>75</sup> The resemblance to Plath’s ‘Lady Lazarus’ is worthy of note.

<sup>76</sup> Elizabeth Hardwick writes of Plath: ‘when the curtain goes down, it is her own dead body there on the stage, sacrificed to her plot.’ *Seduction and Betrayal: Women and Literature* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1974), p. 107.

<sup>77</sup> See “‘Deny deny deny’” in Elizabeth Bishop’s poem ‘Roosters’ in *The Complete Poems: 1927-1979* (New York: The Noonday Press/Farrar Straus Giroux, 1994). Sexton was a great ‘fan’ of Bishop’s, writing to her: ‘your poems ---mean more to me than anyone else’s.’ Letter to Elizabeth Bishop, [1962 (?)], HRHRC.

<sup>78</sup> Mona Van Duyn, Letter to the *American Poetry Review*, 2.6 (November/December 1973), pp. 39-40. Sexton kept a cutting of the letter, and drafted a poetic reply: ‘Open Letter to Mona Van Duyn.’ HRHRC.

Sexton's rhetorical flourish is continued in her second paragraph, where she asks: 'What's in it for the poet? Money, applause, adulation, [. . .] an audience', before cynically remarking: 'Don't kid yourself.' Sexton implies that there is, in fact, nothing in it for the poet, and that the advantage is all to the audience:

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.<sup>79</sup>

Sexton again makes her point by dramatising it, illustrating her argument by reference to imagined theatrical or spectacular events. 'Once,' she declares, in suspenseful, story-telling mode, 'I cried after I read a poem.' She continues: 'I had never read this poem before an audience and I had no idea it would move me so. I was embarrassed to cry. I had to go off stage and get my pocketbook, which had a Kleenex in it, so that I might blow my nose.' This revelation of distress and embarrassment is merely an attenuation or repetition ('and sold him and sold him and sold him') of the confessional moment. As I have suggested, the apparently genuine and pitiable revelation is, itself, an act, a dramatic play for sympathy. For, some ten years earlier, Sexton had offered, as a measure of a strong poem, precisely this capacity to move the speaker/performer to tears:

The final test of a poem often comes during a public reading. I have almost always read this poem during a "reading" and yet its impact upon me remains strong and utterly personal. I get caught up in it all over again. By the time I get to the last verse my voice begins to break [. . .] Because "Some Foreign Letters" still puts a lump in my throat, I know that it is my unconscious favorite.<sup>80</sup>

Sexton complains that people have willingly witnessed the spectacle of her emotional response to a poem. Yet it is arguable that this emotional response has been knowingly performed or offered up to the audience (tears are delivered on cue, as though from a script); first, by the repeated (hence 'still puts') reading of a poem which is calculated to achieve certain effects, and second, by this essay's dramatic representation of the original trauma. There is a further level of performance within the article in that Sexton relates the story of her

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<sup>79</sup> Sexton's comments echo the reference to the speaker 'spilling her guts' in 'Hurry Up Please'. Her condemnation of the audience's interest in her appearance is ironic given her own anxious preoccupation with her sun tan, and choice of clothes, prior to her appearance at the London Poetry International Festival. Letter to Ted Hughes, 3 March 1967; Letter to Jon Stallworthy, [June (?)] 1967. HRHRC.

<sup>80</sup> 'Comment on "Some Foreign Letters"', in Colburn, ed., *No Evil Star*, pp. 14-17 (p. 17) (first publ. in *Poet's Choice*, ed. by Paul Engle and Joseph Langland (New York: Dial, 1962).

lecture agency's cynical dramatisation and promotion of her stage reputation. In order to ensure further interest in her work, they speak 'proudly of my presentation to their clients thusly: "It's a great show! Really a pow! She cries every time right on stage!".' Sexton complains of her lecture agency that they 'exploit your soul' and, more generally, that 'somehow in this poetry biz, as one of my students calls it, we are asked to make a show of it'. This, although persuasive in its confirmation of the commodification of experience, is disingenuous given that the exploitation is mutual (a point which Mona Van Duyn makes, arguing that 'most of us do not hire agents to sell us as performers, but if we did we would not publicly profess, as Ms. Sexton does, horror and shock at our agent's praise of us *as performers*').<sup>81</sup>

Sexton describes the circumstances which have led to her decision to abandon readings (or, as she puts it, to the 'death of Anne as a performer': the use of the third-person to describe 'Anne' further promotes the image of self as object or commodity). In her article, Sexton objects to the forced attendance at her reading of a class of law students who, she feels, will have no interest in poetry and will 'see *nothing* but the freak' (an anxiety about the vulnerability of the physical self which replicates that in the poems discussed earlier). She complains that readings make public, and thereby sully, that which should be 'private' and 'precious' and hidden 'deepest'. Yet it is precisely this private/public dialectic, or speaker/reader, penitent/confessor, poet/audience interface (see 'my face, your face' in 'For John, Who Begs Me not to Enquire Further'), which sustains the confession, and by which its meaning is generated.

Sexton concedes, however, that there is some attraction in the spectacle of the 'famous' poet reading, or, more specifically, in the famous poet spectacularly failing. As she admits:

I remember being a fledgling poet and going to hear the famous poets read [. . .] there was a sneaky, unconscious underground part of me that wanted the poet to be a little weird [. . .] we want the big names to act a little alien, a little crazy.

The metaphor of acting ('to act a little alien') indicates an understanding that what we see is ineluctably a performance or masquerade – a show and not the 'real' poet. Maintaining the role of awe-struck, 'fledgling poet', Sexton recalls an anecdote about an Auden reading: 'I have also been told of W.H. Auden coming on stage absent mindedly in his carpet slippers.' Yet this anecdote – reported at one remove – is itself a masquerade, a dramatic re-interpretation of events calculated to achieve particular effects (to modestly, and misleadingly, distinguish between vulnerable, exploited 'I' and the 'famous poets' about

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<sup>81</sup> Letter to the *American Poetry Review*, p. 40.

whom she claims only tangential knowledge).<sup>82</sup> For in fact, Sexton had had direct – and less benign – experience of seeing Auden read. In 1967, as Sexton’s then biographer (and companion at the time)<sup>83</sup> reports, Sexton was scheduled to appear at the same event as Auden:

At the International Poetry Festival in London, she stood up to W.H.Auden and WON! It was a cut-throat evening. Poets from the world over competed for two minutes of reading time: [. . .] Mr. Auden sent an emissary to Ms. Sexton. Auden, in his wrinkles and carpet slippers, held the honored anchor-end of the evening. Mr. Auden requested that Ms. Sexton cut short her reading of *The Double Image* so that Mr. Auden might be at home at 10.00 p.m. as was his custom. Ms. Sexton sent back word that she would be pleased to assist Mr. Auden by exchanging places on the program so that Mr. Auden could be at home according to his custom. Mr. Auden left for home at 10.45 p.m.<sup>84</sup>

Clearly, it does not suit the thrust of Sexton’s argument in ‘The Freak Show’ to confess to such eagerness to read in public. Neither does it suit her presentation of herself as vulnerable and innocent party to reveal the assertiveness evidenced in her actual dealings with Auden. Moreover, in reiterating the image of Auden as carpet-slipped eccentric, Sexton may be said to be collaborating in the same kind of voyeuristic stereotyping (Auden always wears slippers) as she attacks in respect of popular images of herself (Sexton always cries).

Sexton’s ‘script’ is interesting because of the way in which it draws on – indeed enters into a dramatic dialogue with – Auden’s 1963 poem ‘On the Circuit’.<sup>85</sup> ‘The Freak Show’ is an ironic and calculated interpretation (in the sense of a dramatic rendering) of Auden’s poem, modestly claiming dissociation, while modelling itself on, and subtly reinforcing the similarity of, their experiences. ‘On the Circuit’, like ‘The Freak Show’, begins with the poet/performer flying toward the destination for the reading and contemplating his imminent fate. Auden’s speaker, like Sexton’s, figures himself as the vulnerable victim of his lecture agency:

Predestined nightly to fulfill  
Columbia-Giesen-Management’s  
Unfathomable will

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<sup>82</sup> Sexton’s friend, the poet Maxine Kumin, recalled seeing Auden reading ‘in his carpet slippers’ at least twelve times. Interview with Enid Shomer, *Massachusetts Review*, 37 (1996-7), 531-55 (p. 534).

<sup>83</sup> Ames was replaced as biographer by Middlebrook. See Linda Gray Sexton, *Searching*, pp. 221-23.

<sup>84</sup> Lois Ames, ‘Remembering Anne’, in McClatchy, ed., pp. 111-14 (p. 113). Interestingly, Charles Osborne, Auden’s biographer and the organiser of the event remembers differently: ‘Wystan came and read his poems, and amused the audience by being visibly impatient with the American poet Anne Sexton, whose reading of her confessional verse went on and on. Before the evening was over he had reduced her to tears.’ *W. H. Auden*, p. 320.

<sup>85</sup> ‘On the Circuit’, *W.H.Auden: Selected Poems*, ed. by Edward Mendelson (London: Faber and Faber, 1979).

Auden uses a similar religious idiom to Sexton. His management's 'unfathomable will' is a pastiche of the will of God. So too, his poetry is described as 'my gospel of the Muse', although, unlike God, he is allowed no day of rest (he travels 'daily, seven days a week'). For Auden, as for Sexton, the reading tour will be unmemorable:

Unless some singular event  
Should intervene to save the place,  
A truly asinine remark,  
A soul-bewitching face.

Here, encapsulated, are all of the events which form the subject of 'The Freak Show': the singular event (the disaster of the precisely evoked 'January 4<sup>th</sup>, 1973' reading), the 'truly asinine remark' (Sexton complains about audiences who call out "'Whatever you do, Annie, baby, we're with you'"), and the 'soul-bewitching face' (the singular redeeming element of Sexton's disastrous 'final' reading is the presence of 'an understanding sister', the sympathetic professor, Janet Beeler). Sexton, like Auden, finds the domestic arrangements for such trips 'utter hell'. She complains about the 'badly burned hamburger' she was served in 'the student bistro, a barn-like place, our table on top of a hot but fake fireplace' where she had to shout to be heard. The description replicates Auden's distaste for

The radio in students' cars,  
Muzac at breakfast, or – dear God! –  
Girl-organists in bars.

More importantly, Auden expresses a sardonic anxiety about the availability of alcohol: '*What will there be to drink?*' This is an anxiety which Sexton foregrounds, admitting that, on the occasion of her fateful, last reading, she 'guzzled down the double vodkas [. . .] I was drinking too fast and I was scared'. Elsewhere, in making arrangements for readings, Sexton is precise in her requirements: 'I have only one requirement and that is the need for a lot of vodka (don't bother with such niceties as limes, tonic water, etc.).'<sup>86</sup>

The choice of the title 'The Freak Show', and the reference within the article to the poet as 'freak,' as '*nothing* but the freak' and as "'a kind of expensive freak'", is noteworthy in that it anticipates the idiom of criticism directed towards present-day confessional talk-shows ('Oprah' and 'Jerry Springer', for example). Jane Shattuc notes the 'outcry against the new talk shows as "freak shows," "geek shows," or, in the words of the *New York Post*, "sicko circuses"'. Shattuc quotes a talk-show guest who: 'likens the shows to the nineteenth-

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<sup>86</sup> Anne Sexton, Letter to Elizabeth Dean, 22 May 1974, HRHRC. It has been argued that one of the contributing factors in Sexton's growing antipathy to giving readings, and towards her audience, is her increasing reliance on alcohol. See Luedtke, p. 183.

century freak-show circuses but declares: “What’s different now is that we, as freaks, are doing the speaking. It isn’t the barker telling our story for us”.<sup>87</sup>

This, surely, is the point to be made about Sexton’s article. Indeed, it constitutes one of the paradoxes and anxieties inherent in it and in the confessional performance which is its subject. The ‘freak’/performer is complicit in, even solicits, her own exploitation. Like Jonah, albeit less explicitly, she proclaims, “‘Here I am!’.” Her complaint about confessional performance is simply a sequel, a further confessional performance inviting the exact same voyeuristic attention as the original. ‘Look at me’, Sexton declares, look at me suffering as people look at me – a mise-en-abyme which sees her locked in the endlessly reflecting mirrors of the confessional performance. This meta-performance is itself a performance – a point which Barbara Kevles makes in the foreword to her interview with Sexton. She quotes one of Sexton’s remarks: ‘I am an actress in my own autobiographical play’ and likens the textual role which is Sexton’s referent to her performance in the actual interview: ‘Even when replying from written notes [a script?], she read with all the inflections and intonations of [. . .] “an actress in her own autobiographical play”’.<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> Jane Shattuc, *The Talking Cure: TV Talk Shows and Women* (Routledge: New York and London, 1997), pp. 140, 93. One of the characters in Sexton’s unpublished play *Mercy Street* is named ‘Barker’.

<sup>88</sup> Interview with Barbara Kevles, p. 309.



## Chapter Four

‘It is true that I am an autobiographical poet most of the time,  
or so I lead my readers to believe’\*: Sexton and Autobiography

Sexton’s declaration in the title to this chapter seems to countenance the critical consensus that her poetry is ‘truly’ and ‘directly autobiographical’, that it is ‘clearly the autobiography of the psyche itself’, and that its ‘horizon, or story-line is, of course, autobiographical’.<sup>1</sup> Yet the proviso of the second part of her statement, with its subtle – but nevertheless authoritative – admission of its own deceptiveness, disaffirms the humble acquiescence of the first part. In characteristic Sexton style, the statement beguiles the reader. It offers obfuscation in the guise of clarification, falsehood in the guise of truth.<sup>2</sup>

Sexton indicates that the ‘autobiographical’ is neither as determinate, nor its significations as certain, as has previously been understood.<sup>3</sup> Her statement encapsulates the ambiguity of autobiography as a genre: a genre which offers itself as a model of truth, authenticity and ultimate certainty (the self revealed by the person best qualified to do so), while simultaneously masking a shifting, treacherous undertow of deceit, uncertainty and evasion. Sexton experiments with the autobiographical genre, as she does with the confessional mode, exploiting the intriguing indeterminacy of each – the possibilities which they offer of creating, exercising, or disguising different selves – in order to confound oversimplified readings of what is at stake. Her problematisation of the autobiographer’s authority, and obfuscation of her intentions, contradicts James Olney’s assertion that autobiography is ‘the simplest of literary enterprises’ and confounds Philippe Lejeune’s insistence on the importance of authorial intentionality as a sign and measure of the autobiographical.<sup>4</sup> Autobiography, for Sexton, is a guise: a convention which the knowing subject may appropriate (and hide behind) at will (that is, some or ‘most’ of the time). It is a

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\* Crawshaw Lectures (1) p. 6, HRHRC.

<sup>1</sup> Ted Hughes, ‘Notes on the Chronological Order’, p. 81; Diane Wood Middlebrook, ‘1957: Anne Sexton’s Bedlam’, in Wagner-Martin, ed., pp. 239-46 (p. 239) (first publ. in *Pequod* (1988)); McDonnell, p. 40; Diane Wood Middlebrook, ‘Poet of Weird Abundance’ [excerpts], in Wagner-Martin, ed., pp. 72-80 (p. 79) (first publ. in *Parnassus* 12, 13 (1985)).

<sup>2</sup> The gesture replicates the statement ‘at one time I hated being called confessional and denied it, but *mea culpa*. Now I say that I’m the *only* confessional poet’ (see Chapter One) and anticipates the paradox of Sexton’s declaration ‘I like to lie, I like to confess, I like to hide’ (see Chapter Five).

<sup>3</sup> Nor indeed, is it to be regretted. Sexton figures it a conscious choice, rather than an unfortunate reaction (as is implied by Carolyn Heilbrun, who in tones reminiscent of Jones’s ‘intolerable compulsion to confess’ describes women’s autobiography as a product of ‘uninhibited [. . .] impulses’). ‘Woman’s [sic] Autobiographical Writings: New Forms’, *Prose Studies*, 8.2 (1985), 14-28 (p. 20).

<sup>4</sup> Olney, ‘Autobiography and the Cultural Moment: A Thematic, Historical and Bibliographical Introduction’ in *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical*, ed. by James Olney (Princeton, N.J., Princeton University Press, 1980), pp. 3-27 (p. 3); Lejeune, *Le Pacte Autobiographique* (Paris: Seuil, 1975).

fabrication (in the sense both of a construction and an invention; something made and something made up). It is a studied rhetorical process in which experience is selected, shaped and mediated in order to 'lead [the] readers to believe' that what they are seeing is a self revealed, or a self-revealing self.<sup>5</sup> Sexton's meta-explanation (the act of leading the reader to believe that this is how she leads the reader to believe) seems to provide answers while actually raising a multitude of questions: What is an "autobiographical poet"? What strategies, techniques, or conventions might be employed in order to 'lead [the] audience to believe' that the text in question is 'autobiographical'? How would Sexton assimilate, and the reader recognise, such an identity?

Sexton repeatedly and insistently questions the status and practice of writing about the self. Her poems contemplate the existence – even co-existence – of multiple selves, and they describe the chronological development, and shedding, of different versions of the self (thereby indicating that the 'self' is not coherent, consistent or fixed). Poems discussed in this chapter, such as 'Just Once' (LP), reflect the temporality (and thus fragility) of self-understanding. Others (for example, the 'Memoir' poems) explore the status and vulnerability of memory, demonstrating that an autobiographical (that is, graphical, or *written*) memory is always already inflected by other texts (as exemplified by the speaker's appropriation of her ancestor's correspondence in 'Some Foreign Letters' (TB)). Sexton's writing parodies orthodox expectations of the unity, chronology and teleology of autobiography; so, 'End, Middle, Beginning' (MSt.) summarises – pointedly in reverse order – her life achievements. Her poems develop elaborate conceits in order to experiment with and problematise the conventions of the genre. The 'Horoscope Poems' relate, in anticipation, the story of her own future, while 'Love Letter Written from a Burning Building' records, as though from beyond the grave – or beyond the limits of self-*life*-writing – the narrative of the subject's own death.<sup>6</sup>

It is important, at this point, to attempt a definition of the terms of debate – if only so that they might hereafter be explored, even contested. I should like, first of all, to adopt Candace Lang's helpful distinction between autobiography and the autobiographical (assimilating, too, her provisos and reservations about the fixity and implied referentiality of the terms):

It would seem expedient to at least limit the rubric "autobiography" to works in which a first-person narrator explicitly declares his [sic] intention to recount a major portion of his experiences and/or his reflections on those

<sup>5</sup> Sexton's poetry exemplifies Sidonie Smith's definition of autobiography as: 'both the process and the product of assigning meaning to a series of experiences, after they have taken place, by means of emphasis, juxtaposition, commentary, omission.' *A Poetics of Women's Autobiography: Marginality and the Fictions of Self-Representation* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), p. 45.

<sup>6</sup> Sexton's strategy replicates the technique which Leigh Gilmore has identified in Gertrude Stein's writing: of 'mobiliz[ing] the recognizable constituents of autobiography [. . .] against autobiography itself', p. 200.

experiences (even though this still leaves the question of the referential dimension – the “authenticity” – of the autobiography to be dealt with in each individual case) and to settle for the term “autobiographical” for other works which one may care to propose as attempts at “self-inquiry,” “self-revelation,” “self-creation,” and the like.<sup>7</sup>

However, as Lang’s rather reluctant tone implies, there are problems with reading autobiography as a pure and unmediated reflection of prior experience, and as a genre shaped and characterised by its subject matter or content. As we have seen, this has long been an issue in Sexton criticism. For example, the misprision that the confessional poem refers explicitly and directly to the prior lived experience of the author – as though the poetic text were a mere notation of anterior and real events – underpins James Tulip’s assertion that

Mrs. Sexton’s writing sprawls passively over the page in a readable, journalistic fashion; but nothing new gets made in the process. The poems too often are simple illustrations of positions known and knowable prior to the poem’s being written.<sup>8</sup>

I should like to suggest, in contradiction, that Sexton’s poems are intensely conscious about their own ‘process’ – indeed, as I shall argue in my Conclusion, that this process forms their very subject matter. Her poems contemplate the way in which experience or identity becomes ‘known and knowable’ only by being written. They also, perhaps more importantly, contemplate the condition of not knowing, of being uncertain and, as we will see in the final chapter, of being subject to a language which does not document, is not an ‘illustration’ of prior knowledge but rather distracts, misleads, and obstructs.

Faith in the existence, accessibility and importance of a stable, coherent, and pre-linguistic consciousness has underpinned the Western tradition of autobiography from Plato to modernism. However, as Sexton’s poetry demonstrates, the unconscious, or, the ‘great chaos’, as she terms it plays a more important part in the construction of the self than the kinds of surface event (‘positions known and knowable’) which typically find autobiographical representation.<sup>9</sup> As Sidonie Smith explains: ‘the ideas of psychology and psychoanalysis have shattered comfortable assumptions about the integrity of consciousness.’<sup>10</sup> Shari Benstock concurs: ‘The influence of Freud’s discovery of the unconscious cannot be discounted in the unsettling of the “I” that had heretofore stood at the

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<sup>7</sup> Lang, p. 6, n. 5. Olney, too, distinguishes between ‘the noun “autobiography” and the adjective “autobiographical,” arguing that ‘it is possible to have a work that is “autobiographical” without its being “an autobiography”, and that [. . .] it is possible to have a work that is “an autobiography” without its being “autobiographical”’. He cites Eliot’s *Four Quartets* as an example of the former, and D.H. Lawrence’s *Sons and Lovers* as an example of the latter. ‘Some Versions of Memory/Some Versions of *Bios*: The Ontology of Autobiography’, in Olney, ed., pp. 236-67 (pp. 250-52).

<sup>8</sup> ‘Three Women Poets’, in Wagner-Martin, ed., pp 44-46 (p. 45) (first publ. in *Poetry Australia*, 21 (1967)).

<sup>9</sup> Interview with Patricia Marx, p. 82.

<sup>10</sup> Smith, p. 174.

centre of narrative discourse.’<sup>11</sup> Sexton takes her place in a succession of modernist women writers (H.D., Gertrude Stein, Virginia Woolf) whom Benstock identifies as foregrounding in their autobiographical writing the difficulties of accessing, understanding and evoking this resource.

Anne Sexton’s self-reflexive experimentation with autobiography may best be understood by reference to Leigh Gilmore’s concept of ‘autobiographics’. ‘Autobiographics’ defines a process or poetics of self-representation rather than a distinct genre:

I argue that there are not so much autobiographies as autobiographics, those changing elements of the contradictory discourses and practices of truth and identity which represent the subject of autobiography [. . .] I emphasize how the incoherence in the category can be used to further a feminist theory of autobiographical production [. . .] I show how autobiographics avoids the terminal questions of genre and close delimitation and offers a way, instead, to ask: Where is the autobiographical? What constitutes its representation?<sup>12</sup>

The poems discussed below confirm that there is a poetics or rhetoric of autobiography: strategies and devices which constitute and define it (‘its representations’). Gilmore’s emphasis on the inherent ‘incoherence in the category’ dovetails with Sexton’s explication-as-obfuscation in the statement discussed at the beginning of this chapter. Further, as my discussion of performance and truth in the previous and subsequent Chapters indicates, Sexton’s autobiographical writing may only be understood within the context of those ‘contradictory discourses and practices of truth and identity which represent the subject of autobiography’.

Informed by Gilmore’s concept of ‘autobiographics’, I will argue that Sexton is as exercised by the problems and issues arising from the attempt to write the self (that is, with the process) as she is with the problems and issues experienced in the life in question (with the object of the narrative). Sexton, like Gilmore, is interested in asking: ‘Where is the autobiographical? What constitutes its representation?’ This chapter proceeds with a discussion of the first of these questions, and examines Sexton’s exploration of some of the practices and promises offered by autobiographical writing (for example, the opportunities which the memoir offers of understanding one’s self by exploring one’s roots). Thereafter, I turn to the second of Gilmore’s points, in addressing Sexton’s appropriation and manipulation of autobiographical rhetoric – of the devices and conceits used to simulate the autobiographical.

Sexton, perhaps surprisingly, given the apparent self-referentiality of her poetry, seems to find it difficult to present a coherent prose narrative of the self, when asked, for example, to provide autobiographical sketches for publishers or fans. Part of the barrier

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<sup>11</sup> ‘Authorizing the Autobiographical’, in Benstock, ed., pp. 20, 21.

preventing Sexton from relating her 'life story' in prose seems to be the impossibility of identifying and thereafter representing any fixed, unitary, coherent and consistent identity which will transcend the specific discursive context in which it is constructed, and to which it belongs. By which I mean that the subject 'I' is a variable, shifting phenomenon. It signifies differently in different contexts, it changes over time and in different places and circumstances. In a long letter to Jon Stallworthy, her publisher at Oxford University Press, Sexton gives valuable insight into her reluctance and inability to deliver the autobiographical sketch which her publisher has asked her for.<sup>13</sup> The letter begins: 'No. I just can't face that woman [. . .] with an accounting of my "life story." I did write that other rather sweet and old woman a letter . . . but life story. DEAR GOD!' In a comment which brings to mind 'The Letting Down of the Hair', Sexton exclaims: 'It's nice to have fans . . . but they seem a strange lot.'

Having declared her inability to provide a 'life story', Sexton proceeds to attempt one, although on the tacit understanding that the 'story' (fiction?) will be edited (made coherent) by Stallworthy. Within the first lines of this draft autobiography, Sexton is at pains to emphasise the disjunction between the many different, albeit simultaneous, lives she leads, and the discrepancy between her own sense of self and her publicly-perceived identities as poet, housewife and mother: 'I do not live a poet's life. I look and act like a housewife. My daughter says to her friends "a mother is someone who types all day".' What she appears to be (what she 'look[s]' and 'act[s]' like) is not a true measure of her identity (as she subsequently insists: 'I live the wrong life for the person I am'). The difficulties of defining and appropriating a coherent and recognisable identity are emphasised. Sexton is all of these things, and none of them: 'I am a lousy cook, a lousy wife, a lousy mother, because I am too busy wrestling with the poem to remember that I am a normal (?) American housewife.'

Sexton proffers an oft-repeated explanation or justification for her life and work: 'But [sic] only important part of my story is that I started to write, and it was a solitary act.'<sup>14</sup> Typically, such statements have been read as confirmation of the therapeutic or cathartic potential of confessional poetry or, in more sophisticated readings, as evidence of the power of the identity 'poet' to endow Sexton with a sense of self-esteem.<sup>15</sup> I wish, rather, to argue that Sexton is conceding – not without mixed feelings – the role which poetry plays in

<sup>12</sup> Gilmore, p. 13.

<sup>13</sup> Anne Sexton, Letter to Jon Stallworthy, 24 September 1965, HRHRC.

<sup>14</sup> To John Holmes, Sexton wrote: 'poetry has saved my life; has given me a life.' *Letters*, p. 59 (12 February 1959). To W. D. Snodgrass: 'Poetry and poetry alone has saved my life.' *Letters*, p. 81 (9 June 1959).

<sup>15</sup> See Phillips, p. 8 and Juhasz, 'Seeking the Exit or the Home', in *Shakespeare's Sisters: Feminist Essays on Women Poets*, ed. by Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979), pp. 261-68 (p. 265): 'words brought power to reach others and a social role as a poet.'

discursively constructing an identity, subjectivity, a sense of self which does not pre-exist the text.

What Sexton is proposing in this autobiographical sketch – and what makes writing the prose sketch so difficult – is that the identity of confessional poet which she is called upon to explain does not exist outside the boundaries of the confessional text itself. As Sexton says in the letter: ‘one could read my poems and know a hell of a lot about me.’ Although, typically, such gnomic comments are read as evidence of the authenticity and autobiographical referentiality of the poems, it is arguable that Sexton’s point is that the identity proposed in the poem is an identity which is derived from, and limited to, the text. The poem will tell all that there is to know, but at the same time, such a truth is limited to its own discursive boundaries.<sup>16</sup> The self, when understood as a discursive effect, must needs be recreated anew in each and every text and reading. As Sexton explains, in correspondence with Rise and Steven Axelrod about their work-in-progress on her poetry: ‘the poems stand for the moment in which they are written and make no promises to the future events and consciousness.’<sup>17</sup> Sexton’s conscious autobiographical sketches struggle with the demands of articulating a coherent picture of a self which cannot be said to exist outside the text itself, or which cannot be made to cohere with a previously given (that is, in earlier poems) image of self. To Jon Stallworthy, Sexton pleads (calling, significantly, on his own experience as a poet, and thus on his awareness of the role of discourse in creating identity):

I spill it all out in this hopeless fashion because you are a poet and will know there is no “nut-shell bio” but I beg you, make one up out of all this. Hide me! Not necessarily from “fans” but from myself.

Given these difficulties with autobiographical representation, what is it that might ‘lead’ the readers to ‘believe’ that Sexton is an ‘autobiographical poet’? The most instantly identifiable of ‘autobiographical’ poems are those in which she attempts to represent her own identity by reference to the (familial) roots from whence she came, to situate her experience within its historical or genealogical context. It is a classic autobiographical trope to begin the narrative with an account of the subject’s moment of birth or earliest memories (‘classic’ to the extent that even fictive autobiographies, such as *David Copperfield*, exploit it). We see the trope in Rousseau’s *Confessions*, in Virginia Woolf’s ‘A Sketch of the Past’, and even in that quintessential parody of an autobiography, Gertrude Stein’s *The Autobiography of Alice B.*

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<sup>16</sup> As Antony Easthope argues: ‘Conventional literary criticism, because it assumes poetry is to be read as the expression of an author, sees poetry as above all a matter of subjectivity, as though the question “what is poetry?” was still nearly the same as “What is a poet?”. But on Derrida’s showing, discourse is “a sort of machine”, and subjectivity in poetry – “the Poet” – can never be more than an *effect* of discourse, a god or ghost produced (by the reading) from the machine.’ *Poetry as Discourse*, p. 30.

<sup>17</sup> *Letters*, p. 421 (10 September 1974).

*Toklas*.<sup>18</sup> Paul John Eakin, in his study of the history of autobiography, explains this in terms of Erik Erikson's understanding of the autobiographical subject's need to situate herself in a sequence (chronological, social, and generational) in order to achieve identity. He quotes Erikson (from *Young Man Luther: A Study in Psychoanalysis and History*; a copy of which was owned by Sexton): "we *do* choose our parents, our family history, and the history of our kings, heroes and gods. By making them our own, we manoeuvre ourselves into the inner position of proprietors, of creators".<sup>19</sup> This reversal of sequence, such that the progeny (the present subject) becomes the creator and takes charge of the past, is found in a number of Sexton's poems.

In a group of poems written over a period of at least four years, and published in two different volumes (poems which I collectively nominate 'Memoir' poems), Sexton repeatedly contemplates questions of origins, roots, ancestry: personal history as it determines life lived in the present-day.<sup>20</sup> In 'Some Foreign Letters' (TB), and 'Crossing the Atlantic' and 'Walking in Paris' (LD) she appropriates – in order to problematise – the practices and tropes of the memoir. She uses, but only in order to undermine or disallow, complacent and nostalgic readings of the past, exposing the selectivity and fabrication inherent in any representation of one's personal history, and, by implication, in autobiography in general.<sup>21</sup> She interrogates the relationship between introspection and retrospection and specifically foregrounds the textuality of the past (represented in these poems by written documents handed down through the family), and thus of one's grasp of the present.<sup>22</sup> Like Woolf's 'A Sketch of the Past' and Stein's *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, Sexton offers a self-portrait in the guise of a biography of another (autobiography masquerading, in the three poems, as a memoir of her great-aunt Eliza Dingley [Nana]). The 'Memoir' poems, then, may be understood as Sexton's own 'sketch' (in the sense of a graphic or written representation) 'of the past'.

'Some Foreign Letters', addressed to Nana, offers an autobiographical meditation on Nana's letters home from a turn-of-the-century European tour (letters which may themselves

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<sup>18</sup> Virginia Woolf, 'A Sketch of the Past', in *Moments of Being* (London: Triad/Panther, 1978), p. 99. *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* opens with a summary of the ostensible subject's ancestry: 'I was born in San Francisco, California [. . .] My mother's father was a pioneer [. . .] he married my grandmother who was very fond of music.' (London: Arrow Books, 1960), p. 7.

<sup>19</sup> Erik Erikson, *Young Man Luther: A Study in Psychoanalysis and History* (New York: Norton, 1962), pp 111-12, qtd in Paul John Eakin, *Fictions in Autobiography: Studies in the Art of Self-Invention* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1985), p. 38.

<sup>20</sup> The metaphor of 'roots' is found, too, in 'The Letting Down of the Hair' (see Chapter Three). On the death of her parents, the 'lady of the hair' asks: 'Where were the deep roots that grew me?' p. 41.

<sup>21</sup> Sexton's poetry rejects the distinction made recently in Erica Wagner's *Ariel's Gift* between 'a memoir' and 'a work of art' (p. 13).

<sup>22</sup> As Linda Hutcheon explains: 'the past is only known to us today through its textualized traces (which, like all texts, are always open to interpretation).' *The Politics of Postmodernism* (London and New York: Routledge, 1989), p. 81. See also *A Poetics of Postmodernism* (London and New York: Routledge, 1988), pp. 141-57.

be read as autobiographical). Sexton's poem contemplates change and identity, memory and loss, the past and the present, and the possibilities and limitations of language, in representing any of these. Indeed, the poem is as much about reading autobiography as it is about writing it.<sup>23</sup> The process of reading and ascribing meaning to the Aunt's autobiographical letters functions as a metaphor for the way in which we, as readers, ascribe meaning to the contemporary autobiographical text (the poem itself).<sup>24</sup> The title of the poem reflects both the geographical foreignness of these letters from abroad and the historical strangeness of the Victorian Aunt's experience. One of the ways in which the poem achieves its effects is in its juxtaposition, not only of past and present, but of America and Europe. We are shown the letters' disorientating 'foreign postmarks'; we hear the strangeness of the language (trapped in 'the towers of Schloss Schwöbber, [. . .] the tedious / language grew in your jaw'); we see the 'yankee girl' exposed on a foreign mountain and, later, struggling with her 'New England conscience' against a backdrop of the Roman Forum. In the final stanza, the sweeping variety of the European expedition is relinquished in favour of the life of 'a prim thing / on the farm in Maine'.<sup>25</sup> If we read the 'letters' of the title as signifying writing in general, we can see that Sexton's poem self-reflexively contemplates its own 'foreign' impenetrability and indeterminacy, the difficulty of translating memory into language. The title signifies the dislocation and unfathomability (hence the casual, imprecise 'some foreign letters') of any *written* account of a life. Autobiography is always already 'foreign' and indecipherable.

The poem opens with a dialogue symptomatic of its larger attempt to communicate with the past, to forge a bond between the 'I' of the present and the 'you' of history: 'I knew you forever and you were always old, / soft white lady of my heart.' The 'I'/'you' register works throughout the poem to unsettle our sense of who is its subject. As Sexton concedes in a lecture, some of this is the 'confessional poet Anne Sexton speaking *for* her Great Aunt'.<sup>26</sup> The Aunt's authority over her own story is undermined by the dominant 'I' which mediates and controls both her writing (the letters) and the speaker's (the poem). Thus 'Some Foreign Letters' indicates that the text is open to interpretation, even interpolation. The act of reading the Aunt's letters permits the speaker to cross the divide between self and other, to enter into this life (*bios*) and claim it in writing (*graphia*) as her own (*auto*):

I knew you forever and you were always old,

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<sup>23</sup> Reading one's own past 'as one would a book' is identified by Lang as a characteristic of autobiography, p. 11.

<sup>24</sup> The memoir poems are profoundly self-reflexive in the sense defined by Linda Hutcheon: 'the act of reading, then, is itself, like the act of writing, the creative function to which the text draws attention.' *Narcissistic Narrative*, p. 39.

<sup>25</sup> A similar sense of diminishment figures in a number of other ostensibly nostalgic poems about the personal past, most notably in 'Funnel' which closes with the speaker coming to 'question this diminishing and feed a minimum / of children their careful slice of suburban cake'.

<sup>26</sup> Crawshaw Lectures (3) p. 3, HRHRC.



soft white lady of my heart. Surely you would scold  
 me for sitting up late, reading your letters,  
 as if these foreign postmarks were meant for me.  
 You posted them first in London, wearing furs  
 and a new dress in the winter of eighteen-ninety.  
 I read how London is dull on Lord Mayor's Day.

These opening lines also establish a sense of the passing of time, although the poem's true interest may be described as an exploration of the ways in which autobiography misleadingly refuses this passing, attempting instead to freeze the moment (hence 'I knew you forever and you were always old'). 'Some Foreign Letters' is noteworthy for the way in which it mixes different tenses and modes. In the first stanza alone, we see past ('I knew'), imperfect ('were always'), conditional ('you would scold / me'), simple present ('London is dull'), continuous present ('reading your letters') and future ('you will / go') tenses. The effect of this, again, is to problematise this (present) act of reflection on the past, to suggest that the distinction between past and present, subject and object, 'I' and 'you', is less certain than might be thought. The poem looks both backwards and forwards, unsettling our sense of chronology and narrative coherence. As Sexton commented, it has a 'dual outlook toward the past and the present. It combines them in much the same way that our lives do –'.<sup>27</sup> Such a perspective is important to Sexton. In Erica Jong's veiled portrait of her (Sexton is 'Jeannie Morton' in *How to Save Your Own Life*), the narrator recalls that, before her death, 'Jeannie' had given her a notebook, inscribed with Kierkegaard's words: "Life can only be understood backwards, but it must be lived forwards".<sup>28</sup>

Implicit in Sexton's seemingly self-explanatory, even slight and sentimental, memoir of a beloved Aunt is a sense of voyeurism, intrusion and risk (anticipated in the exclamation in stanza one: 'as if these foreign postmarks were meant for me'). We are engaged in an illicit reading of illicit experience. The original letter-writer (Nana) entices her reader with accounts of the thrilling and macabre events of her journey, and the recipient of the letters (speaker of the poem) conveys these to her contemporary audience to similar effect. We too are intrigued and stimulated by this narrative of danger, vulnerability ('you guided past groups of robbers, the sad holes / of Whitechapel') and sexual threat ('clutching your pocketbook, on the way / to Jack the Ripper dissecting his famous bones'). The poem exemplifies the vicarious desire and pleasure which sustain, and are produced in, any reading of the confessional text. The use of the verb 'guided' ('you guided past groups of robbers') is significant – particularly in its active form ('you guided' not 'you were guided'). While implying that Nana is 'guided' (she is safe and chaperoned; the aural pun on 'guided' / glided suggesting confidence and ease),

<sup>27</sup> 'Comment on "Some Foreign Letters"', p. 16.

<sup>28</sup> Erica Jong, *How To Live Your Own Life* (London: Grafton, 1978), p. 177.

the verb also encapsulates Nana's relationship with, and responsibility to, the recipient of the letters and, thereafter, the readers of the poem. For Nana (represented by her letters) 'guides' us through her experience: we retain a safe, and saving, distance from events, and are permitted to witness only selected aspects of the scene. Thus 'guided' may be read as a metaphor for autobiography – a genre which offers access and apparent insight, but only ever at the behest, and under the control, of the autobiographer or 'guide'. To return to the quotation from Sexton with which I opened this chapter, we are 'led' or 'guided' to believe only what the subject wants us to believe.

Throughout 'Some Foreign Letters', as I have suggested, metaphors of reading and writing dominate. Yet, as Lang notes,

the description of the autobiographer as 'reader' of his past is not as simply 'metaphorical' as it may first appear: autobiography is 'literally' the analysis of one's past discourses, of one's acts and utterances, insofar as they signify within a social and linguistic context.<sup>29</sup>

One does not, then, 'read' the past but 'past discourses' – that is, earlier readings and interpretations of the past. Thus, autobiography can never identify and represent original experience but only the network of discourses of which it is a product. Sexton's 'reading' (in the literal sense of reading the Aunt's letters, and in the figurative sense of interpreting them) is not a reading of the past, but of Nana's reading (in the sense of interpretation) of her situation. Hence, autobiography (here exemplified by Sexton's poem) – because it is a discourse – is unable to resurrect its subject (Nana). Nana is only knowable, only reachable, as a text, and cannot be made 'real'. As the stanza concludes:

I try  
to reach into your page and breathe it back . . .  
but life is a trick, life is a kitten in a sack.

The ellipsis after 'breathe it back . . .' adds to the suspense of this moment. We are witnesses to a perverse Victorian music-hall spectacle ('a trick').<sup>30</sup> Magic is about to be performed when, by sleight of hand, the promised object (Nana), instead of being materialised, is whisked out of sight, condemned to the dead past from which she came. Notwithstanding the urgency of the speaker's desire (the depth of which is emphasised by the plaintive 'I try',

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<sup>29</sup> Lang, p. 11.

<sup>30</sup> Sexton often refers to her work, particularly the formal or structural devices which shape the poem, as 'tricks.' The sexual connotations of 'trick,' incidentally, are subtly relevant here, given the subtext of sexual predation and vulnerability which underpin the poem.

placed at the end of a line), she is unequal to the task of transforming writing (*graphia*) into life (*bios*).<sup>31</sup>

Here, Sexton gives the lie to one of the orthodoxies of autobiography, particularly autobiography by women. This is the expectation that by re-writing one's past, by textualising one's foremothers, one can reforge an actual or meaningful bond with them (encapsulated in Virginia Woolf's assertion that 'we think back through our mothers if we are women').<sup>32</sup> Initially, of course, this was part of a feminist project to reclaim the past, to give voice and credence to the silenced and undervalued (as, for example, in the work of Tillie Olsen), to reverse the public (male, important) v. private (female, minor) binary.<sup>33</sup> However, as 'Some Foreign Letters' indicates, the attempt to reclaim the past – and specifically, to rebuild a nurturing and reciprocal relationship with one's 'mothers' – is destined to fail.<sup>34</sup> The grotesque image which Sexton uses to encapsulate her inability to resurrect the youthful Nana ('life is a trick, life is a kitten in a sack') speaks also for the fate of the autobiographical project. It invokes the sentimental nostalgia (hence the 'kitten') which feeds our desire to recreate an idyllic past, before exposing its inevitable failure (suffocation 'in a sack'). The violence of this image implies an angry rejection of any attempt to learn (about oneself or others) from the past – and this includes the attempt represented by psychotherapy, an analogy which Sexton herself draws. In 1963, taking the Aunt's letters with her as her 'guide', Sexton undertook her own "grand tour".<sup>35</sup> In Belgium, the letters (along with Sexton's car and other possessions) were stolen. In a letter home, Sexton comments on the theft:

The shock of losing it all just doesn't sink in. I lost all the books! Even Nana's letters from Europe and grandfather's too. I did value and love those two books . . . but they are in the thief's wastebasket I guess . . . and life must go on not backward (just this fact makes me feel better, the trouble with therapy is that it makes life go backwards . . .).<sup>36</sup>

The metaphor of 'reach[ing] into the page' in 'Some Foreign Letters' is used elsewhere in Sexton's poetry to interrogate the validity and usefulness of searching the past for the key to present identity. In '45 Mercy Street' (MSt.), Sexton refers to her life 'And its hauled up / Notebooks'; in 'Flee on Your Donkey' (LD), which also explores the

<sup>31</sup> We might also note that, in respect of the failure to resurrect the lived past, Sexton's frustration parallels Woolf's in 'A Sketch of the Past'. See, for example, pp. 77-78.

<sup>32</sup> Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1945), p. 76.

<sup>33</sup> Tillie Olsen, *Silences* (London: Virago, 1980). See Estelle Jelinek's 'Introduction' to *Women's Autobiography: Essays in Criticism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980) for a summary of the received characteristics of, and readerly responses to, women's and men's autobiographies. Leigh Gilmore describes this tradition as 'the feminist nostalgia for an identity discourse'. p. 237.

<sup>34</sup> Interestingly, this is a conclusion which Sexton's own daughter reaches in her memoir: *Searching*.

<sup>35</sup> In a 1963 letter, Sexton explains: 'I am sailing for Paris and what is called "a year abroad" or what my grandmother called "the grand tour".' Letter to Robin Skelton, 15 May 1963, HRHRC.

backwards/forwards, regression as progression, paradox, she describes the process of ‘dredg[ing]’ or trawling her dreams for insight; and in ‘The Hoarder’ (BF), she proposes a relationship between digging a hole and excavating the truth about the past. In her *Paris Review* interview, Sexton comments on the ‘buried self’ and ‘creative depths’ which were part of her identity before the writing of poems (the process of ‘dredging’ and ‘digging’) brought them to the surface.<sup>37</sup>

One of the characteristics of autobiography, if understood as a discursive process, is that the subject’s authority is moderated, if not nullified, by the voices and interpretations of the other (of the reader). In her Crawshaw lecture on ‘Some Foreign Letters’, Sexton highlights the importance of the reader’s hermeneutic role:

There is some persona going on in ‘Some Foreign Letters’ because it is not all true. It is not all the confessional Anne Sexton speaking for her great aunt. Some of it isn’t true and some of it is. I’d like you to guess which. But is it important which? That’s a job to be left to potential biographers, but then aren’t you all biographers in a sense?<sup>38</sup>

In the poem, the death of the Great-Aunt serves to dramatise this situation, paradoxically opening up a space (‘This is the sack of time your death vacates’) in which she may be reconstructed, or re-membered, by others (first by the descendent/writer and thereafter by the reader of the poem). Autobiography represents an opportunity to plenish, in the sense of fill or furnish, this gap (Gilmore, incidentally, defines autobiography as a ‘textual space’).<sup>39</sup> Contrary to Eakin’s assertion of an ‘autobiographical imperative’, and to Heilbrun’s notion of ‘uninhibited autobiographical impulses’, autobiography is neither a release nor a revelation (there is nothing *to* release from an ‘empty sack’, there is no pre-textual subject to unveil), but a process of fabrication and plenishment.

‘Some Foreign Letters’ lays bare these processes of supplementation, interpretation and speculation:

Tonight your letters reduce  
history to a guess. The Count had a wife.  
You were the old maid who lived with us.

Here, as at other key points in the poem, it is impossible to distinguish between autobiography (‘letters’), truth (‘history’), and fiction (‘a guess’). Each, it transpires, offers a subjective

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<sup>36</sup> *Letters*, p. 191 (7 September 1963) [Sexton’s ellipsis].

<sup>37</sup> Interview with Barbara Kevles, p. 309. See also Virginia Woolf’s ‘tunnelling process, by which I tell the past by instalments, as I have need of it’. *A Writer’s Diary*, p. 61.

<sup>38</sup> Crawshaw Lectures (3) p. 3, HRHRC.

<sup>39</sup> Gilmore, 85. In justification of his ‘immaterial embellishment’ of his *Confessions*, Rousseau explains: ‘it has been only to fill a void due to a defect of memory.’ *The Confessions of Jean-Jacques Rousseau*, trans. by J. M. Cohen (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1953), p. 17.

representation of experience and each is subject to processes of condensation, displacement, denial and omission. Of these, guess-work, or interpretation, dominates. This is exemplified in stanza three, which depicts the Aunt's deeply symbolic climb up 'Mount San Salvatore' (Saint Saviour). We are told that this is her 'first climb' and, clearly, a sexual encounter is being intimated. The confident, explanatory reportage of the earlier two stanzas here dissipates and we find a more urgent, snatched, snapshot of the scene. There are few verbs, and instead a rapid description of the young Nana, the object of the Count's gaze:

this is the rocky path, the hole in your shoes,  
the yankee girl, the iron interior  
of her sweet body.

'History' is, indeed, reduced to a 'guess'. Yet neither Aunt nor speaker needs to explain directly; the metaphorical references to 'hole', 'girl', 'interior' and 'sweet body' invite us to 'guess' that sex is the subject. That the Aunt has 'given herself' to the Count is confirmed in the subsequent lines – 'You let the Count choose / your next climb. You went together' – and in the account of their walk:

You were not alarmed  
by the thick woods of briars and bushes,  
nor the rugged cliff, nor the first vertigo  
up over Lake Lucerne.

The poem foregrounds the uncertain truth-status, first of the letters from Nana, and second of their representation in this poem. Is this what Nana reported of her experience? Or is this the speaker's 'guess'? What is the status of the reader's interpretation of the meeting on the mountain? Which of these versions, if any, may be regarded as true to the experience of Nana?

Stanza five further explores, and then complicates, these questions by admitting a new set of memories to supplement those relayed in the Aunt's original letters. The warm, detailed and apparently clear memories of the earlier stanzas are not, it transpires, the strongest. Like Virginia Woolf's 'Sketch of the Past', where the 'first memory' is not in fact the most significant (there is another memory 'which also seems to be my first memory, and in fact it is the most important of all my memories'), Sexton's key memory emerges later. Part way through this stanza, the perspective shifts, and the 'I' who has hitherto been responsible for reporting or mediating Nana's experience inserts more insistent memories of her own:

When you were mine they wrapped you out of here  
with your best hat over your face. I cried  
because I was seventeen. I am older now.



and this includes Sexton's self-representation in this poem – remains just that: some foreign letters.

Two later poems, 'Crossing the Atlantic' and 'Walking in Paris', develop these themes. They are placed consecutively in the volume *Live or Die*, in which Sexton, unusually, dated all of the poems, noting in a preface:

To begin with, I have placed these poems (1962-1966) in the order in which they were written with all due apologies for the fact that they read like a fever chart for a bad case of melancholy. But I thought the order of their creation might be of interest to some readers.<sup>42</sup>

The poems complement each other and create a sense of autobiographical narrative. In the first of the poems, 'Crossing the Atlantic', Sexton reflects on her sea voyage from America to Europe (undertaken as the first recipient of the American Academy of Arts and Letters travelling fellowship).<sup>43</sup> She contemplates the strangeness of her journey, the reversal by which this American is sailing east in search of her past, in contradistinction to her ancestors' voyage west in search of their future. (Sexton claimed, in a letter to her English publisher, that 'My family tree goes back to William Brewster who came over here on the Mayflower'.)<sup>44</sup>

In 'Crossing the Atlantic', like in 'Some Foreign Letters', the distance between past and present is elided by the act of writing about it. The writer from the past sailing into the future, and the writer from the present sailing back in time, are destined to meet on this hostile sea:

We sail out of season into an oyster-gray wind,  
over a terrible hardness.  
Where Dickens crossed with *mal de mer*  
in twenty weeks or twenty days  
I crossed toward him in five.

As an American poet, *en route* to Europe, and charged by her sponsors with the task of writing about her experience, Sexton must have had Dickens's American tour, and

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<sup>42</sup> We should note Sexton's emphasis on the autobiographical *process* (the order of creation) rather than on events. David Kalstone describes Adrienne Rich's recent practice of "dating each of her poems by year" as a means of "limiting their claims, of signalling that they spoke only for the moment." Qtd in Celeste Schenck, 'All of a Piece: Women's Poetry and Autobiography', in *Life/Lines: Theorizing Women's Autobiography*, ed. by Bella Brodzki and Celeste Schenck (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), pp 281-305 (p. 294).

<sup>43</sup> Middlebrook, *Biography*, p. 193.

<sup>44</sup> *Letters*, p. 271 (24 September 1965). See Patricia Caldwell, *The Puritan Conversion Narrative: The Beginnings of American Expression* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983) for an account of the religious significance of the Atlantic crossing.

specifically its enormous success, in mind as a model both to emulate and to contest.<sup>45</sup> Her speaker also contrasts her experience with that of the conquering Caesar. She portrays herself ‘wrapped in robes – / not like Caesar but like liver with bacon’ – an allusion which suggests a disconcerting anxiety about the success of her trip (Diane Middlebrook reports that when Sexton was offered the fellowship, ‘she felt cornered’).<sup>46</sup> The image of self as meat indicates her sense of vulnerability (she is fodder, fit only to sustain others) and, relatedly, of mediocrity.<sup>47</sup> She is, indeed, ‘not like’ a conquering hero, but rather, like an acquiescent victim. In ‘Walking in Paris’ (discussed below), Sexton’s protagonist abandons any attempt to emulate Caesar and is satisfied with mere survival: ‘To be occupied or conquered is nothing – / to remain is all.’

‘Crossing the Atlantic’ is a poem of complex reversals, metaphorically confirming the complexity and acausality of autobiographical representation: the ship sails the ‘wrong’ way (it sails east) at the wrong time of year (‘out of season’). It leaves behind a ‘wake’ (signifying both the ship’s tracks and a funeral commemoration) which is also a ‘ragged bridal veil’ – exemplifying the contiguity of past and present, life and death, celebration and mourning. The journey across the Atlantic (like the images of digging and dredging discussed earlier) symbolises a regression into the depths; into a dark, labyrinthine underworld:

The ship is 27 hours out.  
I have entered her.  
She might be a whale,  
sleeping 2000 and ship’s company,  
the last 40¢ martini  
and steel staterooms where night goes on forever.  
Being inside them is, I think,  
the way one would dig into a planet  
and forget the word *light*.  
I have walked cities,  
miles of mole alleys with carpets.

Thus the text dramatises the autobiographical process, depicting it as an act of looking back and down, of searching the labyrinths of memory for meaning and identity. (In a Crawshaw lecture on the poem, Sexton explains: ‘There was no ocean there, there was no sky. It was a

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<sup>45</sup> Thus, ‘Crossing the Atlantic’ brings to mind John Berryman’s *Dream Songs* ‘281’ (‘After thirty Falls I rush back to the haunts of Yeats / & others’) and ‘282’ which describes the Atlantic crossing made by three fellow American poets and their contemplation of: ‘our meaning to the Old World, theirs to us.’

<sup>46</sup> *Biography*, p. 193. To journalist Herbert Kenny, Sexton admitted: ‘I’m terrified.’

<sup>47</sup> Similar images occur elsewhere in Sexton’s poetry, for example, in ‘The Death Baby’ (DN) where the speaker pictures herself as food laid out in the family fridge.



tunnel, there was a cave'.)<sup>48</sup> In the underworld, the subject loses contact with her sense of self (here, symbolically represented by a loss of voice); she loses sight of the light (traditionally the source of human understanding);<sup>49</sup> and she experiences her identity as split, alien (recalling 'Some Foreign Letters') and incomprehensible: 'Inside I have been ten girls who speak French. / They languish everywhere like bedsheets.' The metaphor of the ship as underworld reminds us of Orpheus's predicament and the dreadful prohibition against looking back to which he is subject. Many of Sexton's poems, and particularly this 'Memoir' group, play on the paradox, expressed by Rilke in his 'Orpheus. Eurydice. Hermes', by which looking back is both unavoidable and fatal:

If he durst  
but once look back (if only looking back  
were not undoing of this whole enterprise  
still to be done), he could not fail to see them.<sup>50</sup>

In the context of Sexton's poetics, this warning parallels the Oedipus/Jocasta exchange reported in the epigraph to *To Bedlam And Part Way Back* ('most of us carry in our hearts the Jocasta who begs Oedipus for God's sake not to inquire further') and similarly functions as an admonition against seeking one's autobiographical origins.

Sexton's speaker, like Oedipus and Orpheus, is figured as the passive inheritor of a life – and a violent death – foretold (or, more specifically, fore-written by the mother and grandmother):

I have read each page of my mother's voyage.  
I have read each page of her mother's voyage.  
I have learned their words as they learned Dickens'.  
I have swallowed their words like bullets.

The figure of Tiresias (whom we saw in 'Hurry Up Please It's Time', and who foretells Oedipus's fate) is also tacitly present here. The importance of prophecy is indicated in a reference in stanza one to the ship's crossing the sea 'as easily as an old woman reads a

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<sup>48</sup> Crawshaw Lectures (10) p. 9, HRHRC. If we are to read these 'Memoir' poems as, in part, a quest for matrilineal roots, then we should note the reference here to the tunnel back to the cave – a figure which recalls Irigaray's reworking of Plato's parable of the cave such that the 'passage' or "'forgotten vagina'" which joins the cave to the outside world is newly emphasised. Qtd in Cathryn Vasseleu, *Textures of Light: Vision and Touch in Irigaray, Levinas and Merleau-Ponty* (London: Routledge, 1998), p. 8.

<sup>49</sup> 'The nature of light and existence are deeply entwined in the history of Western thought. Fundamental to this tradition is an image of light as in invisible medium that opens up a knowable world.' *ibid.* p. 3.

<sup>50</sup> Rainer Maria Rilke, *Selected Poems* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1964). Sexton had a deep admiration for Rilke's poetry. See *Letters*, p. 271 (24 September 1965). She also read and recommended his *Letters to a Young Poet*, calling it her 'Bible'. Anne Sexton, Letter to S.F. Tobias, 4 March 1969, HRHRC. Sexton may first have known of Rilke's poem through Robert Lowell's version in *Imitations* (London: Faber and Faber, 1962).

palm'. Like Oedipus, the speaker is destined (hence the future tense 'will run') to perform acts of violence and destruction:

She will run East, knot by knot, over an old bloodstream,  
stripping it clear,  
each hour ripping it, pounding, pounding,  
forcing through as through a virgin.

This is a violent and rapacious voyage – and its depiction indicates a profound degree of ambivalence about the validity of the literal and metaphorical journey into the personal and geographical (the Old World) past. There are multiple puns on 'knot' (ship's speed, negation, tangles impeding the smooth process of the journey, and tight bonds between generations obstructing the clarity of the subject's vision). The viciousness with which this 'knot' is forcibly untied marks a double-edged acknowledgement of autobiography's capacity to untangle the web of the past and, in so doing, to simplify it. There is also a profound ambiguity here about the larger autobiographical project and particularly, I would argue, about women's autobiographical writing. In this closing stanza, the 'she' (ship) rapes the 'she' (sea) just as the 'she' (speaker) violates the 'she' (maternal past). Sexton explains: 'I am like the ship, ripping through the ocean of my mother's and grandmother's lives, stripping it away, cutting through life [. . .] (The ocean never stops, neither does the street of the bloodline).'<sup>51</sup> She uses similar metaphors to describe her book *Transformations*, describing the poems as a 'rape' of Grimms' stories.<sup>52</sup> The violence of the image indicates her own ambivalence about her despoliation of the originals. This is an ambivalence which readers, too, have felt. As Alicia Ostriker points out, John Holmes uses a similar rhetoric of 'rape' in his condemnation of Sexton's "forcing others to listen to you".<sup>53</sup>

Such metaphors anticipate what Peter Brooks identifies as a characteristic product of the autobiographical quest: 'truth is not of easy access; it often is represented as veiled, latent or covered, so that the discovery of truth becomes a process of unveiling, laying bare, or denuding.'<sup>54</sup> Similarly, as I have mentioned, Lang comments on the tendency in autobiography to combine metaphors of 'reading' (in Sexton's case, 'I have read each page of my mother's voyage') with metaphors of 'unveiling' ('ripping through' and 'stripping it away'):

The traditional ("positivist") autobiographer sets himself the task of reading his past as one would a book, in an attempt to capture his true or essential self (the "meaning" of his existence). One should recall in passing the importance of reading metaphors ("I read in my soul," etc.) in autobiographies, as well as

<sup>51</sup> Crawshaw Lecture (10) p. 9, HRHRC.

<sup>52</sup> *Letters*, p. 367 (17 November 1970).

<sup>53</sup> 'Anne Sexton and the Seduction of the Audience', pp. 4-5.

<sup>54</sup> Brooks, p. 96.

of “unveiling” metaphors (e.g., Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s renowned “j’ai dévoilé mon intérieur tel que tu l’as vu toi-même. Etre éternel”).<sup>55</sup>

In ‘Crossing the Atlantic’ (as indeed in the poems discussed in the previous chapter), this ‘unveiling’ is both a revelation and an act of exposure, a clarification and an exploitation.

‘Walking in Paris’ takes these ideas a stage further, rendering yet more personal and immediate the attempt to revisit the past initiated in the earlier ‘Memoir’ poems. Here, the speaker is not simply reading about, but physically retracing, the ancestor’s footsteps. She undertakes a figurative and literal journey which, like autobiography, is fraught with difficulties and disappointments. The poem, like ‘Some Foreign Letters’, questions the epistemological status of its own enquiry: ‘What is so real as walking your streets!’ It overstates the speaker’s rights of possession over the Great-Aunt (or, alternatively, the autobiographer’s desire for interpretative control over the past). The poem’s opening line announces: ‘I have come back to your youth, my Nana’ – a reference both to the speaker’s actual return to the place of Nana’s “grand tour” and to this poem’s metaphorical return to the concerns of the earlier poems. In addition, the metaphor ‘come back’ indicates a reversal in the conventional genealogy by which the speaker would descend *from* the Great-Aunt. In this poem, she descends, or ‘comes back’, *to* her. The act of looking back or down simultaneously marks a regression and a progression. The poem is deeply self-reflexive – and anxious – about the process of revisiting (here, literally and metaphorically) scenes from the past.

Again, we find an intense dialogue between the ‘I’ and the ‘you’, although in ‘Walking in Paris’, even more than in the earlier poems, we are conscious that the ‘you’ is always mediated or reported by the ‘I’. The ‘I’ controls (hence the possessive ‘my’) and selectively represents the other:

I come back to your youth, my Nana,  
as if I might clean off  
the mad woman you became,  
withered and constipated,  
howling into your own earphone.

Yet the ‘you’ in the poem may be read, also, as a self-referential ‘you’. In talking to and about ‘Nana’, the speaker is also talking to and about herself. The person ‘howling into your own earphone’ is both the confused Great-Aunt and the speaker; a self-reflexive allusion which ironically anticipates the text’s potential failure to communicate, or to reach an audience.

Although it is possible to read ‘Walking in Paris’ as a successful recuperation of Nana and of an idyllic past, I would argue that the poem may, more accurately, be understood

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<sup>55</sup> Lang, p. 11.

as a record of frustration and failure. The desired communication and identification between speaker and Nana is thwarted, not least by the inevitable passing of time: 'I come, in middle age, / to find you at twenty.' Thus, coming 'back to your youth, my Nana' proves to be only a partial solution to the more general quest for one's own (for 'my') identity. The subject's youth, too, has passed by ('I come, in middle age'), confirming that the forces of chronology and causality are insurmountable – that the 'I' of autobiography changes over time and is neither static nor determinate. Similarly, the reliability and referentiality of the Aunt's letters – and, by extension, of any writing – is cast into doubt. Stanza two opens:

I read your Paris letters of 1890.  
Each night I take them to my thin bed  
and learn them as an actress learns her lines.

The apparently sincere and intimate 'letters home' are presented as a dramatisation or a masque – a theatrical rendering (in the sense of a surface representation) of the truth to be performed or re-enacted by their recipient (the speaker of the poem).<sup>56</sup> The biographical truth value of the whole project (letters and poem, script and performance) is thus undermined. The speaker in the present is not delivering 'the past', but a script: a representation of a representation.

In stanza two, the speaker – in a tone which combines self-accusation with self-satisfaction – comments on the disturbed chronology which sees the Aunt's letters being read and represented from their original stage by a different actress of a new generation:

"Dear homefolks" you wrote,  
not knowing I would be your last home,  
not knowing that I'd peel your life back to its start.<sup>57</sup>

This act of 'peel[ing]' or, as later, 'clean[ing] off' metaphorically represents the autobiographical act of unveiling or revealing, the process by which some previously-buried truth is uncovered. Yet in Sexton's hands, the metaphors function also to signify cleansing, purgation, and erasure, such that the act of revisiting the past is, unavoidably, a means of obliterating or falsifying it. In clearing a route to the past ('stripping' the 'old bloodstream' in 'Crossing the Atlantic' and 'clean[ing] off [. . .] the mad woman' in 'Walking in Paris'), one ruthlessly clears – in the sense of erases – those elements of the past (those 'knots' or

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<sup>56</sup> There are parallels here with Sylvia Plath's performance in her *Letters Home: Correspondence 1950-1963*, ed. by Aurelia Schober Plath (London: Faber, 1978; repr. 1986).

<sup>57</sup> In her own letters home from Europe, Sexton appropriated Nana's affectionate and cheery greeting: a demonstration that she has, indeed, 'learn[ed] her lines.' Such a performance chillingly masks Sexton's misery and loneliness on the actual journey, which culminated in breakdown and a swift return home, recorded in a terse telegram which seems worlds apart from this spectacle: 'ARRIVING BOSTON SUNDAY OCT 27.' HRHRC.

bloodclots in the first of these poems) which might complicate one's vision of the past and sense of the present.<sup>58</sup>

The deep anxiety about the ethics and the referential accuracy of such an approach surfaces throughout 'Walking in Paris'. In seeking to establish parallels between Nana's experience and the speaker's own, the poem has been forced – for the sake of rhetorical and autobiographical symmetry and of narrative coherence – to erase whole epochs of history: 'In Paris 1890 was yesterday / and 1940 never happened – .' Such a moment, perhaps, replicates the 'sack of time' which the Great-Aunt's 'death vacates' in 'Some Foreign Letters'. Both texts feature this central aporia – a space ripe for intervention or interpretation (again, something like Rousseau's 'void' which invites 'embellishment').

By juxtaposing her own private acts of erasure (the attempt to sanitise the Great-Aunt, to evoke a past stripped of any complexity) with the large-scale obliteration of Paris's war-time past, the speaker concedes her own complicity and guilt:

In Paris 1890 was yesterday  
and 1940 never happened –  
the soiled uniform of the Nazi  
has been unravelled and reknit and resold.

This reference to the erasure of Paris's past serves as an implicit reminder of the dangers of such forgetting. Traditionally, we honour the dead by remembering them. Sexton's speaker, by eliding or manipulating historical experience, is a collaborator in its betrayal. These images may be read as a self-reflexive – and indeed self-critical – commentary on the autobiographical poem's own processes. The 'soiled uniform of the Nazi' (like the dirty, mad old woman) has been 'unravelled' (cleaned off, peeled back) and rewoven, so as to be suitable for public consumption (here, in the form of the subject matter of these poems). Paris, like the speaker's Nana, has been remodelled for public (poetic) display and for financial gain (hence 'resold'). 'Walking in Paris' exposes its own bad faith, its dissatisfaction with the masquerade of autobiography, and indicates Sexton's own guilt and ambivalence about the genre. Yet the concerns of this stanza are ostensibly belied by its closing declaration: 'To be occupied or conquered is nothing – / to remain is all!' This is a defiant credo which again foregrounds – although not without some anxiety – the subject's power to appropriate and attenuate a particular version of the truth. The speaker is the 'occupier' (unbeknown to the Aunt, she is her 'last home') and the conqueror (she claims possession of 'my Nana'). She also, as the poem demonstrates, 'remains': she has the last word.

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<sup>58</sup> In her interview with Barbara Kevles, Sexton adopts the 'stripping' and 'unveiling' rhetoric of these 'Memoir' poems, drawing attention to her poetic abandonment of 'early themes' ('the subject of therapy'), and her development of new interests: 'Inherent in the process is a rebirth of a sense of self, each time stripping away a dead self' (p. 313). See also John Berryman's *Dream Song* '287': 'he shed his skin / appearing henceforward in a new guise.'

In the subsequent stanza (stanza three), the speaker concedes the extent of her transgression, but nevertheless continues to strip back the layers, to push back the boundaries of recall and representation:

Having come this far  
I will go farther.  
You are my history (that stealer of children)  
and I have entered you.  
I have deserted my husband and my children,  
the Negro issue, the late news and the hot baths.

The metaphor of 'entering' the remembered Nana (or the past) recalls both the rapacious violation of memory (and of Nana) in 'Crossing the Atlantic,' and the descent into the past, or the underworld, apparent in both earlier poems. The speaker exposes the extent to which she has 'unravelling' her own past: cleaned off ('deserted') her husband and children, the American present ('the Negro issue, the late news'), and domestic responsibilities ('the hot baths'), in order to rejoin Nana. That she is able to disregard current political issues is a further reminder of the speaker's dangerous complicity in the erasure or misrepresentation of the past.

The final stanza, like the penultimate stanza of 'Some Foreign Letters', synthesises the rigorously demarcated 'I' and 'you' of earlier stanzas to form the pronoun 'we'. 'To remain' is indeed 'all', as the complexities of the past are eclipsed by the two women's new-found communion:

Come, old woman,  
we will be sisters!  
.....  
Come, my sister,  
we are two virgins,  
our lives once more perfected  
and unused.

This *carpe diem* gesture is both product and evidence of the unravelling, peeling back and reknitting of experience which sustains the text. It appropriates the same image as Sylvia Plath's poem 'Edge':

The woman is perfected.  
Her dead  
  
Body wears the smile of accomplishment.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> First publ. in the London 'Observer' of 17 February 1963 and in the American edition of *Ariel* in 1966.

Sexton, too, suggests that perfection may only be achieved through the final annihilation of experience and memory which is death.

Diane Middlebrook comments of 'Walking in Paris' that 'the imagery of being a virgin suggests that one of Sexton's coping strategies [during her European tour] was the fantasy of starting life over'.<sup>60</sup> Although I concur with Middlebrook's reading, I would add that the key motivation for Sexton – as evidenced in this and the other 'Memoir' poems – is the chance not to live a new life, but to rewrite it, to generate a new textual identity (here, by appropriating the Aunt's letters, or by 'putting your words into my life'). As Jacqueline Rose comments, there is an 'ambiguity inherent to autobiography, which constitutes, as much as it transforms, the reality to which it is presumed to refer'.<sup>61</sup> All three 'Memoir' poems demonstrate that the acts of reading (interpreting) and writing (representing) allow the subject to modify or erase earlier 'selves' and to construct new ones (self as sister, virgin and intrepid traveller, free of 'all that is American and forgotten').<sup>62</sup> In the words of Leigh Gilmore: 'the autobiographical subject is produced not by experience, but by autobiography.'<sup>63</sup> Thus, autobiography offers a means of self-creation, not a simple, referential reflection of some pre-existent subject. Gilmore's comment implies that autobiography produces presence out of absence, unity out of fragmentation, coherence out of chaos. It confirms the point which Sexton makes in a letter of 1963: 'My poems only come when I have almost lost the ability to utter a word. To speak, in a way, of the unspeakable. To make an object out of the chaos.'<sup>64</sup> As she elaborates in her interview with the *Hudson Review*:

There is a big change after you write a poem. It's a marvellous feeling, and there's a big change in the psyche, but I think you really go into great chaos just before you write a poem, and during it, and then to have come out of that whole, somehow is a small miracle, which lasts for a couple of days. Then on to the next.<sup>65</sup>

Such apparent coherence is beguiling. Thomas McDonnell, amongst others, is betrayed into identifying in her poetry a 'continuing wholeness', whereas, as Sexton's comment indicates, any such unity is sporadic and temporary.<sup>66</sup>

The aural pun on 'whole'/hole (to 'come out of that hole') is particularly worthy of note given that we have seen Sexton, in the 'Memoir' poems, constructing an identity by

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<sup>60</sup> Middlebrook, *Biography*, p. 205.

<sup>61</sup> *Haunting*, p. 108.

<sup>62</sup> Certainly, this acknowledgement that the self is experienced as multiple, discordant, fluid is not unique to Sexton. Earlier, women writers (Stein, Mansfield, Woolf) make much the same point.

<sup>63</sup> Gilmore, p. 25.

<sup>64</sup> *Letters*, p. 171 (2 August 1963).

<sup>65</sup> Interview with Patricia Marx, p. 82.

<sup>66</sup> 'Light in a Dark Journey', p. 40.

plumbing the depths or by descending into the underworld. In 'The Hoarder', she depicts the poetic process in terms of a sustained metaphor for digging a hole in the ground:

There is something there  
I've got to get and I dig  
down.

Thus, one emerges 'whole' as a consequence of excavating a 'hole' (surely a metaphor for the promise of psychotherapy). This brings to mind the writing process which Virginia Woolf depicts in 'A Sketch of the Past.' Describing the effect of sudden shocks in her life, Woolf notes:

A shock is at once in my case followed by the desire to explain it [. . .] it is a token of some real thing behind appearances; and I make it real by putting it into words. It is only by putting it into words that I make it whole; this wholeness means that it has lost its power to hurt me; it gives me, perhaps because by doing so I take away the pain, a great delight to put the severed parts together.<sup>67</sup>

It is important to note (as we saw in the plenishment of the 'sack of time' in 'Some Foreign Letters') that this is an active process of construction or reconstruction: 'to make an object', 'to put the severed parts together.' Sexton uses similar rhetoric to describe her own work:

When writing you make a new reality and become whole. It is as if I were operating on myself and suturing on the arms and legs, placing the heart, settling the intestines. Much of my poetry is the poetry of a cripple, and yet the act of creation cures for a time.<sup>68</sup>

This marks a reversal of the tropes used elsewhere in her work (as is to be discussed shortly, and in Chapter Six) whereby autotomy (the casting off of parts of the body) and corporeal synecdoche are used to signify subjectivity and the writing process.

Indeed, the evidence of many of the poems belies these claims to the achievement of wholeness, subjective unity and coherence through the act of writing. 'Just Once', for example, offers the tantalising promise of self-presence in momentarily displaying a vivid, unified, coherent self.<sup>69</sup> The poem opens with a moment of insight: 'Just once I knew what life was for. / In Boston quite suddenly, I understood.' The speaker pictures herself at the heart of the city ('[I] walked there along the Charles River'), illuminated by 'lights copying themselves, / all neoned and strobe-hearted'. Her epiphany – her realisation of 'what life was

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<sup>67</sup> 'A Sketch of the Past', pp. 83-4.

<sup>68</sup> Crawshaw Lectures (9) p. 4, HRHRC. Sexton's comment touches on the possible performativity of language: an issue which will be explored in Chapter Six.

<sup>69</sup> Joyce Carol Oates detects the influence of Yeats's 'Vacillation'. 'Anne Sexton: Self-Portrait in Poetry and Letters', in Wagner-Martin, ed., pp. 52-65 (p. 54) (first publ. in *The Profane Art: Essays and Reviews* (New York: Dutton, 1983)).



for' – is played out against the holistic background of the elements (earth, air, fire and water: that is, her night-time walk along the banks of the river, lit by stars). The speaker implicitly figures herself as the centre of this particular universe. The 'neoned and strobe-hearted' lights shine for her, announcing her presence by 'opening / their mouths as wide as opera singers' (the theatrical metaphors imply that her apparently solitary, soul-searching walk is, at bottom, a performance).<sup>70</sup> Even the stars belong to her, marking her suffering for the world to see: 'the stars, my little campaigners, / my scar daisies.' The speaker's presence centres all points of the compass:

I walked my love  
on the night green side of it and cried  
my heart to the eastbound cars and cried  
my heart to the westbound cars.

'Just Once' is, in many respects, an extremely egotistical poem. It asks not how 'I' fit into the world, but how the world shapes itself around me. Yet such autobiographical confidence is temporary. The transience of the moment (indicated already in the title and opening line, and subliminally confirmed in the impermanence of the images throughout: flickering strobe lights, flowing river, fleeting cars, twinkling stars) is reiterated in the poem's final lines:

and hurried my truth, the charm of it, home  
and hoarded these constants into morning  
only to find them gone.

The diminution in this last line, with its few and monosyllabic words and final sonorous 'gone', provides a stark and telling contrast to the excited, rapid, syntactically varied preceding lines.<sup>71</sup> The sense of identity here – of self as a whole, taking one's place in a larger whole – is fleeting and ephemeral. Wholeness is a snatched moment, a self-realisation which occurs 'just once' and gratuitously. There are no 'constants' (hence the dream or fairy-tale metaphor in the penultimate line: such night-time gifts never last). And it follows that any sense of self is, to borrow Virginia Woolf's words, simply a 'moment of being'. As Sexton concedes in the quotation cited earlier, any impression of wholeness which writing gives is precisely that: an impression, a simulation, an effect which quickly fades 'and then on to the next'.

Sexton's work raises important questions about the possibilities – or, more accurately, limitations – of autobiography for the subject who experiences herself in this way: as

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<sup>70</sup> The image also suggests the 'dead-woman in neon' of 'Talking to Sheep', discussed in Chapter Three.

impermanent or fragmented.<sup>72</sup> Although autobiography demands that one scrutinises one's self, the self (which is the subject and object of the search) is always split, and never fully present to itself. One of Sexton's responses to this problem is the abandonment of any attempt to write the self 'whole' and the use, instead, of synecdochic representation of the lives of a disparate collection of parts of the body. The strategy recalls Sexton and Woolf's comments, quoted above, about the pleasure to be derived from 'suturing' the 'severed parts' together to make a whole. In 'Killing the Spring' (BF), for example, Sexton depicts the piece-by-piece closing down of the body and its senses. This autobiographical act (this attempt at writing the self) is characterised by self-effacement (the head, eyes, and ears are buried or drowned), by self-negation (the word 'not' appears repeatedly), and by self-obliteration (looking back to Eliot, by 'a continual extinction of personality'):<sup>73</sup>

Once upon a time a young person  
died for no reason.  
I was the same.

Most often in Sexton's work (as we will see in the final chapter), it is the hands or fingers or arm (all metonyms of writing) which are the objects of attention. As Diana Hume George notes: 'hands remained synecdoches for self throughout Sexton's canon.' She proceeds to read a number of her poems in terms of the ways in which hands and other parts of the body 'represent [. . .] and then become the whole'.<sup>74</sup> However, I would suggest that Sexton's synecdochic objectification of parts of the body is less amenable to coalescence and closure than George suggests. In her work, the parts do not always form a 'whole'. Moreover, what George does not notice is the significance of the hand, not simply as a synecdoche for 'self', but as a synecdoche of the writing, or autobiographical, self. In a number of Sexton's poems (for example, 'Cripples and Other Stories' with its mutilated arm, discussed in Chapter One), the writing self is specifically figured as impaired and partial – as incapable of constituting a 'whole'.

In 'The Touch' (LP), the metaphor of an amputated hand indicates that the writing (or specifically, autobiographical) self is dissociated from the life which it is thought to represent: 'For months my hand had been sealed off / in a tin box. Nothing was there but subway railings.' From the point of view of autobiography, it is significant that the hand is 'sealed

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<sup>71</sup> This resonant 'gone' is used to similar effect in 'The Truth the Dead Know' which commemorates the deaths of Sexton's parents, and opens with the melancholy line 'Gone, I say and walk from church'.

<sup>72</sup> Celeste Schenck dryly notes the argument that 'women, never having achieved the self-possession of post-Cartesian subjects, do not have the luxury of "flirting with the escape from identity," which the deconstructed subject may enjoy'. 'All of a Piece', p. 288.

<sup>73</sup> 'Tradition', p. 44.

<sup>74</sup> *Oedipus Anne*, pp. 64, 66. See also Robert Lowell's 'The Severed Head', in *For the Union Dead* (London: Faber and Faber, 1985). Camille Paglia notes an 'obsession with loss of limbs' in Emily Dickinson's work, p. 654.

off' such that it is unable to gain access to the underground (hence 'subway railings'), to the unconscious, or the depths of memory. This reading is confirmed later in the poem's opening stanza:

You could tell time by this, I thought,  
like a clock, by its five knuckles  
and the thin underground veins.  
It lay there like an unconscious woman  
fed by tubes she knew not of.

The dormant hand is 'like an unconscious woman' because it lies unresponsive, gathering energy (earlier in the stanza, we are told that it 'lay there quietly'), awaiting its moment of action and revelation. The metaphor of the clock confirms the role of autobiographical writing in recording, and reflecting on, the passing of time. It also implies a distinction between actual time and the subject's experience of it (a problem which Virginia Woolf encapsulated in her differentiation between 'time on the clock and time in the mind').<sup>75</sup>

One important feature of this and Sexton's other synecdoche poems about dissociated, objectified or amputated hands and arms is that it is only one hand which is so treated.<sup>76</sup> In 'The Touch', it is clear that an active hand remains and is able to display ('turn over', write about) the 'sealed off' one:

I turned it over and the palm was old,  
its lines traced like fine needlepoint  
and stitched up into the fingers.

The synecdoche works as a rhetorical device: the 'I' in the guise of being separate and distinct from the hand which writes is manifestly *not* separate – as the existence of the text itself (a product of the union of subject and writing) demonstrates. This is paradigmatic of the way in which the autobiographical subject may be both present in, and detached from, the life which is its subject.

The third stanza of 'The Touch' opens resignedly: 'and all this is metaphor.' The poem is noteworthy for its conscious interrogation of the importance (and limitations) of metaphor as a means of comparing like with like, or perhaps with unlike, as a way of translating experience into text (a process which will be explored in more detail in the final chapter), and as a way of bringing into figurative proximity two disconnected objects – life

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<sup>75</sup> *Orlando: A Biography* (London: Vintage, 1992), p. 59.

<sup>76</sup> Amputation may signify punishment – a just retribution for the autobiographer who seeks to see and know too much (like Actaeon whose curiosity is punished by dismemberment by his own hounds (see Peter Brooks, *Body Work*, p. 115)).

and writing, hand and subject.<sup>77</sup> The figure of metaphor works in two seemingly contradictory ways: it permits the speaker to compare her experience with something completely separate and different, and it permits her to emphasise latent contiguities. Here, Sexton depicts metaphor as a mere rhetorical or textual figure, as an artificial way of constructing likeness where none exists:

And all this is metaphor.  
An ordinary hand – just lonely  
for something to touch  
that touches back.<sup>78</sup>

Yet, as is indicated by the subsequent and immediate appropriation of another metaphor in line seven of this stanza ('I'm no better than a case of dog food'), metaphor remains an insistent and inescapable figure.

Sexton here articulates one of the obstacles to autobiography. She demonstrates the impossibility of ever presenting a 'true' picture of oneself: all that can truly be achieved is a 'likeness' – a representation in terms of similarity, or contiguity – which is never, finally, self-identical. There is no clear depiction, but only metaphors, metonyms and tropes ('And all this is metaphor') which embody varying (and indeterminate) proximities to the subject of representation and to each other. It is impossible to write the self without displacing or deferring the representation down a metaphorical line ('I' am an amputated hand, 'I' am a case of dog food, etc.). Metaphor, rather like the statement by Sexton with which I opened this chapter, introduces indeterminacy in the guise of certainty, possibility in the guise of explanation. As Sexton suggests in an unpublished introductory talk to students at Boston College: 'I am the one who creates, not the one who thinks . . . and if by mistake I should think - - it is in symbols and metaphors . . . and I must remind you that I am not responsible for what they mean . . .'<sup>79</sup>

Subject and reader alike can only ever circle, or circumvent, the truth – itself a metaphor used by Sexton to discuss the writing process. She describes her poems, 'With Mercy for the Greedy' and 'For God While Sleeping' (PO), as 'circl[ing] obsessively' around the same theme.<sup>80</sup> In a letter to the editor of the *Hudson Review* about an interview which she had recently given for the journal, Sexton complains:

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<sup>77</sup> In her Crawshaw lectures, Sexton explains: 'In metaphor two things that are not quite alike are likened. Therefore they take on a new color and a new brightness. They take on a new character.' (7) p. 4, HRHRC.

<sup>78</sup> This reciprocity of touch confirms that the confession is a two-way process. It is not just that the speaker 'touches' or affects her audience, but, as Sexton explains in her interview with Barbara Kevles: 'I want them to feel as if they were touching me' p. 329.

<sup>79</sup> Anne Sexton, untitled draft talk for Boston College, 4 November 1962, HRHRC [Sexton's ellipses].

<sup>80</sup> Anne Sexton, Letter to Sister Mary Immaculate, 21 February 1964, HRHRC.

I feel the interview with Patricia Marx is simply awful. I really do. And who am I to be saying anything. What I say in it spirals around the truth and the lie as a snail shell held close for inspection. I tried to fix it a little without basically changing the me she interviewed.<sup>81</sup>

These circumventory images suggest a wariness born of experience. They confirm that the route to memory, and to identity, may not be straightforward and obvious but may instead (as we saw in Chapter One, in connection with 'Kind Sir') be indirect and meandering. Peter Brooks relates such circumvention to the kinds of metonymy and synecdoche which I have identified in Sexton's work. He characterises the gaze (which can never see the object whole, but only ever as a collection of parts) as a 'frustrated attempt to fix the body in the field of vision [which] sets off the restless movement of narrative, telling the story of approach to, and swerve away from, that final object of sight that cannot be contemplated'.<sup>82</sup> Thus it may be argued that autobiography can only ever skate around the edges of the truth. It offers snatches of insight and brief moments of contiguity or wholeness, yet perpetually denies closure. Autobiographical truth, like all others, is endlessly deferred, displaced, indeterminate.

The profound ambivalence about the efficacy of the figures by which one may write the self persists even to the – superficially positive and redeeming – end of 'The Touch'. Here, the damaged, dissociated and dying hand is brought back to life and into productive creativity by the loving touch of another:

Your hand found mine.  
Life rushed to my fingers like a blood clot.  
Oh, my carpenter,  
the fingers are rebuilt.  
They dance with yours.<sup>83</sup>

These lines appear, at first, to suggest that if the sealed-off hand can be restored it may – through the act of writing/re-membering – bring the dismembered self back to wholeness. It may reconstitute itself as a successful writing self ('My hand is alive all over America'). In a comment which she made about the poem in a 1974 interview, Sexton seems to confirm that the act of writing generates a sense of wholeness, plenitude, satisfaction: "'The Touch' shows something about my feeling that there's God everywhere, although I didn't know it when I

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<sup>81</sup> Anne Sexton, Letter to Fred Morgan, 12 August 1965, HRHRC. This foregrounding of the distinction between 'I' and 'me,' incidentally, indicates their co-existence, and the availability of a number of different 'selves.'

<sup>82</sup> Brooks, pp. 102-3.

<sup>83</sup> Middlebrook identifies the ostensible addressee/s of this poem as Bob Clawson, a teacher (and briefly one of Sexton's lovers), and Dr. Zweizung, her psychotherapist (and also the addressee of the 'Letters to Dr. Y.' discussed in Chapter Six). *Biography*, pp. 257-8. However, it is also arguable that the 'you' addresses a wider audience, whose responsive interest in the poet's work stimulates and sustains its creation.

was writing it [Sexton quotes the final stanza] I just wrote that. I didn't look into it.'<sup>84</sup>

However, we find that the act of regeneration in the poem is implicitly and unavoidably life-threatening. The oxymoronic 'Life rushed to my fingers like a blood clot' metaphorically, and pertinently, links life with death. The metaphor of the 'carpenter' (perhaps signifying Christ?) also appears in Sexton's 'Wanting to Die', where its referent is the suicidal subject. This reading contradicts Diana Hume George's view that the flow of blood back into the hand is a positive and life-giving gesture. The simile reveals some anxiety about the possible risks of permitting life (blood) to flow back into the writing hand—a fear, perhaps, of what writing might reveal.

'Love Letter Written in a Burning Building' similarly promises, and then denies, a satisfying resolution. Here, as in 'Just Once' and the earlier 'Memoir' poems, we are provided with a wealth of apparently autobiographical detail – sufficient to persuade the reader that they are party to lived experience. The 'Love Letter' opens 'Dearest Foxy', and we are permitted insight into the speaker and addressee's shared past:

I am in a crate,  
the crate that was ours,  
full of white shirts and salad greens,  
the icebox knocking at our delectable knocks,

Here, however, the speaker is in the process of self-destruction. As the title indicates, she is trapped in a burning building – a particularly apposite metaphor, given the prominence in Sexton's ostensibly autobiographical poems of metaphors of self (particularly female self) as house or room (see, for example, 'Housewife' and 'There you Were' (MSt.)) and of writing as fire (in 'The Fire Thief' (AR) or 'Talking to Sheep'). In 'Love Letter Written in a Burning Building', the speaker is unable to complete the story of the self (to tell the 'whole story'), and therefore to reify or save the self, forcing a terrifying circularity:

As for me, my dearest Foxy,  
my poems to you may or may not reach the icebox  
and its hopeful eternity  
.....  
If my toes weren't yielding to pitch  
I'd tell the whole story –  
not just the sheet story  
but the belly-button story,  
the pried-eyelid story,  
the whiskey-sour-of-the-nipple story –

Yet, in an attenuation of this circularity, it is always possible that the 'whole story' is, after all, what is being told. Paradoxically, the 'whole' story is a dreadful narrative of

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<sup>84</sup> Interview with Gregory Fitz Gerald, p. 195.

fragmentation, destruction and disintegration. We find a similar trope in 'The Fierceness of Female' (MSt.) which achieves closure through disintegration, juxtaposing metaphors of spinning (signifying circumvention and weaving, avoidance and fabrication) with metaphors of unknitting/unravelling to show the self constructed and the self deconstructed as two sides of the same coin of identity.

In 'Love Letter Written in a Burning Building', the 'whole' story is that the subject is not whole, but is at this very moment engaged in, and reporting on, an act of self-immolation by fire:

Despite my asbestos gloves,  
the cough is filling me with black,  
and a red powder seeps through my veins,  
our little crate goes down so publicly.

However, in spite of the speaker's claim *not* to be telling the 'whole' story, we find an inalienable sense of resolution. 'Love Letter' was one of the last poems which Sexton wrote (dated just one week before her death) and in its final lines, it looks back to, and confirms, 'Her Kind's' premonition of her death by burning:

we seem to be going down  
right in the middle of a Russian street,  
the flames making the sound of the horse being beaten and beaten,  
the whip is adoring its human triumph  
while the flies wait, blow by blow,  
straight from United Fruit, Inc.

As this anticipation and then confirmation of a death not yet experienced (autothanography, instead of autobiography) would indicate, one of the major conceits which Sexton develops in order to subvert the conventions and promise of autobiography is the reversal of the genre's conventional chronology and narrative causality. 'End, Middle, Beginning', and the 'Horoscope Poems' in the 'Scorpio, Bad Spider, Die' sequence, for instance, may be regarded as parodic in the way in which they present the autobiography of the future, or reverse a sequence of events, so as to make a nonsense of conventional notions of cause and effect.<sup>85</sup> The 'Horoscope Poems' do not scrutinise past life events for significant information about present character (a characteristic of autobiography, according to Philippe Lejeune: "A retrospective account in prose that a real person makes of his own existence stressing his

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<sup>85</sup> As Linda Hutcheon argues, 'the familiar narrative form of beginning, middle, and end implies a structuring process that imparts meaning as well as order.' *Politics*, p. 62.

individual life and especially the history of his personality”’); instead, they look to the future for such signs.<sup>86</sup>

‘End, Middle, Beginning’ parodies the archetypal life-story. Although written in the third-person, its blatant appropriation (or perhaps misappropriation) of the idioms, structure and concerns of the ‘life story’ induce me to read it as a poem about autobiography, and indeed, the absence of the first-person pronoun notwithstanding, as fundamentally autobiographical. Sexton’s subject is objectified, dramatised, coldly scrutinised from the outside (the use of the third-person pronoun helps to sustain this judgmental distance). Moreover, the effect of this distance is to expose the vulnerability of the subject, who is laid bare for public scrutiny (itself a metaphor for the auto- and bio-graphical acts). Like T.S. Eliot’s ‘East Coker’, Sexton’s poem begins with the end. However, unlike Eliot (whose use of this achronology may be regarded as a framing device), Sexton completely and persistently reverses the time sequence – to considerable rhetorical effect. Eliot states his premise: ‘In my beginning is my end’, and Sexton exemplifies it: ‘There was an unwanted child. / Aborted by three modern methods.’ The paradox that my beginning is my end is my beginning is found in a number of Sexton’s other poems (for example, in ‘O Ye Tongues’ which begins, ‘Let there be a God as large as a sunlamp to laugh his heat / at you’ and ends ‘For God was as large as a sunlamp and laughed his heat at us / and therefore we did not cringe at the death hole’). These rhetorical figures are reminiscent of the palindromes which feature repeatedly in Sexton’s writing (see the references to the ‘rat’s star’ in ‘With Mercy for the Greedy’ and ‘An Obsessive Combination’, discussed in Chapter One and the Conclusion, respectively). They also anticipate the self-reflexive circularity of ‘For John, Who Begs Me Not to Enquire Further’. The effect of these figures is to suggest that ends, middles and beginnings are equal and indeterminate, and may be read in any order. In ‘End, Middle, Beginning’, Sexton makes a mockery of the simple cause and effect trajectory of much narrative. She subverts the implicit expectation of, and quest for, origins which lies at the heart of the autobiographical project (the search for who I am, and how I became this way), and rejects the teleology which would see all experience as leading, systematically, to the construction of the subject which we see before us.

Like some of the fairy-tale poems in *Transformations*, ‘End, Middle, Beginning’ appropriates and then distends the conventional structures, idioms, and themes of the fairy-tale. From the archetypal ‘Once upon a time there was a beautiful baby’, we are faced, suddenly, with a grotesque image of rejection, violation and hate (the ‘unwanted child’, aborted not once but the magical ‘three times’):

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<sup>86</sup> Philippe Lejeune, *Le Pacte Autobiographique*, p. 14, qtd in James Olney, ‘Autobiography and the Cultural Moment’, pp. 3-27 (p. 18).



There was an unwanted child.  
 Aborted by three modern methods  
 she hung on to the womb,  
 hooked onto it  
 building her house into it  
 and it was to no avail,  
 to black her out.

The fairy-tale idiom persists and is subverted throughout the poem. Indeed, the text achieves its shocking effects by exploiting our expectations of the genre. We are reminded of Snow White (although Sexton's subject 'did not yell – / instead snow fell out of her mouth'), of Rose Red or of the Sleeping Beauty: 'Her hair turned like a rose in a vase, / And bled down her face.'

There is a succession of complex paradoxes at play here. First, the 'unwanted child' is, in fact, the 'wanting' child, the child who desires so much to live that she escapes 'three modern methods' of abortion. Second, the child seeks to live in order to achieve death. There is a strong 'instinct towards death or destruction' (to quote Freud) in this poem, which manifests itself in the unwanted child's silent acceptance of pain and punishment:

At her birth  
 she did not cry,  
 spanked indeed,  
 but did not yell –  
 instead snow fell out of her mouth.

The silence reproduces the condition of Freud's death instinct ('which works in silence') and is found again in stanza three where the growing child is buried under rocks: 'to keep / the growing silent.'<sup>87</sup> The reference to snow signifies the death instinct's tendency to reduce living matter to a cold, lifeless, 'inorganic state.'<sup>88</sup> Throughout, the unwanted child, having clawed ('hooked') its way into the world, seeks stillness and nothingness. The subject is passive, immobile, death-like:

They locked her in a football  
 but she merely curled up  
 and pretended it was a warm doll's house.  
 They pushed insects in to bite her off  
 and she let them crawl into her eyes.

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<sup>87</sup> Sigmund Freud, 'An Autobiographical Study', trans. by James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press/Institute of Psychoanalysis, 1948), p. 105.

<sup>88</sup> Sigmund Freud, 'Civilisation and its Discontents' (1930) in *Civilisation, Society and Religion: Group Psychology, Civilisation and its Discontents and Other Works* [PFL 12], ed. by Albert Dickson, trans. by James Strachey (Harmondsworth: Pelican, 1985), pp. 243-340 (p. 310). Similar images of snow and ice figure in Sexton's 'The Break' which in turn replicates Edith Wharton's *Ethan Frome*; both texts explore the death instinct.

Later, even when unceremoniously married off by an un-named, but dominant ‘they’ (‘they gave her a ring and she wore it like a root’),<sup>89</sup> the death instinct persists: ‘[she] lay like a statue in her bed.’ That the woman wore a wedding ring ‘like a root’ (putting down roots, as she put out hooks in the womb) indicates that she regards this rite of passage, like the earlier ones (birth and puberty), as mere staging-posts on the route to death.

Yet simultaneously, as in the poems discussed above (which foreground the gap that metaphor attempts to bridge), the connection between marriage and roots (‘she wore it like a root’) is broken even as it is ostensibly established. It is necessary to describe the ring as being ‘like a root’ precisely because it is not a root, not organic or life-giving. Hence the difference, explored in the poem’s fifth stanza, between surface appearance (ring as metonym of marriage, marriage as metaphor for happiness) and private experience:

she wore it like a root  
and said to herself,  
“To be not loved is the human condition,”  
and lay like a statue in her bed.

As the poem moves into its final (or, to mimic the reversed trajectory indicated by the title, its ‘beginning’) stages, we learn that the speaker did ‘once’ (reminding us of ‘Just Once’) escape this stultifying drive towards death:

Then once,  
by terrible chance,  
love took her in his big boat  
and she shoveled the ocean  
in a scalding joy.

The dramatic ‘then once’ echoes the fairy-tale tone of the earlier stanzas, and has the effect of enhancing the fictionality of the experiences being evoked. It is significant that the death instinct is thwarted by an encounter with its opposite element: with ‘scalding’ Eros. The hot passion, however, bears (in the aural pun on ‘scalding’ / scolding) the seeds of its own destruction: ‘scalding’ suggests burning danger (and possible death) just as scolding implies disapproval and punishment.

The slow, emphatic final stanza, with its single-word opening lines (‘Then, / slowly’) and long, attenuated assonance (‘love seeped away’) emphasises, as it dramatises, the final victory of the death instinct, the turn to stultification, lifelessness, silence:

the boat turned into paper  
and she knew her fate,  
at last.  
Turn where you belong,

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<sup>89</sup> Sylvia Plath’s ‘The Applicant’ is an obvious subtext.

into a deaf mute  
that metal house,  
let him drill you into no one.

The image of the paper boat may be read as a metaphor for the transience and inevitable failure of autobiography, of the textualisation of one's life. That the subject knows 'her fate, / at last' merely confirms what the rest of the poem has demonstrated: that the beginning (birth) inevitably brings us to the end (death), indeed that the 'beginning' is the end (in the sense that it closes the poem). The final admonition subtly takes us back to the beginning of the poem (the 'end' of the title). For this concluding line reads like a perverse metaphor for conception. The speaker anticipates, and indeed seeks to avoid, the moment of impregnation which must have preceded the need for abortion. The final invocation is a plea against being 'drilled' (planted and fertilised like a seed) and thereby brought to birth. It is a plea for death pure and simple, a death which would pre-empt the otherwise inescapable battle with Eros. So 'End, Middle, Beginning', like 'Love Letter Written in a Burning Building', functions as a perverse anti-autobiography, as a record of life which is a record of death. Such a conceit exposes and undermines many of the conventions and techniques of autobiography and, most perniciously, its underlying premise: that there is a life worth living and worth writing.

## Chapter Five

‘I like to lie. I like to confess. I like to hide’\*: Truth and Lies

Sexton’s comment (one of the ‘warnings and intimations’ offered during her series of Crawshaw Lectures) combines the dramatic and confident self-critique which is typical of her work with a radical and idiosyncratic approach to the conventionally antithetical (but to Sexton, synonymous) qualities of truth and lying. Moreover, it proffers a theoretically complex challenge to the received characteristics of the confessional mode.

The speaker’s authority as owner and purveyor of significant truths is undercut by her insistence that she is lying. The notion that confession is a compulsion or imperative is instantly undermined by the suggestion that it is a choice – that she acts of her own volition and relishes (‘I like to confess’) what she does. The pleasure of writing poetry derives, she implies, from successfully deceiving the reader, not from some painful and cathartic act of self-revelation – although even this assertion of the satisfactions of lying (‘I like to lie’) may itself, in an exemplification of the Cretan liar paradox, be untrue. The implication that confession is predicated not on a painful search for truth (*pace* Diana Hume George who describes Sexton as ‘Oedipus Anne’, the fearless seeker) but on a taste for casuistry represents, in its own unreliability, the precariousness of the truths apparently conveyed in confessional writing.<sup>1</sup> In the light of Sexton’s comments, confessionalism’s claims to harrowing authenticity may no longer be accepted, and its nature as a constructed and artful discourse must be acknowledged. The effect of this (and Sexton’s other equivocal statements about the relationship between poetry and truth) is to distance the text from readings which seek to evaluate its biographical or truth value, and to mystify those simplistic views of the mimetic and referential relationship between poet, text and experience.

Sexton’s writing demonstrates a stance (or rather a series of stances) towards truth of some complexity and ambiguity. She essays a number of sometimes contradictory positions with respect to the possibility or desirability of capturing and conveying ‘truth’, often situating the voice of the poem in a middle ground between telling all (confessing) and telling nothing (hiding). She deals in paradoxes (that she is lying about lying, that poetic artifice is necessary to evoke truth), and in antitheses (truth *versus* lies, volubility *versus* silence); in whole truths, partial truths, truths whispered, disguised or denied (‘I like to hide’). More important, indeed, in Sexton’s poetry than speaking the truth, is speaking *about* truth and its inevitable – although seemingly antithetical – bedfellows. Thus ‘Live’ foregrounds the

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\* Anne Sexton, *Crawshaw Lectures* (1) p. 2, HRHRC.

<sup>1</sup> *Oedipus Anne*, p. xvi.

'perjury of the soul' and proclaims 'an outright lie'. 'The Errand' (DY) dramatises the act of 'double crossing', advocates deceit ('let us deceive with words') and celebrates disguise ('decades of disguises'). 'Little Uncomplicated Hymn' in spite of the promise and express aim of its title, is concerned with a complex truth which patently cannot be told (and specifically, cannot be 'sung' in poetry). 'Is It True?' poses a question which it is unable to understand and incapable of answering. Paradoxically, the frequency, loquacity and persistence with which Sexton speaks *about* truth as an issue or problem acts to obscure it as an essence. The prominence of the question of truth in her writing has a similar effect to the 'discourse on sex' which Foucault has identified as central to modern (that is post-Enlightenment) Western culture. By which I mean that her ostentatious foregrounding of 'truth' (like her emphatically 'personal' or 'autobiographical' voice) serves to hide it:

By speaking about it [sex] so much, by discovering it multiplied, partitioned off, and specified precisely where one had placed it, what one was seeking essentially was simply to conceal sex: a screen-discourse, a dispersion-avoidance.<sup>2</sup>

It is also arguable that the debate about, or appeal to, truth is carried out not in the poems themselves, but in paratextual comments (interviews, lectures and other authorial explanations) and extratextual clarifications and interpretations (as offered, for example, by Sexton's daughter). Thus truth is endlessly displaced, endlessly attenuated, and seemingly impossible to determine.

As we will see, Sexton side-steps questions about the truth status of the events or experience apparently at the source of the poems (like Emily Dickinson, she seems to aim to 'tell all the truth but tell it slant') and works hard to displace her own responsibility for it.<sup>3</sup> As she explains in an interview: 'In some ways as you see me now, I am a lie. The crystal truth is in my poetry.'<sup>4</sup> However, even this seemingly crystal-clear explanation is a guise. First, crystal is notoriously vulnerable to flaws (this being the metaphor at the heart of F. Scott Fitzgerald's 'The Cut-Glass Bowl', of Henry James's *The Golden Bowl*, and of Sexton's own 'For John, Who Begs Me Not to Enquire Further').<sup>5</sup> Indeed, in Sexton's own copy of *The Golden Bowl*, she has underlined Amerigo's words: "if I'm crystal I'm delighted that I'm a

<sup>2</sup> *The History of Sexuality*, p. 53. Arguably, Sexton is engaged not in 'a battle on behalf of the truth, but [...] a battle about the status of the truth' – asking not 'what is the truth?', but 'what *is* truth?'. 'Truth and Power', in *The Foucault Reader: An Introduction to Foucault's Thought*, ed. by Paul Rabinow (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991), pp. 51-75 (p. 74).

<sup>3</sup> Poem 1129 in *The Complete Poems*, ed. by Thomas H. Johnson (London: Faber and Faber, 1975) [subsequent references are to this volume]. In one of Sexton's unpublished poems, 'The Mother of the Insane', the speaker appeals: 'Because I publish it all, must I own [possess and own up to] it too?'

<sup>4</sup> Interview with Brigitte Weeks, in Colburn, ed., *No Evil Star*, pp. 112-18 (p.115) (first publ. in *Boston* magazine (August 1968)).

<sup>5</sup> William Carlos Williams compares the innovative qualities of Marianne Moore's writing to 'a break [...] a flaw, a crack in the bowl'. 'Marianne Moore', in *Selected Essays*, pp. 121-31 (p. 121).

perfect one, for I believe they sometimes have cracks and flaws – in which case they're to be had very cheap!".<sup>6</sup> Second, in claiming that the 'crystal truth' is contained in the poetry, Sexton indicates that truth is a product of perception. That is, she acknowledges the role of the reader/observer in espying the truth through the glass. Her use of the metaphor also indicates that the truth is not, perhaps, 'in' the poetry, but is refracted outside of it – displaced onto, and only comprehensible as part of, a public, discursive domain. Finally, it is possible to argue that the poetry's crystalline qualities (connoting, at least in part, a crystal ball) are a sign of its ability to generate or anticipate (foretell) truth rather than merely to reflect or display anterior events. This tacit connection between truth-telling and sooth-saying is a particularly important one given Sexton's appropriation of the persona 'witch' (in 'Her Kind', for example), and her invocation of the figure of Tiresias (in 'Hurry Up Please It's Time').

Sexton's repeated insistence that the truth originates in the text – 'the crystal truth is in my poetry' and 'to really get to the truth of something is the poem, not the poet'<sup>7</sup> – indicates the futility of looking beyond the writing for evidence of its authenticity. In Marjorie Perloff's terms, it rejects the option of reading the poetic text as though it were 'a mere conduit to a truth beyond it'.<sup>8</sup> There is, Sexton suggests, no identifiable reference to prior actuality: the text generates and represents its own truth. One effect of this is that it permits the poems to authorise or validate their own truths. Truth is self-contained within the text, it witnesses to itself, and sides-steps subjection to extra-textual means of validation (or 'appropriate public verification procedures', as Elizabeth Bruss terms them).<sup>9</sup> In reply to a letter from a reader who wished to know more about the poems, Sexton explains: 'I feel that each poem is its own song and deserves its own voice. More than anything else I ask of each poem that it not be boring and that it be, somehow, true to itself.'<sup>10</sup>

I wish to argue that there is something quite complex – and evasive – going on here. Sexton's claims about the self-referential truthfulness of her texts are clearly belied by the dense para- and extra-textual frameworks which surround them. Although Sexton insists that the texts speak for themselves, it is arguable that their meaning (and thus their 'truthfulness')

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<sup>6</sup> Chapter Seven, HRHRC.

<sup>7</sup> Interview with Patricia Marx, p. 74.

<sup>8</sup> *Poetic License*, p. 51.

<sup>9</sup> *Autobiographical Acts: The Changing Situation of an Literary Genre* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), p. 11. Leigh Gilmore identifies a similar trope in Mary McCarthy's *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood*: 'Bereft of a corroborating other, she creates one in the interchapters [. . .] In direct address to the reader, she challenges her own account, finds it accurate, and thereby preserves the structure of confession.' p. 123.

<sup>10</sup> Anne Sexton, Letter to Mrs. Tavener, 23 August 1965, HRHRC.

is only established by a process of para- and extra-textual validation and accreditation.<sup>11</sup> However, in a further twist (which we should by now recognise as characteristic of Sexton's discourse on truth), even these paratexts may be said to refer to or validate only themselves. The paratexts are invariably contradictory ('I like to lie. I like to confess'). Each paratext potentially possesses its own paratexts (and all or any of these may offer a distinct and contradictory version of the truth ostensibly being validated). Each paratext (interview, comment, letter of explication) constructs a new (meta-) truth 'about' the truth of the poem, and not one which finally, or with any authority, identifies a prior, pre-textual truth. The crucial point is that the context is, itself, textual. There is no 'real' truth which will validate the text (*contra* Spacks's view that 'Sexton's autobiography authenticates her poetry'),<sup>12</sup> but only a tissue of other discourses which are open to readerly interpretation and which generate and validate what we understand to be the truth.

In Sexton's prolific (and often repeated) comments about her work, a pre-existing script or version of events can frequently be identified – a script to which she refers in order to complete or validate the truth of the text (a number of the paratexts, incidentally, acquire authority not by proximity or reference to some prior truth, but by repetition). In several interviews, Sexton rehearses a story about the authenticity which she perceived in W.D.Snodgrass's 'Heart's Needle', and about the way in which her reading of that poem galvanised her into reclaiming her estranged infant daughter. This experience, she explains, motivated the poems 'The Double Image' and 'Unknown Girl in a Maternity Ward' (TB).<sup>13</sup> Her admission, in these interviews, that the actual truth (sacrificed for the sake of the poem's dramatic truth) is that she had two daughters, not just the one who features in the poem, and that the reconciliation with her infant daughter which forms the resolution of 'The Double Image' was unsatisfactory and brief, seems only to extend the confessional moment. It is a mock confidence to the interviewer and readership which serves to prolong the poem's resolution and closure.

Yet the success of these confessions (poetic and paratextual) is undercut in two ways. The first is by the glimpse of a less evocative and dramatic situation, a further unconfessed truth about the experience in question. This can be read in Sexton's reference to 'The Double

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<sup>11</sup> I draw on Genette's definition of the paratext, that is: all of those 'accompanying productions' (interviews, letters, diaries, prefaces, etc. ) which 'surround a work and, to a greater or lesser degree, clarify or modify its significance'. *Paratexts*, pp. 1, 7. These, I would suggest, are crucial to the text's apparent authenticity. There is a distinction to be made, however, between paratexts (comments for which the author bears some responsibility) and extra-textual material (supplementary or contradictory material supplied by others). The latter is, rather disparagingly, described by Donald Davie as 'adventitious information'. *Thomas Hardy and British Poetry* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973), p. 137.

<sup>12</sup> 'On 45 Mercy Street', p. 186.

<sup>13</sup> See, for example, interview with Patricia Marx, pp. 75,79; interview with Barbara Kevles, p. 89.

Image' in her lecture notes, where a sense of anger, shame and distress emerges in the fractured language and dissolving sense of her comments:

Sounds nice, doesn't it? Poetic. That I should write such a poem and get my daughter. Truth was she went back in three days, crying for her Nana, not me the mother, the never remembered, the not often enough, the not teach me the word for Mama, the not put me on the toidy [sic] seat, the not feed me the cereal.<sup>14</sup>

The other is in the extra-textual contradiction to these glib statements subsequently offered by the poet's eldest (and here forgotten) daughter, Linda Gray Sexton, a challenge which suggests that the neat paratextual completion of the poems contributes little more towards the depiction of the whole truth than the poems themselves. Linda Sexton describes her own memories of the moment at which Joy was first removed into her grandparents' care: 'Mother turned on me, eyes electric with hate. "It's all *your* fault," she shouted, putting her face down close to mine. "*Your fault!*".' She describes her own subsequent repeated retelling of the scene in words which fittingly echo her mother's situation (and indeed which recall the image of the speaker 'pick[ing]' at her spots in 'Cripples and Other Stories', discussed in Chapter One):

Every child is engaged by a story in which she plays one of the main characters [. . .] Remembering such a story is also another way of validating the experience, a literal picking at the scab so a clean scar can form. For many years I retold the story in a detached manner, a classic way of denying how much that moment at the head of the stairs hurt me.<sup>15</sup>

Anne Sexton's own poetic and narrative versions of events, her various confessions about her abandonment and then reconciliation with her daughter(s), bear only a tenuous relationship with historical events. Her ostensibly true (paratextual) confession about the poem is a mask which occludes its origins and referent. It makes a truth claim which can no more be justified than that of the poem itself.

Linda Sexton accuses her mother – in omitting to mention her either in the poems or her later explanation of their sources – of denying the truth of the real and terrible situation into which she was expelled (a life of neglect with abusive relatives). From this, one could argue that Sexton's omission of an older daughter was not in fact for the sake of dramatic coherence, but because the truth behind that child's experience was too awful to confess to. Similarly, Linda Sexton reveals that Anne Sexton's seemingly vulnerable admission that she was not well enough to take care of her daughter when they were first temporarily reunited

<sup>14</sup> Crawshaw Lectures (1) p. 7, HRHRC.

<sup>15</sup> *Searching*, p. 14.



masks a more mundane and less sympathetic truth – a truth which Linda Sexton only discovered many years later:

I saw that she had actually come home after a brief hospitalization of a few weeks. She spent the remainder of the time I was in Scituate [the six months while Linda was with the abusive relatives] at home: keeping her appointments with her analyst, lunching with friends, having her hair done. She slept in her own bed and wandered through her own house. Stunned, all the excuses and rationalizations I had used to cushion myself from the truth collapsed inward.<sup>16</sup>

My point here is not to judge any one of these versions of past events to be more credible than any of the others, but to demonstrate that the ‘true’ experiences which, according to the poet, are at the root of the poem are terminally undecidable. The poet’s attempt to isolate and finalise the truth is doomed to failure, and is the subject of endless reiteration and reinterpretation. Truth only comes into play in the context of something revealed no longer to be true. The apparent truth of the poem is shown to be a falsehood by means of the additional insights afforded by the extra-textual commentary, and truth itself is thus deferred beyond the text. This is an evasive strategy by which the speaker avoids speaking honestly and displaces the responsibility onto another. Truth, then, is not sought out, but side-stepped.

Sexton’s paratexts, like the poems which they ostensibly validate, are characterised by contradiction and casuistry (to quote Emily Dickinson’s ‘Poem 1129’ again, ‘success in circuit lies’). Her ostensibly sincere confessions about the truth-status of the poems (meta-confessions, perhaps) are as evasive and dissembling as the poems themselves.<sup>17</sup> Clearly, Sexton is conscious of this: ‘it rather pleases me in a quizzical fashion to do this because then I don’t have to really admit to anything.’<sup>18</sup> In her apparent explication of the referentiality (or truth-value) of ‘Some Foreign Letters’, she declares that the poem ‘is a mixture of truth and lies. I don’t feel like confessing which is which. When I wrote it I attempted to make all of it “true”. It remains true *for me* to this day’.<sup>19</sup> Here, she uses confident, frank rhetoric to persuade us that she’s confiding something – giving the key to the poem – whereas, in fact, she is giving nothing away. Similar statements include the equivocal: ‘Many of my poems are true, line by line, altering a few facts’ (so, in other words, they are not ‘true’); the evasive ‘Each poem has its own truth’ (thus denying any connection with actuality); and the artful (‘I

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<sup>16</sup> *ibid.* p. 25.

<sup>17</sup> If, as Foucault proposes, confession is ‘one of the main rituals we rely on for the production of truth’, then these (arguably equally ritualistic; that is, repetitive and performative) ‘meta-confessions’ play a major role in sustaining or consolidating the original (that is the poetic) ‘production of truth’. *The History of Sexuality*, p. 58.

<sup>18</sup> Interview with William Heyen and Al Poulin, p. 137.

<sup>19</sup> ‘Comment on “Some Foreign Letters”’, p. 16.

don't adhere to literal facts [. . .] I make them up').<sup>20</sup> Moreover, in her insistence that 'Some Foreign Letters' remains 'true *for me*', Sexton concedes an important point about the subjective nature of truth, thereby disputing the kind of reading which would see the confessional text as offering a transcendent truth for all people and all time.

It is apparent that, in statements such as these, Sexton is toying with the classic contradictions which fuel any discourse about truth. This is seen most clearly in her 1965 *Hudson Review* interview. Asked about her earlier comment that 'All poets lie', Sexton explains:

I think maybe it's an evasion of mine. It's a very easy thing to say, 'All poets lie.' It depends on what you want to call the truth, you see, and it's also a way of getting out of the literal fact of a poem. You can say there is truth in this, but it might not be the truth of my experience. Then again, if you say that you lie, you can get away with telling the awful truth. That's why it's an evasion.<sup>21</sup>

We are here dealing with multiple layers of contradictory meaning (and, again, with an example of the Cretan Liar Paradox). If 'all poets lie' then this poet must be lying. If she is lying, how can we credit her assertion that some poems depict 'the awful truth', or that behind her lie, there *is* a truth? A similar trope is found in Sexton's declaration, in a letter to her daughter, that 'I exaggerate everything I fear'.<sup>22</sup> The consequence of this paradoxical truth-game is to question the possibility or reliability of any claim to authenticity or referentiality. Equally, Sexton's admission – quoted as the title to this chapter – that 'I like to lie' may, itself, be a lie, leaving us uncertain about the truthfulness of this or any confession.

Again, we have what Foucault might refer to as a 'screen-discourse, a dispersion-avoidance'. An exaggerated truth becomes a fake or lie, and conversely falsehood assumes the status of truth ('if you say that you lie, you can get away with telling the awful truth'). Thom Gunn comments on this paradox in Sexton's work (implicitly confirming her claim, quoted above, that 'I attempted to *make* all of it "true"'): 'It may well be that she is most credible when she fictionalizes her experience.'<sup>23</sup> The reader in such a case is wrong-footed, unable to distinguish which are the most truthful texts, and whether those that appear most truthful are, in fact, simply the most successful fakes. As Sexton admits in her 1966 television

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<sup>20</sup> Interview with Barbara Kevles, p. 103.

<sup>21</sup> Interview with Patricia Marx, p. 75.

<sup>22</sup> *Letters*, p. 339 (3 July 1969). Leigh Gilmore identifies a similar trope in Jeanette Winterson's *The Passion*: "I'm telling you stories. Trust me" (p. 226). Paul John Eakin (p. 15) discusses Mary McCarthy's manipulation of different degrees of truth and fiction in her *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood* and argues that her memoirs (and 'ostensible failure to tell the truth about herself') are appropriate means to reveal the paradoxical truth about herself – that is, she lies to demonstrate that she truly is a liar.

<sup>23</sup> 'On *All My Pretty Ones*', p. 126.

interview, 'I faked it up with the truth.'<sup>24</sup> As we saw in Chapter One, there is more identity between confession and fiction than has hitherto been recognised. At times, Sexton uses the terms synonymously, for example, in her explication of the poem 'Unknown Girl in a Maternity Ward': 'I was fictionalizing but of course I mean so-called confessing.'<sup>25</sup> The potential contiguity of the two genres is unwittingly confirmed by James Dickey's approval of the 'candor' (truthfulness) of Sexton's 'story' (fiction): 'Mrs. Sexton's candor, her courage, and her story are worth anyone's three dollars.'<sup>26</sup>

Sexton's tacit acknowledgement of the importance of the reader/confessor in the 'completion' (Foucault's term) of the truth confirms the insights discussed in previous chapters about the primarily shared, discursive nature of confession.<sup>27</sup> Crucially, Sexton concedes her own indebtedness to the audience, without whom there can be no truth: 'Many of them [the poems] are true. Others are about lives I haven't led. Yet I keep thinking . . . someone has to believe them! I hope someone will.'<sup>28</sup> Her comments further exemplify Leigh Gilmore's assertion about the importance, to the success of the confession, of the triangle of speaker, reader and text (as Gilmore puts it: 'the stage must be set with a penitent/teller, a listener, and a tale').<sup>29</sup> Sexton indicates as much in her (aborted) 'Journal of a Living Experiment' (the diary which she was required to keep as part of her participation in the 'Teachers and Writers Collaborative'). Here she explains:

I also know something about moments in time, the sense of a good, right, clear moment. Confusion getting rinsed off. I call these moments Truth. But actually they are moments of understanding in people I'm with or in the books of what is alive.<sup>30</sup>

Hence truth is to be found in the text ('in the books') or in the process of reading ('moments of understanding in people') rather than in some prior and authenticating authorial experience.

It is in other people's readings of her work, Sexton claims, that truth is revealed. Thus she shrugs off the role of truth-finder and teller, and assumes instead that of innocent listener. She reads other people's critiques 'to see where the truth might lie' and explains that 'I am told that my poetry is the work of a victim, of the passive sufferer, of the crucified man. And I

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<sup>24</sup> 'Anne Sexton', National Educational Television outtakes (1 March 1966), American Poetry Archive, San Francisco State University.

<sup>25</sup> Interview with William Heyen and Al Poulin, p. 138.

<sup>26</sup> 'Five First Books', p. 319.

<sup>27</sup> *The History of Sexuality*, p. 66.

<sup>28</sup> Anne Sexton, draft 'Introduction' for the 'Poetry Book Society', HRHRC [Sexton's ellipsis and emphasis].

<sup>29</sup> Gilmore, p. 121.

<sup>30</sup> 'Journal of A Living Experiment', June 16 1967, HRHRC [Sexton's emphasis].

put that thought in my mouth and taste it and find it surprising but true'.<sup>31</sup> The metaphor of oral consumption is one which figures in 'Talking to Sheep' ('I swallowed it like my fate'). In both texts (the journal and the poem), the subject incorporates the identity bestowed by an other. Yet even these apparently sincere accounts of the evasiveness and autonomy of truth are ambiguous and unreliable. If Sexton seeks from others an explanation of where 'the truth might lie', her intention may be to test how well she has deceived her audience, or how well she has beguiled them into misreading her artfully constructed truths.

Throughout her work, Sexton draws attention to the strategies and techniques by which 'truth' might be produced (in the sense both of brought forth and of created). For example, she insists repeatedly on the importance of strict poetic form as a means of capturing and displaying it. In a commentary written for the Poetry Book Society on their recommendation of Sexton's *Selected Poems* (published only in the United Kingdom), she explains:

If you care about form, about half are in form of some sort. But form, for me, is a trick to deceive myself, not you but me. When I am finished with this trickery, I often hide it so that no one can see that I had my back to the wall all the time. Who, after all, wants to be caught doing an acrostic while they thought they were really telling all? What I mean to say is that some poems are too difficult to write without controls of some sort.<sup>32</sup>

There are two different issues here. The first (to which I shall return in a moment) is that truth will only emerge as a consequence of a nexus of prohibitions, that it is inextricably connected with power.<sup>33</sup> The second is that truth is difficult of access, evasive, shifting. It needs to be trapped or beguiled by the 'trickery' of form and only then can it be isolated and revealed. In an interview with Patricia Marx (*apropos* these comments), Sexton explains:

I think all form is a trick to get at the truth. Sometimes in my hardest poems, the ones that are difficult to write, I might make an impossible scheme, a syllabic count that is so involved, that it then allows me to be truthful [. . .] But you can see how *I say this* not to deceive you but to deceive me. I deceive myself saying to myself you can't do it, and then if I can get it, then I have deceived myself, then I can change it and do what I want. I can even change it and rearrange it so no one can see my trick. It won't change what's real. It's there on paper.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Crawshaw Lectures (9) pp. 1-2, HRHRC. For a discussion of the 'lie' [untruth] / 'lie' [come to rest] homonym, see Christopher Ricks, 'Lies', in *The Force of Poetry* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), pp. 369-91.

<sup>32</sup> Draft 'Introduction' for the 'Poetry Book Society', HRHRC.

<sup>33</sup> Sexton's 'Journal of A Living Experiment', mentioned on a number of occasions above, although eventually discontinued, is the only one of her prose diaries to be sustained for more than a few days. This, I would venture, is because it was written under strict imperatives and time constraints.

<sup>34</sup> Interview with Patricia Marx, p. 80 [my emphasis].

In both of these examples (and elsewhere), the metaphors which Sexton uses ('tricks', 'magic' and 'spells') indicate that it is only by subterfuge or sleight of hand that truth may be trapped and exposed (conjured, perhaps). However, Sexton's repeated explanations of the importance of these formal tricks as a way of accessing truth may, in themselves (as a close reading of her syntax suggests), be a trick or deception. Specifically, 'I say this' proclaims the possibility that what she 'says' is not true.

Hers is a problematic assertion, not least because it is clear that, notwithstanding her insistence that she is the one beguiled by this technique, we too, as readers of the putatively authentic truth, are affected – even served – by the strategy. As J. D. McClatchy points out, the tricks persuade both speaker and reader (leaving aside McClatchy's confident reference to 'actual experience'):

The truth-getting tricks [. . .] serve as a method of conviction for both poet and reader. For the poet, form functions to articulate the details and thrust of her actual experience, while for the reader it guides his dramatic involvement in the re-creation: both convictions converging on authenticity, on realization.<sup>35</sup>

Although Sexton may claim that 'I say this not to deceive you but to deceive me', it is clear that her strategy does deceive the reader. Jeanne Kammer, for example, is taken in by the 'tricks', arguing that the formal effects of the poems are instrumental in their evocation of the truth. Form, she insists, is 'a means of making strong poems – sturdy baskets – while telling the truth'.<sup>36</sup> Sexton's reference to the 'tricks' which construct the truth paradoxically confirms both her lack of control over the truth (truth appears as if by magic: 'I think of all these things quite magically, and not in some academic way, because I don't really know what my form is') and her poetic skill (she conjures truth by means of these tricks).<sup>37</sup> Sexton's use of the metaphor arguably owes something to Freud's perception of how the creative writer ensures the continuing attention of the reader, specifically in the face of the 'feeling of repulsion' which may come between them: 'The writer softens the character of his egoistic day-dreams by altering and disguising it, and he bribes us by the purely formal – that is aesthetic – yield of pleasure which he offers.'<sup>38</sup>

Most importantly, as I have indicated, Sexton's explanation of the importance of

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<sup>35</sup> 'Somehow to Endure', p. 256.

<sup>36</sup> Jeanne Kammer, 'The Witch's Life: Confession and Control in the Early Poetry of Anne Sexton', in Colburn, ed., *Telling the Tale*, pp. 125-34 (p. 127) (first publ. in *Language and Style*, 13.4 (1980)). Kammer uses a rather regrettable metaphor, given the therapeutic connotations of basket weaving.

<sup>37</sup> Interview with Patricia Marx, p. 81. Thinking back to the sexual self-display and commodification detailed in Chapter Three, it is possible to read 'tricks' as a slang word for a prostitute's activities.

<sup>38</sup> 'Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming' (1908), in *Art and Literature: Jensen's Gradiva, Leonardo Da Vinci and Other Works* [PFL 14], ed. by Albert Dickson, trans. by James Strachey (Harmondsworth: Pelican, 1985; repr. Penguin, 1990), pp. 129-41 (p. 141).

‘tricks’, controls and constraints in the representation of truth should be understood as an acknowledgement of the importance of such procedures in *constructing* truth. As Foucault argues, truth is ‘produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint’: “‘Truth’ is to be understood as a system of ordered procedures for the production, regulation, distribution, circulation, and operation of statements.”<sup>39</sup> Constraint, tricks, controls (‘ordered procedures’) offer a method for creating rather than corralling the truth, a means of generating what we understand as truth, rather than of bringing to light some prior, buried, authentic experience. Further, the presence of such tricks serves to emphasise the truthfulness of what they depict: if confession is to be understood as ‘a ritual in which the truth is corroborated by the obstacles and resistances it has had to surmount in order to be formulated’, then the ostentatious difficulties which Sexton encounters in bringing truth to the text are read as a sign of its honesty.<sup>40</sup> The ‘tricks’ evidence how hard truth is to find (‘some poems are too difficult to write without controls’), and thus the poems prove or validate their own authenticity.

An equally effective strategy is Sexton’s insertion of ‘made-up’ facts to add verisimilitude to her text. Specific and intimate details are incorporated in the poems in order to seduce the reader into believing that they are seeing true, lived experience. As Jean-Jacques Rousseau explains of his own *Confessions*: ‘it is not enough for my story to be truthful, it must be detailed as well.’<sup>41</sup> In Sexton’s case (as, arguably in Rousseau’s), such details are, in fact, synthetic – consciously added to give the impression of authenticity: ‘I don’t adhere to literal facts all the time; I make them up whenever needed. Concrete examples give a verisimilitude.’<sup>42</sup> The simulation of ‘real life’ is a strategy of dissimulation. Verisimilitude is not truth, it is *like* truth. To adopt Julia Kristeva’s words, there is a ‘*semblance* of truth which is at work in the discourse of art’.<sup>43</sup> Roland Barthes refers to Aristotle’s understanding of verisimilitude as not necessarily what is, or even what once was, but what is *possible*<sup>44</sup> – a distinction which is replicated in Julia Kristeva’s notion of the ‘plausible’.<sup>45</sup> The truth (like the autobiographical) is that which the reader can be persuaded to believe. The credible is that which can be read with credulity. The wealth of personal and specific details, the use of the intimate, first-person voice which appears to be confiding difficult and deeply felt secrets, and the personal address (to significant others or to the reader) – all characteristics of Sexton’s work – contribute to the impression of verisimilitude (thus Laurence Lerner applauds her use

<sup>39</sup> ‘Truth and Power’, pp 72, 74.

<sup>40</sup> *The History of Sexuality*, p. 62.

<sup>41</sup> *Confessions*, p. 169.

<sup>42</sup> Interview with Barbara Kevles, p. 329.

<sup>43</sup> ‘The True-Real’, in *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. by Toril Moi, trans. by Seán Hand (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), pp. 214-37 (p. 220).

<sup>44</sup> *Criticism and Truth*, ed. and trans. by Katrine Pilcher-Keuneman (London: Athlone Press, 1987), p. 34.

<sup>45</sup> ‘The True Real’, pp. 220, 217.

of 'specific locations, [. . .] specific incidents, [. . .] facts about her illness' in 'The Double Image').<sup>46</sup>

Sexton also, as we saw in Chapter Three, exploits drama, performance, and spectacle in order to give the impression of truthfulness. In response to a question about whether she manipulates 'literal facts [. . .] to present the emotional truth', she explains: 'It's something that an artist must do make it clear and dramatic and to have the effect of the axe. To have that effect you must distort some of these facts to give them their own clarity.' And again: 'I simplified everything to make it more dramatic.'<sup>47</sup> Equally, she makes use of narrative chronology to give the impression of 'honest precision' (as J. D. McClatchy proposes, 'the poems [. . .] have a kind of chronicle effect on readers, as one keeps track volume by volume').<sup>48</sup> Narrative coherence is established within and between poems and volumes (for example, the 'story' of Sexton's relationship with her parents is sustained throughout *All My Pretty Ones* and beyond; the 'story' of her friend Ruth informs 'With Mercy for the Greedy' and 'The Letting Down of the Hair'). A further effect of this cumulative chronology is that the poems are not only permitted to validate (to be 'true to') themselves, but to validate, or authenticate, each other. Thus the details of 'A Little Uncomplicated Hymn' seem to authorise the truth of 'The Double Image'.

Sexton wants both to give the *impression* of truthfulness (and I use the word 'impression' advisedly in order to indicate both a semblance and an imprint or mark) and to dissociate herself from overly credulous readings. She is emphatic about the difficulties and barriers to the production (again, in a double sense of display and creation) of truth. It is noteworthy that the verbs which we have available to us (produce, establish, find) unavoidably work in two ways. They are themselves dissembling, or 'double crossing', and it is the equivocation which seems inescapably to accompany any discussion of truth which is one of Sexton's most persistent, and important, subjects.<sup>49</sup>

Such is the case in the poem, 'The Errand'. This late poem (1972), apparently addressed to a fellow poet, takes as its subject the deceitful and prevaricating nature of the ostensibly truthful confession. It also alludes to the pressure on the confessional poet to continue to produce the truth – hence the poem's dogged and weary opening line: 'I've been going right on, page by page.' 'The Errand' conjures up images of disguise, veiled truth, and misdirection to describe the two poets' work: 'two hunger-mongers throwing a myth in and out, / double crossing our lives with doubt.' The image of 'double crossing' is a frank

<sup>46</sup> 'What is Confessional Poetry?', p. 52.

<sup>47</sup> Interview with Patricia Marx, pp. 75, 71.

<sup>48</sup> 'Somehow to Endure', pp. 251, 252.

<sup>49</sup> *The Concise Oxford Dictionary* defines 'double-talk' as a 'verbal expression that is (usu. deliberately) ambiguous'. It is arguable that such doubling and equivocation anticipates, in some ways, the mirroring which will be discussed in my Conclusion.

recognition both of the potentially deceitful nature of the confession, and of the status of the paratextual comments which ostensibly clarify – but merely obfuscate – the difference between truth and lies. The image of ‘hunger-mongers’ suggests a traffic in, fascination with and exploitation of need, and is particularly pertinent to the confessional role.

The perceived obsessions of the confessional poet are catalogued. These include hedonistic and practical means of self-destruction (‘cognac and razor blades’), medical and psychiatric relationships (‘my shrink’ and ‘some doctor’) and religious concerns (‘The Cross’ and ‘that eggless man’). This final image finds a parallel at the end of ‘Is It True?’, where the search for truth is resolved by Jesus’s arrival with his ‘eggful of miracles’: that he is ‘eggless’ here suggests a more pessimistic view of the possibility of salvation. All of these are exposed as pathological and ineffective, mere techniques for avoiding the real truth which is death: ‘in the end death won’t settle for my hypochondrias.’ The truth is vulnerable to manipulation and division: ‘But then I’ve told my readers what I think / and scrubbed out the remainder with my shrink.’ It is shifting and evasive (it ‘won’t settle’; it is described in terms of ‘escapades’ and ‘barriers’).

The role of the poet is revealed to be just a disguise, its adoption a facile and futile mask obscuring uncertainty:

let us be folk of the literary set,  
let us deceive with words the critics regret,  
let us dog down the streets for each invitation,  
typing out our lives like a Singer sewing sublimation,

Again, the apparent truthfulness of the confessional voice is a disguise: the very specific image of the ‘Singer sewing sublimation’ alludes to the costume or material camouflage adopted by the confessional poet (the pun, too, is on poetry as song). The simple rhyming couplets which constitute the basic form of the poem may be read as a mocking demonstration of the ease with which the ‘literary set’ may be joined, and supposedly authentic and meaningful texts produced. Yet the jumble of experiences and images on which such ‘delicate’ sublimations draw is itself shown in all its emergent and excessive power. The penultimate stanza sees the return of the repressed objects which had been veiled by the earlier sublimations, brought back to life in all of their violent, sexual excess:

they were spanked alive by some doctor of folly,  
given a horn or a dish to get by with, by golly,  
exploding with blood in this errand called life,  
dumb with snow and elbows, rubber man, a mother wife,

However, neither the poetic sublimations, nor the final garbled and energetic effort to retain a voice, can fight off the real truth which is the inevitable and impending fact of death: ‘because



this errand we're on goes to one store.' The 'decades of disguises' are obsolete. The desperate attempt to evoke day-to-day life (to give verisimilitude, perhaps) fails:

the shopkeeper plants his boot in our eyes,  
and unties our bone and is finished with the case,  
and turns to the next customer, forgetting our face

This may be read as a reference to the vicissitudes of the literary market-place – which threatens a metaphorical (literary) death, as well as a literal one. The quiet and monosyllabic words of the final line of the poem offer a simple and grave acknowledgement of the true weakness and insignificance of the poet's words (and thus of the truths ostensibly revealed). Although earlier referred to as 'stones' (weapons/objects of permanence), they are now exposed in all their transience and weakness as 'sighs / like moth wings for a short while in a small place'.

It is important to recognise that, notwithstanding the best efforts of even 'Oedipus Anne' – the indefatigable seeker after truths as George labels her – it is impossible ever to *tell* the truth. Although confession (in psychiatric, religious, judicial and literary terms) promises truth, this may be a promise which it is unable to deliver. According to Foucault, the Western technique of confession produces 'a literature ordered according to the infinite task of extracting from the depths of oneself *in between the words*, a truth which the very form of confession holds out like a shimmering mirage'.<sup>50</sup> Thus the truth of the text may be gleaned not from what we say, but from what we do not say. It is to be found, if at all, not in any 'biographical reality lying beyond itself', but in its own silences, gaps, elisions and aporias.<sup>51</sup>

In 'For the Year of the Insane' (LD), language can neither reflect nor create truth. Instead, it hides, confuses and misleads. As in 'Talking to Sheep', the female body is disconnected from the speaker's understanding of, or attempt to represent, the truth. In this abject situation ('my body is useless./ It lies, curled like a dog on the carpet'), language (the route to truth) is imagined first as a meaningless act of learning by rote and then abandoned completely:

There are no words here except the half-learned,  
the *Hail Mary* and the *full of grace*.  
Now I have entered the year without words.

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<sup>50</sup> *The History of Sexuality*, p. 59 [my emphasis].

<sup>51</sup> Eakin, p. 19. As mentioned in Chapter Three, Sexton uses whispering as a trope to suggest deceit, ambivalence, and reticence – the barely perceptible truth hidden behind the declamatory surface. In 'The Passion of the Mad Rabbit', for example, or 'The Letting Down of the Hair', the truth is to be found not in the frank and forceful confessions, but in whispered asides and confidences. Whispering, as a metaphor for writing, signifies a quiet, latent truth waiting to be told. It also signifies – in the fact that a whisper does not want to be publicly heard – secretiveness, and fear of punishment.

In her Crawshaw Lectures, Sexton discusses this poem and poses the rhetorical question: 'When I lose words, what do I get? (communion).'<sup>52</sup> Words are a form of deceit: beatitude is earned only by silence:

Without words one may touch bread  
and be handed bread  
and make no sound.

Silence is not an element which exists simply to contradict the discursive effects of the poem, but is part (an essential part) of its practice. Silence is not the antonym of truth, but is an element inherent in its expression.<sup>53</sup> Thus the lying and hiding which Sexton declares to be at the heart of poetry may, paradoxically, be a means of establishing its truth.<sup>54</sup>

Sexton's 'A Little Uncomplicated Hymn' brings together the questions of how voice and silence work together to present a truth. It explores the competing pressures under which the confessional poet labours (tell all *versus* tell nothing) and provokes questions about the speaker's degree of activity (is she evading truth?) or, conversely, passivity (is the truth escaping her?). The initial tone of the poem is controlled and confident, declaiming the speaker's intended voice and subject. Yet it quickly becomes uncertain. There is a tentative and self-conscious recognition (shown by the use of the past tense, 'I wanted' and 'there was', and emphasised by the enjambment of the title and first line) of the failure of representation, of what the poem can *not* be:<sup>55</sup>

A LITTLE UNCOMPLICATED HYMN  
*for Joy*

is what I wanted to write.  
There *was* such a song!

Having alerted us to the failure of the poem on the terms anticipated by its title, the speaker teases the reader with a catalogue of what it was once – but is now *not* – going to be:

There was such a song!

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<sup>52</sup> Crawshaw Lecture (10) p. 8, HRHRC.

<sup>53</sup> See Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, p. 27. 'Silence itself – the things one declines to say, or is forbidden to name, the discretion that is required between different speakers – is less the absolute limit of discourse, the other side from which it is separated by a strict boundary, than an element that functions alongside the things said, with them and in relation to them within all-over strategies.'

<sup>54</sup> For Nietzsche, such antitheses are necessary and fruitful: 'it might even be possible that what constitutes the value of those good and honoured things resides precisely in their being artfully related, knotted and crocheted to these wicked, apparently antithetical things, perhaps even in their being essentially identical with them.' Nietzsche's use of the metaphors 'artfully', 'crocheted' and 'knotted' to evoke the relationship between truth and artifice parallels Sexton's practice in 'Talking to Sheep'. *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. by R.J. Hollingdale (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973; repr. 1990), p. 34.

<sup>55</sup> See William Carlos Williams's line, 'I wanted to write a poem', in 'January Morning'. *The Collected Poems 1909-1939*, ed. by A. Walton Litz and Christopher MacGowan (Manchester: Carcanet, 1987).

A song for your kneebones,  
 a song for your ribs,  
 .....  
 a song for your dress-up high heels,  
 your fire-red skate board.

There is an energy and a conscious creativeness in this summary of what the poet had wanted to write, the lively images, the Whitmanesque repetitions ('a song for your'). This is a celebration of the poet's power to evoke the body, the mind and the potential of her daughter. In the second stanza, however, the pace is slowed, and the paean becomes 'a song for your night'. The lines are longer, the vowels heavier ('spooned', 'moving', 'mumbling'). The syntax is more complex, demanding greater concentration from the reader. In the first stanza, the speaker deftly conjures up a wealth of dancing images; in the second, she is powerless: 'I cannot undo.' The refrain 'a song for' appears infrequently. It can no longer communicate on its own terms and, instead, must be followed by a lengthy explication, as though the literary convention (the poetic 'song') has malfunctioned or proved inadequate for evoking the desired truth.

The speaker of 'A Little Uncomplicated Hymn' appropriates, but only in order to repudiate, the power of naming which is presumed to accrue to the – particularly woman – writer. For Sexton, the power to name is, in fact, the power to mis-name, or signifies the failure of naming (and thus of language):<sup>56</sup>

I named you Joy.  
 That's someone's song all by itself.  
 In the naming of you I named  
 all things you are ...  
 except the ditch  
 where I left you once.

In calling the child 'Joy', and in writing about 'Joy', there is an abject failure of voice. Neither the name nor the naming (the poem) conveys the whole truth. Indeed, here, Sexton follows her own advice to young poets: 'tell *almost* the whole story.'<sup>57</sup> The evocation of 'Joy' is predicated on omission: it names 'all things you are. . . / except the ditch.' Thus the speaker's authority (in the double sense of power, and ability to authorise) is challenged. The ellipsis in the fourth line (and the negation in the fifth) introduce doubt about the honesty and efficacy of the writer's use of language and the capacity of poetry to really tell the truth of something. In the next stanza, again the speaker tries to attach a word to her child, and to make it a meaningful representation – 'Joy, I call you' – but again must admit that she fails:

<sup>56</sup> Juhasz applauds 'the power of naming itself to define and to exorcise'. *Naked and Fiery Forms: Modern American Poetry by Women, a New Tradition* (New York: Harper and Row, 1976), p. 119.

<sup>57</sup> Interview with Barbara Kevles, p. 335.

and yet your eyes just here  
with their shades half-drawn over the  
gunsights,

.....  
'Why was I shut in the cellar?'

A simple word ('Joy') cannot counter such violent experience. The truth which she is trying to represent escapes linguistic representation. In fact, in describing the child, the speaker is compelled to use words which, in themselves, betray the accepted subject matter of a 'hymn' (that is, a song to Gods or heroes) and become a lament. In the fourth stanza, the child is addressed as 'O little Icarus' (the fallen and fated); later, she is described in pathetic, nursery-rhyme terms as 'humpty-dumpty girl' (who couldn't be put back together again).

In the central section of the poem, the speaker draws back self-reflexively to consider the nature of her work, its function and adequacy:

And I've got words,  
words that dog my heels,  
words for sale you might say,  
and multiplication cards and cursive writing  
that you ignore.

The repetition of 'words' in each of the first three lines suggests tedium and denies the special qualities of the writer.<sup>58</sup> Words are depicted as 'ten a penny', the poetry is an 'artefact' (the 'words for sale' are reminiscent of the metaphors of commerce and prostitution in 'Making a Living' and 'The Errand'). There is no special gift: the words pursue the writer rather than the writer striving to conjure and shape them. The words prove, further, to be redundant. In 'A Little Uncomplicated Hymn', the speaker figures out complex equations, she makes connections ('multiplication cards and cursive writing'), yet none of these fabrications can compete with the reality of the child's experience and needs.

In the next stanza, the speaker insists on the failure of her project, taking us full circle back to the opening of the poem:

And I can only say  
a little uncomplicated hymn  
is what I wanted to write  
and yet I find only your name

The speaker is in a passive position, used by, and at the mercy of, language. She has failed adequately to represent the truth of the daughter's experience or of the mother/daughter relationship, has failed to provide the 'little uncomplicated hymn' promised in the title, and has delivered, instead, only confusion, silence, and misunderstanding:

There *was* such a song,  
 but it's bruised.  
 It's not mine.

The image of the bruise encapsulates the speaker's experience of telling the truth as one of suffering and loss. The poem closes with a reprise of her original optimistic intentions, and with an inevitable acceptance of the inability of the form to represent the subject, of the literary work to reflect reality, or of the writer to convey the truth. Of this vast, complex and spirited exercise, 'just one' truth – evoked in simple, monosyllabic words – remains:

I found just one.

you were mine  
 and I lent you out.

I look for uncomplicated hymns  
 but love has none.

The typographical gaps on the page reinforce the void between the 'hymn'/poem (the artefact / the 'said') and the complex emotion which it seeks to represent. Foucault's truth 'in between the words' is embodied in the spaces between the lines.<sup>59</sup>

What, then, are we to make of the best endeavours of the confessional poet when the truth escapes representation (other than by means of the concentration of these few simple words and the silence which surrounds them, and from which they gain their force)? Ironically, we are left with a confessional voice which resists the lure of the dramatically and visibly poetic to offer an uncomplicated hymn which says all there is to *say*, while acknowledging that confession (truth-telling) cannot express the truth of the complex relationship between the speaker and her child. We should note, however, that the speaker has disclaimed ownership of such a truth ('There was such a song / [. . .] It's not mine'). The truth which emerges at the end of this poem is in spite of the best intentions of the poet (as the past tense of the opening line suggests, the poet's wishes, or what she 'wanted to write', are irrelevant). Paradoxically, the silences and omissions in the poem indicate that the truth is that truth is unrepresentable; it cannot be written, cannot be told.

In 'Talking to Sheep' (discussed in Chapter Three), the speaker attempts the evasive strategy of calling the confession a fiction – although this is thwarted by the audience's

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<sup>58</sup> An allusion, also to Hamlet's 'Words, words, words'? See Chapter Six.

<sup>59</sup> The aporia here exemplifies Kristeva's point that truth is that which is not and cannot be expressed; it is the 'unspoken of the spoken', something beyond the grasp of orthodox truth-discourses: 'the unspoken in all discourse [. . .] whatever remains unsatisfied, repressed, new, eccentric, incomprehensible, that which disturbs the mutual understanding of the established powers'. 'About Chinese Women', in *A Kristeva Reader*, pp. 138-59 (pp. 153, 156).

recognition of a truth which is common to their lives (*'Me too, Me too'*). Both poems insist, finally, that the text cannot do justice to the truth – yet this in itself, although paradoxical and unexpected, is a form of truth. As Sexton explained in her Colgate lectures:

I wanted to write her a little uncomplicated hymn. I spent a year trying. Stops and starts, fumbles [. . .] I wanted to write it and I couldn't, perhaps because of my own guilt. So as it goes, I wrote it honestly an anti-hymn, very complicated. You can't always write the way you want to.<sup>60</sup>

The paratext here does two things. First, it seeks to corroborate the truth of the account by reference to the barriers and obstacles to its completion. Second, and crucially, it indicates the writer's own lack of power over language, the text and its truth. Even if we were to accept that the revelation rather than the masking of truth is Sexton's aim, how can we be confident that such an aim can ever be achieved, that truth can be found and revealed by the writing subject?

Diane Wood Middlebrook, like Diana Hume George (author of *Oedipus Anne*), identifies in Sexton's work a 'habit of seeking' (rather than, as I would argue, a habit of hiding) the truth. She finds Sexton's associational method (one derived from psychotherapeutic practice) to be successful and sees in her writing a 'painfully acquired honesty'.<sup>61</sup> However, I should like to counter that the psychotherapeutic situation, as represented in Sexton's writing (its implicit power differentials, the strategies devised by the patient, consciously or otherwise, to avoid disclosure), renders the analogy far more complicated and difficult than Middlebrook would allow. In short, the fact that psychotherapy and confession might seek the truth is no guarantee of the success of either discourse. Most importantly, to return to Sexton's own point, 'you can't always write the way you want to.' You can't always say what you mean (in the words of T.S. Eliot's 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock', "That is not what I meant at all").

Sexton's 'Said the Poet to the Analyst' (TB) is read by Diana Hume George as a reflection of the positive, and healing, relationship between patient (speaker) and analyst (listener).<sup>62</sup> J.D. McClatchy relates the poem to the myth of Oedipus, and argues (reverting here to the notion of the confessional poet's compulsion to tell the truth) that it confirms the importance of 'what *must* be revealed'.<sup>63</sup> However, I would propose that the poem is principally – and crucially – about the deceptiveness of truth, about the way in which words 'say' something which is not, in fact, consciously intended, or, to borrow again from Eliot, which is not 'meant at all'. The poem is divided into two stanzas of nine lines each. In the

<sup>60</sup> Crawshaw Lectures (10) p. 12, HRHRC.

<sup>61</sup> '1957: Anne Sexton's Bedlam', p. 239.

<sup>62</sup> *Oedipus Anne*, p. 147.

<sup>63</sup> 'Somehow to Endure', p. 255 [my emphasis].

first, the speaker takes the position of the patient: 'My business is words', and in the second, that of the doctor: 'Your business is watching my words.' Most importantly, the poem demonstrates that language – although, indeed, as Middlebrook insists, associational, relational ('one word is able to pick out another / to manner another') – is not necessarily (if at all) referential. Nor is it necessarily revealing: 'I / admit nothing.' Truth is never grasped, never contained. It is only ever latent or potential:

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.

We should note the emphatic, monosyllabic final line of this stanza. It offers a disavowal of what has ostensibly been 'said', a disclaimer, and a signifier of the uncertain truth-value of what is confessed.<sup>64</sup> It offers a tacit acknowledgement of the persistence of misreading (the things which might have been said, which we have understood to have been said, but which in fact were not) and confirms the speaker's guile (the ellipsis teases us before the sudden negation 'but did not'). It further indicates her problematic ability to access, and thereafter represent, what is 'meant' (echoing the inability to say just what she wanted to say in 'A Little Uncomplicated Hymn').

Sexton's long poem, 'Is It True?', written in 1973, brings to the fore the doubts and uncertainties about truth which everywhere characterise her writing. Most importantly, it questions the accuracy and efficacy of any depiction or representation of truth – including, crucially, its own representations. Like 'Little Uncomplicated Hymn', it problematises the process by which 'truth' is translated into words, symbols, song. The question 'is it true?' is the unspoken question which subtends all witnessing (and perhaps all writing) of the confession (the refrain 'is it true?' which punctuates the poem is, arguably, spoken in a number of different voices as though by multiple auditors). Is it true? Should we believe? Should we empathise? Is the confession true to what? To real lived experience? To verifiable

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<sup>64</sup> It is possible to read many of these comments in terms of Freud's theory of negation. As a further example, in a Crawshaw Lecture ((2) p. 10, HRHRC), Sexton declares: 'All this was merely my fictions made up of snatches of my life, lyric instances that I developed, other masks that I pulled over my face and voices who spoke for me. Never, never, never. All a lie.' The emphatic 'Never, never, never. All a lie' – like 'but did not' in 'Said the Poet to the Analyst' – offers an example of negation. The denial of unconscious thoughts establishes their presence (here the denial of a truth proves its existence). As Freud proposed: 'There is no stronger evidence that we have been successful in our effort to uncover the unconscious than when the patient reacts to it with the words "I didn't think that" or "I didn't (ever) think of that".' 'Negation' (1925), in *On Metapsychology: The Theory of Psychoanalysis* [PFL 11], ed. by Angela Richards, trans. by James Strachey (Harmondsworth: Pelican, 1984; repr. Penguin, 1991), pp. 437-42 (p. 442).

historical events? What is the status of the confession if it is not true?<sup>65</sup> How would we ever know? Why, as readers, do we need it to be true?

The ultimate guarantor of truth in Western epistemology is *Logos*. 'Is It True?' (which, in part, questions the truth of God) should be seen as problematising the whole epistemology.<sup>66</sup> Yet it is a poem of profound uncertainty (it does not declare the referent of the 'it' of the title): it asks a question, yet is uncertain what it is asking, unsure where to look, and doubtful about the possibility of finding an answer.<sup>67</sup> The poem opens with the image of a carpenter occasionally glancing up to heaven, as though for reassurance as he goes about his daily work:

Once more  
the sun roaming on the carpenter's back  
as he puts joist to sill  
and then occasionally he looks to the sky  
as even the hen when it drinks  
looks toward heaven.

Ostensibly, this image indicates that all creative acts are in service of a greater good (in the service of God) and that His blessing is sought. Yet such an epistemology is undermined by the resonance in Sexton's poetry of the image of the carpenter as death-seeker or suicide (as, for example, in 'Wanting to Die' where 'suicides have a special language. / Like carpenters they want to know *which tools*'). Thus, this carpenter is not seeking a blessing, but rather glancing upwards in fear of retribution. So, too, the image of the hen represents all creatures' subservience to divine will and, more bathetically – and certainly more in keeping with Sexton's style – a nursery-rhyme 'Henny Penny' frightened that the sky is going to fall. In either case (and by metaphorical extension, in the case of the poet herself), we have a vulnerable subject who is unsure, who is seeking evidence of God's presence and of the extent of His power.

The speaker, like the hen and carpenter of the opening lines, is 'Once' (more?) seeking approval or reassurance, or anticipating disapproval. Although the 'sun' (God/Logos/light) shines frequently on the supplicant, the speaker has only 'once' sought him out and praised him:

Once in Rome I knelt in front of the Pope

<sup>65</sup> See Chapter Six for a discussion of J.L. Austin's concept of 'unhappy performatives'.

<sup>66</sup> As Jacques Derrida argues, if language is deconstructed then so, exponentially, is truth. If it is understood that writing 'no longer issues from a logos', what follows is 'the de-sedimentation, the de-construction, of all the significations that have their source in that of the logos. Particularly the signification of truth'. *Of Grammatology*, trans. by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, corrected edn. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), p. 10.

<sup>67</sup> See Steve Connor, 'Points of Departure: Deconstruction and John Ashbery's "Sortes Vergilianae"', in Easthope and Thomson, eds, pp. 5-18, on Ashbery's use of a similarly indeterminate 'it'.



as he waved from his high window.  
It was because of a pain in my bowels.

The deflation from the formal syntax of 'as even the hen' in line five to the anecdotal 'Once in Rome', to the mocking ('waved from his window') and scatological ('my bowels'), establishes a tension which sustains the poem – reverence *versus* irreverence, the spirit *versus* the body, faith *versus* scepticism, truth *versus* falsehood. Here, as in 'Hurry Up Please It's Time', the sacred and the profane co-exist (a juxtaposition which provokes the first of many wondering exclamations throughout the poem: 'Perhaps it is true'). Israel, it seems, is still 'the promised land' in spite of the excesses of 20<sup>th</sup>-century commercialism: 'Now even the promised land of / Israel has a Hilton.' The metaphor of the hotel is particularly resonant given that this is the region which is renowned for having no room at the inn.

The point of these geographically and indeed religiously incongruous images (from Rome to Israel to the United States; Catholicism to the Hare Krishna movement) is to indicate the lengths to which the speaker will go to find truth (the truth of a particular religion or denomination, the truth of experience, the truth of *Logos*). Yet the facility with which one place, or one creed, replaces another is evidence of a profound moral and spiritual dissatisfaction: an inability to find truth in any of these 'promised lands'. In a letter to Louis Untermeyer, written some ten years before 'Is It True?', and thanking him for his support of her application for the travelling fellowship mentioned in the last chapter, Sexton quotes some lines from Emerson about the futility of such a journey:

'Travelling is a fool's paradise. . . At home I dream that at Naples, at Rome, I can be intoxicated with beauty, and lose my sadness. I pack my trunk, embrace my friends, embark on the sea, and at last wake up in Naples, and there beside me is the stern Fact, the sad self, unrelenting, identical, that I fled from. I seek the Vatican, and the palaces. I affect to be intoxicated with sights and suggestions, but I am not intoxicated. My giant goes with me wherever I go.'<sup>68</sup>

Further, the textual guides which would conventionally (and metaphorically) permit one to find the path to truth (the map and the Bible) are shown to have failed: 'I have lost my map / and Jesus has squeezed out of the Gideon.' However, as in 'Kind Sir: These Woods', it is possible that such disorientation may prove to be a necessary step towards finding the way. In a later stanza (stanza ten), the speaker abandons these physical and spiritual routes to truth, concentrating on secular sources closer to home. She focuses on the literal, the practical and the mundane, as though, as a last resort, to test the truth value of the real world ('typewriters', 'skillets', 'shoes'). This recalls 'The Errand', where the most tantalising of material objects

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<sup>68</sup> 3 April 1963, HRHRC.

proves unable to disguise the truth of imminent death. None of these resources can satisfy her desire for understanding – hence the repeated, plaintive cries (‘Is it true? / Is it true?’) which punctuate the poem. Again, there is a profound self-consciousness about her own failure as a writer, either to find or – an important distinction – to convey the truth.

‘Is It True?’ is primarily concerned with the problems of divining, recognising and accepting truth. In stanza five, the speaker turns to a priest and tries to represent the despicable nature of her own identity. Yet this priest/confessor – notwithstanding the apparent frankness (a confessional trope) of her explanation – is unable to understand or see the truth of her condition:

When I tell the priest I am evil  
he asks for a definition of the word.  
do you mean sin? He asks.

It transpires that the meaning of evil, like the meaning of truth, does not inhere in the term itself, but can only be signified by reference to what it does not mean:

Sin, hell! I reply.  
I’ve committed every one.  
What I mean is evil,  
(not meaning to be, you understand,  
just something I ate).

The speaker has committed ‘every’ sin and has, by her own action – that is by tainting her listeners – committed ‘every one’ (else) to hell. In ‘Is It True?’, the speaker is progressing beyond the earlier stage (where genuflecting to the Pope was attributed to a pain in the bowels), and we have a more fundamental and painful need (‘not [. . .] just something I ate’).

The speaker is able to define truth only by reference to its conventional antithesis – to lying: ‘Evil is maybe lying to God./ Or better, lying to love.’ Put simply: if one lies, one betrays the truth, and thus deserves the label ‘evil’.<sup>69</sup> Yet the priest does not understand. Throughout the poem, the primary barrier to the realisation and representation of truth is the failure of interpretation, specifically on the part of those ascribed (in Foucault’s phrase) a ‘hermeneutic function’. The priest/psychiatrist/judge/audience is charged with the acceptance and interpretation of the confession, and when he fails in his duty, truth cannot be realised. Here, in spite of the speaker’s attempt at a clear definition, the priest/confessor ‘shakes his head. / He doesn’t comprehend’.

Crucially, the priest can only ‘comprehend’ if he is permitted to witness the physical dramatisation of the truth. Action speaks louder than words. As we saw in Chapter Three, the

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<sup>69</sup> Given Sexton’s interest in such figures, the palindrome of ‘evil’ and ‘live’ and the near palindrome of ‘love’ should be noted. These emphasise the latent contiguity of the terms.

body signifies where language does not. What the priest and the avaricious confessional audience want to see here – as, for example, in ‘The Letting Down of the Hair’ – is physical evidence, relics, the embodiment or performance of the truth:

But the priest understands  
when I tell him that I want to  
pour gasoline over my evil body  
and light it.

Certainly, the auditor’s inability to understand the truth impacts on the speaker’s own ability to comprehend it. In stanza seven, she is forced into the position of interrogating herself, turning herself into her own auditor (and addressing herself in the second person in a voice reminiscent of the narrator’s ‘friend’ in Berryman’s *Dream Songs*):<sup>70</sup>

Ms. Dog,  
why is you evil?  
It climbed into me.  
It didn’t mean to.

Here, as throughout the poem, grammar breaks down, as though inadequate to the task of conveying the truth.

Stanza eight conveys the desperation of such a search for truth. It invokes, while mocking, the psychotherapeutic practice of looking to the past (and to past parenting) for the roots of present trauma: ‘Maybe my mother cut the God out of me / when I was two in my playpen.’ As in ‘Hurry Up Please’, the speaker envisions herself as suffering in a wasteland of uncertainty. Moreover, this wasteland is one of her own making:

All is wilderness.  
All is hay that died from too much rain,  
my stinky tears.<sup>71</sup>

‘Stinky tears’ evokes the same sense of abjection, shame and worthlessness as attended the reference to the queer-smelling confession in ‘Talking to Sheep’. The lines reveal a profound ambivalence about the role of the confessional text in producing (perhaps exaggerating) and

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<sup>70</sup> In one of Sexton’s sporadic (and aborted) attempts to keep a diary, she is unable to write without first imagining an audience: ‘Today I will start, though it seems impossible to “start” such a conversation with myself. There is no one here but myself. Enough to know that I am many people and perhaps one of me will hear this and jump with surprise.’ This indicates, I would argue, an acute consciousness of the need for an audience (even one made up of her own ‘many’ selves) in order for meaning, and autobiographical truth, to be established. Unpublished diary, 25 May 1960, HRHRC.

<sup>71</sup> In a letter to Philip Legler, Sexton writes: ‘Look at me, nine years at the shrinks and still plenty much abundance. It can’t be removed like it was painted on. It’s from inside.’ 6 May 1966, HRHRC.

thereby travesty truth.<sup>72</sup> There is a self-consciousness here about the easy, glib, but nevertheless inaccurate, representations of truth in this and other texts. Similarly, in 'The Black Art', the act of confession is an excessive gesture: 'There is too much food and no one left over / to eat up all the weird abundance.' In 'Cigarettes and Whiskey and Wild, Wild, Women' (MSt.), the speaker comes to realise that her identity (as a 'woman of excess, of zeal and greed') has distanced her from, rather than brought her into proximity with, the truth which she seeks.

In 'Is It True?', like in 'With Mercy for the Greedy', 'need is not quite belief.' The desperate lengths to which the truth-seeker is prepared to go are no indication of her eventual success. However, there is no mistaking the profundity of her desire for spiritual nourishment:

A starving man doesn't ask what the meal is.  
I would eat a tomato, or a fire bird or music.  
I would eat a moth soaked in vinegar.

Notwithstanding the speaker's avowed lack of interest in asking questions, a fundamental and persistent uncertainty about the nature and origin of truth remains. Paradoxically, the speaker's doubts about the existence of God are expressed in the repeated invocation of His word (signifying either a deep cynicism or the vestiges of belief): the reference to the 'wilderness' in stanza eight (quoted earlier) draws on the Book of Isaiah, as does the allusion to wood in stanza nine.<sup>73</sup>

In stanza ten, in a dramatisation of the terrible vacillation and uncertainty suggested by the poem's title, the mood shifts from one of anxiety and despair to one of hope and optimism – although the benedictions ('Bless all, [. . .] / Bless also') which figure throughout this stanza (and subsequently) have the effect of a talisman rather than a credo. The leap of faith signified by the attempt to offer a blessing is always grounded, and thereby spoiled, by the persistent uncertainty about whether 'it' is true. This stanza, I would argue, offers a veiled – but nevertheless effective – refutation of the notion that the confessional poet serves merely as a mirror of, or 'conduit' (Perloff's term) to, truth. Here, in an exemplification of Sexton's intention (quoted earlier) to 'make all of it true', it is tools, artifice, the process of construction which are praised ('Bless all useful objects'). The speaker twice valorises the cooked over the raw ('the mattress I cook my dreams on' and 'the skillet, black and oil soaked'), thus refuting

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<sup>72</sup> Again, we recall Foucault's notion of the 'screen-discourse'. The more something is talked about, the further it disappears from view.

<sup>73</sup> The Biblical source is Isaiah 40.20. So, too, the question posed in stanza eleven ('If all this can be / then why am I in this country of black mud?') evokes Isaiah 34. 9-10 and the devastation of the land of Edom. See Morton, p. 126.

Lowell's distinction between the two and indicating that truth may be found in the former rather than the latter.<sup>74</sup>

The end of the stanza returns to the persistent and still unanswerable question posed in the poem's title. Coming straight after this confident and self-reflexive examination of the text's own processes, it tables the possibility that 'it' (in the sense of certainty about anything) is not true and thereby undermines its own processes of inquiry and exposition. Yet even in the face of evidence of the absence of God/truth, the speaker still clings to the vestiges of belief:

If religion were a dream, someone said,  
then it were still a dream worth dreaming.  
True! True!  
I whisper to my wood walls.<sup>75</sup>

'Whispering', like writing (a point which will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter), is a way of suggesting (or partially revealing) the truth without necessarily declaiming it in full. Whispering 'true' to the wooden walls is – like the 'dream worth dreaming' – better than nothing, but we should not be seduced into thinking that we are witnessing the whole truth.

Stanza fourteen displays the same persistent – if doomed – desire to find and *tell* the truth. Here the speaker is emphatic and confident in her speculations about heaven:

In heaven  
there will be a secret door,  
there will be flowers with eyes that wink  
there will be light flowing from a bronze bell,

Yet she stops short of actually calling these things into existence (significantly, and in contradistinction to 'O Ye Tongues', discussed in the next chapter, inverting the Biblical phrase: 'Let there be [. . .]').<sup>76</sup> In later sections of the poem, she comes close to prayer – although a prayer dominated by secular concerns: 'Keep us, God, from our politicians.' Moreover, she is still actively seeking (like the carpenter and the hen in the opening stanza) the confirmatory response which will prove or validate the truth of her speculations:

I will lay open my soul  
and hear an answer.  
Hello. Hello. It will call back.

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<sup>74</sup> See Ian Hamilton, *Robert Lowell: A Biography* (London: Faber and Faber, 1983), p. 277.

<sup>75</sup> A similar continuum of voice, whisper, silence, is found in 'The Passion of the Mad Rabbit'. The wood walls to which Sexton's speaker confides remind us of the cupola in 'The Letting Down of the Hair'.

These are abstruse lines, which serves further to exemplify the failure of communication between priest and speaker in earlier stanzas. The speaker's words, although apparently meaningful to her, yield little meaning to the reader, indicating that even if the speaker were to find the truth – here at the doorway to heaven, and in conversation with God – it might not bear representation.

Crucially, the speaker foregrounds her own inability to tell the truth: 'My tongue is slit / I cannot eat.' First, this projects an image of self as liar (she has a split or forked tongue). Second, and relatedly, she is not worthy of God's truth (she cannot eat and therefore is unable to receive the Sacrament). Her tongue is split because, as we know from stanza eight, this is the part of the body which the mother sliced open 'to take the God out of me'. God is not in her tongue, she does not have the power to describe, invoke, commune with or even receive Him. Significantly, as in so many other elements of Sexton's work, this loss is figured as a physical phenomenon. It is akin to the autotomy and synecdoche which we find in the poems about autobiography and language (Chapters Four and Six). In all of these cases, the only way in which Sexton is able to write about herself, and her own relation to confessional writing, is in terms of the casting-off of parts of the self, in terms of fracture, loss or incompleteness.

'Is It True?' emphasises the barriers to representation and explication. It is frank in its acknowledgement of the difficulties of communicating truth, even if truth were first to be found. *Contra* the views of Neil Myers ('[Sexton] is perfectly outright in word and deed') and Phillips ('there are no barriers between the reader and the poet'),<sup>77</sup> it is impossible for the speaker (penitent) to make the reader (confessor) comprehend: 'Do you understand? / Can you read my hieroglyphics?' The reference to the hieroglyphics (the visual, ideogrammatic form of representation) – as well as invoking Ezra Pound's championing of the ideogram as an effective signifying system – brings to mind the earlier section of the poem where the priest is incapable of understanding language but can interpret gestures.<sup>78</sup> 'Hieroglyphics' also makes self-deprecating reference to the text's own impenetrability, to the barriers which inevitably attend the evocation and interpretation, the finding and telling of truth. The onus is firmly placed on the reader ('you') – 'Can you read?' – to decipher the truth of the text. In her 'Journal of a Living Experiment' (here, reflecting on the experience of teaching poetry), Sexton contemplates such a conundrum. The errors in her syntax unwittingly exemplify the very barriers which she describes:

It was the poet's job is to write so their understood [sic] [. . .] Poems shouldn't be hieroglyphics. They should be explicit . . . easily understandable . . . moving. Not that you shouldn't read a poem twice [. . .] Not that I wanted

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<sup>76</sup> In J. L. Austin's terms, discussed in more detail in the next chapter, changing a performative utterance into a constative statement.

<sup>77</sup> Myers, 'The Hungry Sheep Look Up', p. 21; Phillips, p. 17.

<sup>78</sup> See *ABC of Reading* (New York: New Directions, 1960).

them to guess what I meant, but I wanted them to guess what the poem said. I kept referring to the text.<sup>79</sup>

Again, we find Sexton emphasising the importance of the text and its reading as the source of truth – although she also acknowledges the difficulties inherent in this discourse. There is a profound anxiety here, an anxiety about being incomprehensible, and thus about the failure of the confession.

The poem returns, finally, to the problematic exchange between speaker and priest (penitent and confessor). The failure to tell the truth is matched here (as in a number of Sexton's other poems) by the audience's failure to hear it:

When I tell the priest I am full  
of bowel movement, right into the fingers,  
he shrugs. To him shit is good.  
To me, to my mother, it was poison  
and the poison was all of me  
in the nose, in the ears, in the lungs.  
That's why language fails.  
Because to one, shit is a feeder of plants,  
to another the evil that permeates them  
and although they try,  
day after day of childhood,  
they can't push the poison out.

In a letter of May 1974 addressed to J.D. (Sandy) McClatchy (who was engaged in research on the poet's work and who had offered some comments on 'Is It True?'), Sexton explains: 'As it so happens, in the biographical/confessional truth of it all, it was both first a priest then a psychiatrist. Neither liked the "evil" until I made it into a metaphorical truth-telling, shit driven explanation.'<sup>80</sup> Sexton's comments encapsulate the ambivalent position of the confessional speaker. She is applauded (by the 'priest'/psychiatrist/confessor) for her purgative or therapeutic act (for the 'gift' of the faeces), yet she is condemned by her culture (by critics) for her sordid revelations, and she is simultaneously seized by her own anxiety about, and revulsion towards, her emissions. The 'metaphorical truth-telling, shit driven explanation' attempts to bring these polarised positions into proximity (yoking 'shit' and 'good', 'poison' and nutrition). It emphasises the latent contiguity – even identity – between them. The 'metaphorical truth-telling, shit driven explanation' (the poem) offers itself as a paradigm of the process by which truth (which is not finite, and does not precede the text) is a product of reading, of interpretation. 'Shit' is, in one context or for one reader, a metaphor for evil; in another context or for another reader, it is a metaphor for good.

<sup>79</sup> 'Journal of A Living Experiment', 29 September 1967, HRHRC.

<sup>80</sup> Anne Sexton, Letter to J.D. (Sandy) McClatchy, 29 May 1974. HRHRC.

Finally, in a supreme metaphor for confessional process, the speaker is forced to concede: 'I can only imagine it is true.' Truth can never be found or 'told', instead it must be approached and suggested in metaphor, fictionalised, 'imagine[d]'. It cannot even be played out on the speaker's body – for this, too, has betrayed her:<sup>81</sup>

Maybe I'm dead now  
and have found Him.  
Maybe my evil body is done with.

In a manner which entirely exemplifies the larger points made by 'Is It True?', the final section of the poem is susceptible to at least two major and contradictory interpretations. From one perspective, it suggests that there is a pre-textual truth which will, inevitably and finally, emerge. Truth will out, and will side-step any attempts to capture it, showing itself only when the speaker has given up the search (rather like in 'A Little Uncomplicated Hymn' where it is on abandoning the attempt to capture her daughter's experience that the truth surfaces). In other words, the poem does answer – in the affirmative – its own questions: it finds 'truth' and it offers us a truthful representation. Alternatively, the answer or truth, such as it is, is that the question is insoluble. There is no glorious epiphany, only a mechanical gesture. There is no sense of resolution, only tenacity, persistence:

For I look up,  
and in a blaze of butter is  
Christ,  
.....  
but who lives on, lives on  
like the wings of an Atlantic seagull.  
Though he has stopped flying,  
the wings go on flapping  
despite it all,  
despite it all.<sup>82</sup>

In Sexton's library, now held at the University of Texas at Austin, is a heavily annotated copy of a book entitled *Helping Your Child to Understand Death*. Sexton has underlined one particular line – 'the mystery is harder to bear than the reality' – and has inscribed 'always' in the margin. This seems to me to signify both the question and the answer of 'Is It True?' It invokes the condition of indeterminacy, the absence of closure, the inevitable continuation of the quest (hence the wings continuing to flap 'despite it all'),

<sup>81</sup> See Sexton's complaint: 'the body's rebelling' in her 'Journal of a Living Experiment', 29 September 1967, HRHRC (qtd in Chapter Three).

<sup>82</sup> The first draft of 'The Child Bearers' (MSt.) is prefaced: 'Joan [changed to 'Jean' in the published version], death comes close to all of us, flapping its awful wings at us.' 45 *Mercy Street*, manuscripts and typescripts, HRHRC. Joan was Sexton's sister-in-law, whose sudden death was reported in 'Sweeney' (see Chapter Two).



searching still and endlessly for the awful unknown.<sup>83</sup> Just as 'Is It True?' refuses to declare what 'it' is, the poem exemplifies the impossibility of ascertaining whether 'it' is *true*. Neither the question nor the answer can ever be resolved.

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<sup>83</sup> The image of the wings flapping skywards takes us back to the anxious observation of the carpenter and hen at the beginning of the poem (the same kind of circular trope as we have seen in 'Hurry Up Please It's Time' and 'O Ye Tongues'). The image tacitly, and dreadfully, reminds us that a hen carries on running and 'flapping its wings' even after its decapitation.

## Chapter Six

‘That strange unconscious excitement over words’\*: Sexton and language

‘Language fails’, writes Sexton; ‘Oh! There is no translating’, ‘no language is perfect’, ‘be careful of words’, ‘the words aren’t good enough’.<sup>1</sup> As these brief quotations from a number of different poems and volumes indicate, Sexton’s is a poetry which is deeply and persistently exercised by the problem of language. Yet hers is also a poetics which is predicated on exploring ‘the possibilities of the word’, one which boldly declares ‘I am in love with words’.<sup>2</sup> Her writing is engaged in a sustained act of attrition and/or courtship with a language which is autonomous, elusive, unpredictable: a language which is *not* a passive medium (not a vehicle for the expression of pre-linguistic emotion) but is concrete, material, and demands scrutiny in its own right. This interest in language is sustained throughout Sexton’s writing: from the early and unpublished poem ‘The Thought Disease’ (which contemplates the concrete properties of language), to the sporadic sequence, ‘Letters to Dr. Y.’ (which problematises discursive linguistic practices such as ‘the talking cure’), to the fairy-tale poems of *Transformations* (which indicate the potential fictionality of language). Sexton’s preoccupation is apparent, finally, in the late poems of *The Awful Rowing Towards God* (published posthumously in 1975) which foreground the heterogeneity of language. As she explains in her penultimate Crawshaw lecture, what motivated her to start writing was not a ‘compulsion’, not the need to obtain some ‘expressive-purgative’ release, but rather, ‘that strange unconscious excitement over words.’

Certainly, such a persistent and quizzical concern with language has precedents (for example, in the work of Gertrude Stein, William Carlos Williams and others). Confessional poetry’s debt to such forebears has been recognised by a diverse range of critics, from Kenneth Rexroth and Peter Brooker to Marjorie Perloff (who proposes ‘a family tree that goes [from Pound] by way of Williams to Black Mountain, the Objectivists, and the confessional poets’).<sup>3</sup> However, Sexton’s critics have uniformly failed to acknowledge the

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\* Crawshaw Lectures (9) p. 3, HRHRC.

<sup>1</sup> Respectively, ‘Is It True?’, ‘Love Song’, ‘Is It True?’, and ‘Words’ (last two quotations).

<sup>2</sup> ‘Letter Written During a January Northeaster’ and ‘Words’.

<sup>3</sup> *Poetic License*, p. 121. Brooker cites Charles Olson’s influence in reorienting the American poetic tradition ‘along the axis of Ezra Pound – William Carlos Williams – Louis Zukofsky’. ‘Introduction: Reconstructions’, in *Modernism/Postmodernism*, ed. by Peter Brooker (London and New York: Longman, 1992), pp. 1-33 (pp. 7-8). Rexroth identifies a: ‘reaffirmation of the anti-literary, no-nonsense aesthetic that goes back to Imagism and Literary Cubism’, an attitude which is shared by ‘almost all the poets of this generation [. . .] from Anne Sexton to Ed. Sanders’. ‘The New American Poets’, *Harpers Magazine*, 230.1381 (June 1965), pp. 65-71 (p. 67).

significance of this lineage, and specifically, its importance to her scrutiny of language. J. D. McClatchy, for example, explicitly denies that there is any common ground:

Among the barriers the self constructs are the familiar defense mechanisms: repression, displacement, suppression, screen memories, condensation, projection and so on. Such psychological techniques, in turn, have their rhetorical analogues, not surprisingly those most favored by modernist poets and their New Critics: paradox, ambiguity, ellipsis, allusion, wit, and the other “tensions” that correspond to the neurotic symptoms by which the self is obscured. And in order to write with greater directness and honesty about their own experiences, Sexton and the other confessional poets have tended to avoid the poetic strategies of modernism – to depress poetry, so to speak – and have sought to achieve their effects by other means.<sup>4</sup>

It is the argument of this thesis that such reductive and credulous readings of Sexton’s poetry have, precisely, failed to do justice to the ‘paradox, ambiguity, ellipsis, allusion, wit and the other “tensions”’ which characterise her work.

Sexton’s poem ‘The Thought Disease’, for example (written in April 1960 but never published), toys with the same kinds of concerns as had exercised Gertrude Stein, William Carlos Williams and Wallace Stevens.<sup>5</sup> The title itself tacitly invokes Williams’s point, that there are (or should be) ‘no ideas / but in things’.<sup>6</sup> It posits that immediacy of perception is preferable to the ‘disease’ of contemplative thought. Thus it also brings to mind the search in Wallace Stevens’s ‘An Ordinary Evening in New Haven’ for

The poem of pure reality, untouched  
By trope or deviation, straight to the word,  
Straight to the transfixing object, to the object

At the exactest point at which it is itself,  
Transfixing by being purely what it is.<sup>7</sup>

As Sexton avers in her ‘Journal of a Living Experiment’, ‘It’s the most important part of writing . . . being concrete, being specific.’<sup>8</sup>

Sexton’s ‘The Thought Disease’ contemplates the physical properties of language, here represented by the alphabetical symbols on the typewriter (this idea of the typewriter as the source and master of language emerges repeatedly in Sexton’s poetry, and will be discussed in due course). In this respect, Sexton may be said to go one stage further than

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<sup>4</sup> ‘Somehow to Endure’, p. 251.

<sup>5</sup> ‘The Thought Disease’, unpublished typescript, HRHRC (quotations in square brackets indicate manuscript amendments to the original text). See Appendix One.

<sup>6</sup> William Carlos Williams, ‘A Sort of a Song’, *The Collected Later Poems of William Carlos Williams* (London: MacGibbon and Kee, 1965), and ‘Paterson’, *Collected Poems 1909-1939*.

<sup>7</sup> Wallace Stevens, ‘An Ordinary Evening in New Haven’, *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* (London: Faber and Faber, 1945).

<sup>8</sup> ‘Journal of a Living Experiment’, 29 September 1967, HRHRC.

Stein.<sup>9</sup> She breaks language down, not simply into words and sounds, but into its individual, component letters, and thereafter proceeds to play with the multiple possibilities which each discrete letter suggests:

Taking them separately, I see the legs  
of children, pigs, chickens, a bald head,  
boards to walk over, sticks bent by hands.

As we saw with reference to 'hieroglyphics' in the previous chapter, Sexton is here also exploring the possibilities of the ideogram (as proposed by Ezra Pound). The signification of the letters of the alphabet is to be understood pictorially rather than semantically. The poem contemplates the resonance of a selection of letters in turn (beginning with 'a, you are a world of your own / with an umbrella over your head'), each time addressing their concrete, physical properties rather than their linguistic suggestiveness.<sup>10</sup> In lines which subtly allude to the interest in palindromes and mirror-images evident elsewhere in Sexton's work, the poem explains: 'b and d is a fat [pudgy] nine month old baby / looking [sitting] in front of a mirror.'<sup>11</sup> Finally, and I would argue highly significantly, given the anxiety which Sexton expresses in other poems about the commercialisation of poetry and the commodification of language, the poem contemplates 's': 'that snake, that swan, / with a knife you are money.' In other words, with a strike or line through its heart, 's' is physically transformed into the \$ sign. Clearly, 'The Thought Disease' is not assimilable into the expressive-realist modes of reading typical of Sexton criticism. It can only be read with an eye to the insights of modernism; that is, by attending to its allusiveness, its tensions, and its wit.

If the poetry has, as McClatchy suggests, been 'depress[ed], so to speak', this is surely a consequence of critical failure rather than of Sexton's poetic practice. And it would certainly seem that there has been a widescale reluctance or failure to engage with what are, after all (and in keeping with the properties of the language which is their subject matter), complex and elusive texts. These are difficult poems to read, being characterised by seeming incomprehensibility, frustrating aporias, an irreducibility to coherence, and a general resistance to being rendered (in the sense both of being 'represented' and 'reduced') in

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<sup>9</sup> William Carlos Williams argues that Stein 'has gone systematically to work smashing every connotation that words have ever had, in order to get them back clean'. 'A 1 Pound Stein', p. 163.

<sup>10</sup> As Freud argues: 'Words are frequently treated in dreams as though they were things.' *The Interpretation of Dreams* [PFL 4], ed. by Angela Richards, trans. by James Strachey (Harmondsworth: Pelican, 1976; repr. Penguin, 1991), p. 403. William Carlos Williams muses, in 'The Simplicity of Disorder': 'This is the alphabet qwertyuiopae[s?]dfghjklzxcvbnm. The one extraordinary thing is that no one has yet taken the trouble to write it out fully.' *Selected Essays*, pp. 91-101 (p. 97). See also Sexton's ambiguous and contradictory view of language as concrete *and* aural: 'A poem is spoken. A poem has to be spoken. I like it on the page, I like to see the stops of the lines.' Interview with William Packard, p. 47.

accordance with the paradigmatic concerns of confessionalism. This is particularly true of the later poems (for example, those in *The Awful Rowing Towards God*) which have tended to be regarded as afterthoughts or aberrations, as atypical of Sexton's poetry, and even as unworthy of publication. It has been said that 'these last poems are not Sexton's best work; marred by a loss of control, the lines are less poetry than *cri de coeur* [sic]', although I would counter that this perception of early 'control' is a chimera, and thus that it cannot be said to have been lost.<sup>12</sup> Such judgements take us back to M.L. Rosenthal's approval (discussed in Chapter One) of the 'force of character' and 'clarity of line' evident in Sexton's early poetry, and signify the same conservative and formalist critical perspective.<sup>13</sup> Kate Green complains (of another posthumous volume) that certain poems 'seem inaccessible [. . .] seem closed, like a code though full of energy. The language emanates from an inner place that stammers and does not articulate'.<sup>14</sup> In short, these poems seem to give us no clues, their code remains uncracked, the key is hidden. Yet this, I will argue, represents their fascination. Far from being 'inaccessible', they give us access to the condition of language as Sexton finds it. Our own inability to comprehend the language simply replicates hers. The difficulty of the late poems is a symptom and self-conscious exemplification of her main subject – the profound impossibilities of the word. I would argue that Hoffman, Rosenthal, McClatchy and Green misread the fraught – even combative – nature of Sexton's relationship with language. In surrendering to the perceived abstruseness of the later poems, they fail to do justice to some of the most startling and insightful elements of Sexton's poetics.

This reluctance actively to consider the language of Sexton's poetry may, in part, be explained by the general historical tendency to read confessional poetry for its subject matter rather than its form (for 'what the poet has to say' rather than 'how he says it', as Phillips puts it).<sup>15</sup> As Jeanne Kammer explains, 'there is more interest in the substance of [Sexton's] writing, it seems, than in its craft.'<sup>16</sup> Moreover, the 'directness and honesty of language' which McClatchy has identified has beguiled a number of other critics, each of whom has normalised the language of the poetry, seeing it (where they notice it at all) as a

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<sup>11</sup> It is possible here that Sexton is unconsciously confirming Jacques Lacan's concept of the mirror stage as an explanation of the way in which the infant comes to language (or enters the symbolic order). *Ecrits: A Selection*, trans. by Alan Sheridan, (London: Tavistock/Routledge, 1977), p. 5.

<sup>12</sup> Nancy Yanes Hoffman, 'A Special Language', in *South West Review*, 64 (4), 1979 (pp. 209 – 214), p. 213.

<sup>13</sup> *The New Poets*, p. 131.

<sup>14</sup> Kate Green, 'Inventory of Loss', in Colburn, ed., *Telling*, pp. 376-80 (pp. 376-7) (first publ. in *Moons and Lion Tails*, 2.2 (1976)).

<sup>15</sup> Phillips, pp. xiii-xiv.

<sup>16</sup> 'The Witch's Life', p. 113. Kammer, although expressing disapproval of those critics who emphasise 'substance' over 'craft', proceeds to repeat this mistake, concentrating on the 'recurrent themes of grief and loss' and the 'depiction of physical and emotional distress' in *To Bedlam and Part Way Back*.

natural, self-evident medium.<sup>17</sup> Hence Phillips's approving explanation that 'the poetry is written in the ordinary language of open speech',<sup>18</sup> and Linda Wagner-Martin's – somewhat tautological – argument that Sexton 'used such direct expression that there could be no pretending that she was saying anything other than she was'.<sup>19</sup> Such readings fail to recognise that the appropriation of a direct and honest voice may itself be a 'poetic strateg[y]' akin to those 'favored by modernist poets' (to quote McClatchy again). As will be evident from the readings offered throughout this thesis, 'direct expression', or the apparently clear and authentic, may be a disguise or fallacy. It is not possible to establish transcendent meaning or to be definitive about what 'she [the poet] was saying'.<sup>20</sup>

Language, from the perspective of the majority of Sexton's critics (and notwithstanding the lessons of, say, Stein and Williams), is regarded as passive, transitive and mimetic, as simultaneously expressive and referential. Jeanne Kammer proposes that Sexton's language 'appears bound up with the act of seeing, of accurate observation and naming – truth sought out and confronted in the solidity of the printed word, the appropriate image'.<sup>21</sup> Yet it is clear from her poems about language that there are no such certainties. Language is rarely, if ever, 'accurate', but rather, as psychoanalysis has shown, is characterised by strategies of displacement and condensation and fraught with ambiguity and contradiction.<sup>22</sup> 'Naming' (as the fallibility of naming in 'Little Uncomplicated Hymn', discussed in the previous chapter, demonstrates) is neither transparent nor referential: the 'printed word' is not reliable. Further, as we saw in 'Is It True?', an image which may be 'appropriate' to one reader may be incomprehensible to another or may be subject to an entirely different interpretation (thus, for Freud, Dora's 'no' means 'yes').<sup>23</sup> Suzanne Juhasz, too, although usually a perceptive commentator on women's poetry, is unjustifiably positive about the power and beneficence of language. She speculates about Sexton's biographical problems, and arraigns language as the natural and effective solution or panacea (the noun is apt, since Juhasz implies that language can somehow be applied to, and heal, extra- or pre-linguistic problems):

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<sup>17</sup> See Alvarez's insistence on the 'transparency' of Robert Lowell's poems, by which he implies that the language gives direct access to some pre-textual experience. 'Beyond All This Fiddle', p. 231.

<sup>18</sup> Phillips, p. 17.

<sup>19</sup> 'Anne Sexton: Poet', p. 4. Hillis Miller proposes, as characteristic of 'literature', 'the way that it does not straightforwardly say what it means, but always says it in terms of some other thing, often by way of what seem wildly ungrounded analogies'. *Tropes*, p. ix.

<sup>20</sup> As Linda Hutcheon asks: 'If, as recent structuralist theories have suggested, language constructs and directs our world and the limits of what we can conceive and communicate, then can there be such a creature as a transparent linguistic text in the traditional realistic mode?' *Narcissistic Narrative*, p. 87.

<sup>21</sup> 'The Witch's Life', p. 118.

<sup>22</sup> For example, see Freud's 'Fragment of an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria' ['Dora'], *Case Histories I: Dora and Little Hans* [PFL 8], ed. by Angela Richards, trans. by James and Alix Strachey (Harmondsworth: Pelican, 1977; repr. Penguin, 1990), pp. 31-164 (pp. 106, 130).

<sup>23</sup> *ibid.* pp. 55, 92-3.

And into this dilemma [Sexton's plight as mentally tormented wife and mother] will come, as an act of grace, poetry to save your life by giving you a role, a mission, a craft: an act, poetry, that is you but is not you, outside yourself. *Words that you can work and shape and that will stay there, black and true*, while you do this, turn them into a poem, that you can send away to the world, a testimony of yourself.<sup>24</sup>

There is little in Sexton's writing to support such an optimistic reading of the way in which language functions. She disproves the view that language is reliable, constant and homogenous (Juhasz's belief that words can be moulded and despatched, as reliable witnesses of the self, and Kammer's sense of language's 'accuracy' and 'solidity'). Her poetry is imbued with a deep scepticism about whether words can be 'worked' in this way (that is, whether it is within the subject's gift to 'do this' to them), whether language may be picked up and cast off at will and according to need, and whether language offers access to truth.

Clearly, in addition to the precedents to be found in twentieth-century poetry, there are a number of theoretical precursors to Sexton's problematisation of language. For example, several of her poems (such as 'Telephone', discussed below) confirm some of the insights of Saussurean linguistics. Moreover, her poetry may be said to anticipate more recent poststructuralist accounts of language, and postmodernist poetic practice (a point which will be discussed in more detail in the Conclusion to this thesis). In order for us to obtain a clear understanding of Sexton's interrogation of language, it is necessary to situate her work within the context of a burgeoning contemporary debate about it – a debate which seems not to have impinged on the work of most critics of Sexton's poetry. Marjorie Perloff's complaint about 'reductive' readings of the postmodern poetry of Susan Howe and Lorine Neudecker (and about the critical inability to do justice to the linguistic and meta-linguistic complexity of the texts) is surely, applicable to readings of Sexton's work:

I take it that poetry is, first and foremost, the language art. In the wake of deconstruction, one would think it no longer necessary to repeat the truism that the verbal signifier is not equivalent to its signifieds. But the current wave of ideologically motivated criticism has ushered in a curious form of backsliding. When, on the one hand, we talk theory, we continue to talk of "difference" and "erasure," of "decenteredness" and "supplementarity." When, on the other, we engage in practical criticism, whether of poetry or of prose, we read texts as if language were a mere conduit to a truth beyond it.<sup>25</sup>

Central to Sexton's poetry about language, and to her problematisation of previously accepted beliefs about its communicative and referential potential, is the understanding that there is no

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<sup>24</sup> 'Seeking the Exit or the Home', p. 261 [my emphasis]. Juhasz argues that 'words brought with them power, power to reach others. They gave her as well a social role, "the poet," that was liberating.' As my argument in Chapter Three indicates, such a positive reading of the adventitious position of "the poet" is belied by Sexton's considerable ambivalence about the role.

essential or intrinsic relationship between language and referent, signs and the things that they name. As Easthope and Thompson suggest (here describing in more detail the approach taken by Perloff, and, more importantly, summarising the roots of Sexton's understanding that language creates and organises our world, rather than simply reflecting some pre-linguistic actuality):

It would be hard to exaggerate the importance to that shift [that is, the 'paradigm shift' from 'conventional author-based literary criticism' to radical theoretical approaches] of the linguistic distinction introduced by Ferdinand de Saussure between the word as *signifier* or shaped sound and the word as *signified* or meaning. At this point 'reality' as the *referent* to which words may (or may not) refer becomes a secondary or derivative effect on human discourse, ceasing to be available as a foundation on which certain knowledge can be based.<sup>26</sup>

This unsettling of the hitherto accepted certainties about language (and thereby about truth and referentiality) paves the way for a profound and comprehensive reorientation of critical perspective on Sexton's writing.<sup>27</sup>

Saussure's opening contention, in the first part of his *Course in General Linguistics*, that 'some people regard language, when reduced to its elements, as a naming-process only – a list of words each corresponding to the thing that it names', illustrates the view of language characteristic of previous Sexton criticism. As Saussure explains:

This conception is open to criticism at several points. It assumes that ready-made ideas exist before words [...] it lets us assume that the linking of a name and a thing is a very simple operation – an assumption that is anything but true.<sup>28</sup>

'Telephone' (from the posthumous volume, *Words for Dr. Y.*) dispels such an assumption, demonstrating that words do not necessarily correspond to the things which they seem to name. Thus, it refutes, for example, Jeanne Kammer's fallacious assertion that Sexton's poetry evidences 'accurate observation and naming [. . .] truth sought out and confronted, reflected in the solidity of the printed word'. The 'Telephone' of the title does not, in fact, designate a telephone, but rather a telephone book: 'Take a red book called TELEPHONE, / size eight by four. There it sits.' The object bears the label 'TELEPHONE' but the label,

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<sup>25</sup> *Poetic License*, pp. 36, 51. 'Backsliding', incidentally, suggests that some kind of progress has been made – something which is not, in fact, evident in Sexton criticism.

<sup>26</sup> *Contemporary Poetry*, pp. vii-viii.

<sup>27</sup> Although Sexton does not acknowledge a debt to Saussure, and there is no evidence of her having encountered his work (the second edition of his *Course in General Linguistics* was translated and published in New York in 1959), I think it justifiable to suggest that her problematisation of language, her demonstration of the two-sided and arbitrary nature of the sign, and her denial of the referentiality of language, echo and exemplify his thought.

<sup>28</sup> *Course in General Linguistics*, p. 65.



taken literally, is misleading. Sexton exploits, to startling effect, Saussure's understanding that 'the choice of the signifier [...] actually has no natural connection with the signified'.<sup>29</sup> There is a purposive disjunction here. The signifier 'telephone' seems to suggest the signified (a telephone) but in fact signifies a different thought concept (a telephone book), thus creating a distinct and meaningful, but unexpected, sign. 'Telephone' signifies either and both concepts. Similarly, the aural pun on 'red' and 'read' (a 'red' book which is 'read') draws attention to the potential ambivalence of language or, as Sexton puts it in an earlier poem ('Letter Written During a January Northeaster' (PO)), to the 'possibilities of the word'. The effect of this is to highlight the unpredictability of language, the absence of referentiality, the fact that, as Saussure argues, 'language is not a mechanism created and arranged with a view to the concepts to be expressed.'<sup>30</sup>

Later in the poem, it transpires that the non-coincidence of the signifier 'telephone' with its apparent signified is not the only misnaming:

Yet some of these names are counterfeit.  
There beside *Frigidaire* and *Dictaphone*,  
there beside Max and Fred and Peggy and John,  
beside Eric of Seattle and Snook of Saskatchewan  
are all the dear dead names. The ink lies.  
Hello! Hello! Goodbye. And then excise.

The telephone book names, and so revivifies, the deceased. The continued inclusion of 'all the dear dead names' implies that they are still alive, still contactable. Yet, as the speaker concludes, this is erroneous ('some of these names are counterfeit'), serving only to prove that 'the ink lies'. If we read 'ink' as a metonym for language generally, we can see that what is being suggested – and demonstrated – is that once one sign (perhaps the misleading 'Telephone' of the title) has proved fallacious, then the value of all and any signs, of the confessional poem, and of language itself, is cast into doubt. For Juhasz, the words 'stay there, black and true'. For Sexton, 'the names are counterfeit' and 'the ink lies'.<sup>31</sup>

'The Collaborator' [*sic*] (an unpublished poem, written in July 1965 and filed among the manuscripts of Sexton's *Live or Die*) traces the history of the subject's relationship with language.<sup>32</sup> The subject questions her own authority to speak (echoing, here, a line from

<sup>29</sup> *ibid.* p. 69.

<sup>30</sup> *ibid.* p. 85.

<sup>31</sup> In her *Hudson Review* interview, Sexton comments: 'people lie to themselves so much – postmarks lie, even gravestones lie.' Interview with Patricia Marx, p. 76.

<sup>32</sup> Unpublished typescript, HRHRC [see Appendix One]. Although the point which I am making here relates to the poem's contemplation of language, it could also be argued that the poem is, in part, a study of the psychotherapeutic situation (and, specifically, of Sexton's husband's therapy [see Middlebrook, *Biography*, pp. 156, 211]). The title signifies both an alliance and an act of treachery, the first line: 'Now he has taken it over', is echoed throughout the poem in images of exploitation and invasion and indicates, perhaps, Sexton's ambivalence about his annexing of her domain.

another unpublished poem of the same period, 'The Mother of the Insane': 'Because I publish it all, must I own it too?'):

In the beginning it was a passion. True!  
But in the beginning I was so obsessed  
with wrapping it up that I did not consider  
it was something I would ever own.

Sexton foregrounds the mutability of language, its slipperiness (its propensity to suggest, in T.S. Eliot's words, that which is not 'meant at all'), its capacity to function metaphorically – that is, by displacement:

True it was only words.  
But words, when you bring them forth  
take on certain human characteristics.

Sexton reverts to her familiar metaphor for poetic form as a cage, a barrier or restraint which permits the safe release of otherwise uncontainable and dangerous figures and emotions: 'I made it entirely out of deformed things / that bloomed as I stuffed them up the cage.' Writing, it emerges, is a battle between recalcitrant language and determined – even ruthless – poet:

And you ask how this can be done?  
Words do it. Words grow inside of me.  
[even then] I murder them and put them in a sack.  
Words vibrate, [however]. Pump on, in spite of it.  
Words sometimes refuse to be put in place.  
And yet, I tell you, I did it to them.

Again, Eliot's writing (from section five of 'Burnt Norton') emerges as a palimpsest:

Words strain,  
Crack and sometimes break, under the burden,  
Under the tension, slip, slide, perish,  
Decay with imprecision, will not stay in place.

In Sexton's poem, the words are depicted as the produce or offspring of the speaker ('words grow inside of me'), or they are likened to the physical core or heart of her being (they 'vibrate' and 'pump on' like the heart muscle). Language then, like the poetry which it sustains (see Chapter Three) is a form of 'blood letting'.

The physical, elusive, and combative nature of language is evident, too, in the 'Letters to Dr. Y.' sequence of poems. The sequence is riddled with metaphors and metonyms for writing: 'voice', 'breath', 'books', 'cry', 'words', 'names', 'read', 'asks', 'sings', 'said', 'truth', 'tongue', 'says', 'answer', 'sign'. That these issues are of primary concern in this group of poems, written sporadically over a period of ten years from 1960 to 1970, provides

further grounds for challenging the orthodoxy that it is only in Sexton's later poems that such complex linguistic questions are raised. Language (metonymically represented by the 'Letters' of the title) ostensibly signifies communication – it is referential and functional, and offers the key to understanding. Yet it is also potentially 'disorderly', vicious, private, querulous, deceitful and incomprehensible.

Diana Hume George reads 'Letters to Dr. Y.' as a direct account of that 'ritualized human relationship unique to our time and our social structures, that between a healer of the mind and his or her patient',<sup>33</sup> while Caroline Hall concludes that 'therapy itself is the theme' of the poems.<sup>34</sup> However, although it is apparent from the outset that the therapeutic situation provides the background to the sequence (the speaker takes the role of needy subject [the analysand 'I'] addressing an authoritative analyst [veiled behind the professional and pseudonymous mask of 'Dr. Y.']), I would argue that it is the discursive nature of this 'heal[ing]' and 'therapy' – its identity as the '*talking* cure' – which is isolated and put to the test. George insists that 'Sexton shows us how free association works in the analytic situation, how information is exchanged between patient and analyst, how therapy progresses',<sup>35</sup> whereas I would counter that Sexton actually shows us the opposite of this. The positive rhetoric of George's 'works' and 'progresses', although forming a correlative with Juhasz and Kammer's perception of the productive malleability of language, finds little in the poems to substantiate it. Sexton's poetry demonstrates that language hinders, confuses and obfuscates its own articulation, preventing 'free' association – not just in the therapeutic arena (although this is the context here, and fittingly so, as the place where such issues are thrown into sharpest relief), but also more generally.<sup>36</sup>

The sequence takes the form of a series of letters addressed by the speaker to her Doctor/therapist, interspersed with remembered dialogue between the two. The opening lines of the first of the 'Letters to Dr. Y.' ('February 16, 1960') confirms the implication of the sequence title that language (here represented by the Doctor's voice) is a means of connection.<sup>37</sup> Moreover, language is represented as a physical necessity, as the source of energy and life (something like the vibrating heart which we see in 'The Collaborator'):

Dr. Y.  
I need a thin hot wire,  
your Rescue Inc. voice

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<sup>33</sup> *Oedipus Anne*, p. 147.

<sup>34</sup> Hall, p. 162.

<sup>35</sup> *Oedipus Anne*, p. 147.

<sup>36</sup> We should note Freud's caution in 'An Autobiographical Study' that 'free association is not really free', p. 72.

<sup>37</sup> Unusually for Sexton, none of the 'Letters to Dr. Y.' is given a title, although all are referenced by the date of writing.

to stretch me out,  
to keep me from going underfoot

These lines alone contain multiple and sophisticated references to language in its broadest sense. The first line with its aural pun on 'Y' (why?) may be read either as a mark of the Doctor's own interrogative stance (he is Dr. Why because, as a psychotherapist, he always asks 'why?') or as an instance of the speaker's own questioning of the addressee: 'Doctor, why...?' (In the manuscript drafts, the sequence is entitled: 'Letters to Doctor Why – 1958-1968.')

The 'thin hot wire' is a metonym for intense or heated telephone conversation, which also conveys the sense of language as charged and powerful. In addition, 'hot wire' – if read as a verb – carries connotations of forced entry, access gained by illicit means in place of a key. Thus the hot wire of the Doctor's voice provides an entry into the subject's unconscious.<sup>38</sup> The third line, like the first, features aural puns on 'Rescue Inc.' (that the Doctor's voice stands in for the emergency services and is actively 'rescuing'). Moreover, it may be argued that the Doctor's voice, by keeping the speaker alive, is rescuing her writing (or 'ink' ['Inc.']). It should also be said that in all of these possible readings, it is the materiality of language, its physical presence (the connection stripped to its bare, essential elements), which is emphasised.

Language here is denaturalised, or put at issue. It is figured as volatile, anarchistic and prohibitive. It seeks to control the speaker rather than – as we see in George's account – to liberate her. At issue is inhibition (hence the 'cop car') rather than expression:

Death,  
I need your hot breath,  
my index finger in the flame,  
two cretins standing at my ears,  
listening for the cop car.

The rhetoric of violence and attrition here is characteristic of Sexton's writing about language. We see it in a number of other poems, where language is figured as vicious, volatile, prohibitive, mechanistic and alienated. In her *Hudson Review* interview, Sexton describes her writing in similar terms: 'What you're doing is hunting for what you mean, what you're trying to say. You don't know when you start [...] you're always fighting to find out what it is you want to say.'<sup>39</sup> To another interviewer, she explains: 'it's just like a runner getting into training or a fighter hitting a punch bag.'<sup>40</sup> Again, the 'free association' which

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<sup>38</sup> That Sexton figures the analyst as holding this key marks a contemporary revision of Freud's 'Fragment of an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria ('Dora')' with its avowal that 'sexuality is the key' and that 'no one who disdains the key will ever be able to unlock the door'. It also anticipates later Sexton poems (for example, 'The Gold Key,' discussed below).

<sup>39</sup> Interview with Patricia Marx, p. 73.

<sup>40</sup> Interview with Brigitte Weeks, p. 115.

George approves is problematised, and shown to be enacted under conditions of prohibition and restraint. These metaphors of 'fighting', 'hunting' (and later in the same interview, of 'struggling') suggest that language is the enemy. It is the quarry to be caught, or the predator to be escaped. It is alien and separate, it is watchful – or needs to be watched. Sexton pictures herself as 'fighting' or 'hunting' for a meaning which is always one step beyond her – evasive, ever-escaping, uncontainable and thus inexpressible. Similar rhetoric is found in Eliot's poetry. 'East Coker', for example, with its militaristic metaphors ('raid', 'squads', 'conquer', 'strength and submission' and 'fight') regrets that 'one has only learnt to get the better of words'.<sup>41</sup>

The second poem of the sequence ('June 6, 1960') pursues many of these ideas. It self-reflexively comments on the Faustian situation of the (particularly confessional) poet ('I have words for you, Dr. Y., / words for sale'). Like a number of other poems (for example, 'Making A Living'), it conveys the plight of the poet who is involved in displaying – indeed selling – herself to an audience of avaricious punters.<sup>42</sup> In this respect, 'June 6, 1960' bears comparison with Sylvia Plath's 'Lady Lazarus'. Both poems open with a sense of personal bravado: Sexton's defiant 'I have words for you, Dr. Y.', like Plath's provocative, 'I have done it again', wields words like weapons. Both poems use similar devices of enumeration as a way of identifying and controlling the multiplicity and weight of the traumas to which each speaker has been exposed. Images of violence dominate in both, as do the figures of the inept Doctor ('Dr. Y.' and 'Herr Doktor') and the sense that life is a play or drama or spectacle for the entertainment of others. In 'Lady Lazarus', the 'peanut-crunching crowd / shoves in to see'; in 'Letters to Dr. Y.', it is

Words right now, alive in the head,  
heavy and pressing as in a crowd.  
Pushing for headroom, elbowing,  
knowing their rights.

In Plath's poem, it is the audience which proves murderously voyeuristic; in Sexton's, it is the language. (In Plath's 'Words', however, with its resounding opening line 'Axes', it is language which threatens.) We find a similar situation in 'Demon' (AR) where the speaker becomes the victim, and object, of surveillance by language (by 'the public voyeur eyes / of my typewriter keys').

In 'June 6, 1960', the addressee (Dr. Y.) demands order, progression, coherence (asking four times '*And where is the order?*'), yet the words themselves resist such control. The language of the poem revels in its own disorderly profusion:

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<sup>41</sup> Marianne Moore makes a similar point in her poem, 'Baseball and Writing': 'It's a pitcher's battle all the way – a duel –', *Complete Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 1984).

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.

Sexton's poetry, then, represents not an 'ordering of experience through language' (as Jane McCabe would have it), but rather its *disordering*.<sup>43</sup> A later poem, 'Flee on Your Donkey' (LD) (first written in 1962 and revised in 1965), regrets the loss of this – in fact fruitful – linguistic chaos: 'disorder is not what it was. / I have lost the trick of it!' In 'June 6, 1960', the words come 'one after the other'; however, their effect is not cumulative and coherent (not like the layers of snow, one on top of another, which make a snowball), but rather is random and chaotic. They form a hotchpotch 'gathering': 'an old string ball, / one from the rag bag.' Thus language is devalued. This 'disorderly display of words' is not sparkling and well-aimed (like a snowball) but diffuse, disordered and superfluous.

Oppressed by the Doctor/addressee's insistent demands, the speaker herself attempts to define and thus contain the words. The metaphors of the snowball and string bag may be read as an attempt to impose order by way of establishing some meaningful (metaphorical) equivalence. In a vain attempt at appeasement, the speaker tries to conform to Dr. Y.'s request by enumerating the qualities of language:<sup>44</sup>

Words, words, words,  
 piled up one on another,  
 making a kind of weight of themselves.  
 1. each less than a pound  
 2. each less than a stick of butter  
 3. one the size of a roasted peanut, light and wrinkled  
 4. another one, a slim precise girl, a sunflower seed  
 5. one, as small as my thumb, a beach stone in the hand  
 6. and there is always that one, the toad. The toad  
 has many brothers.

Geoffrey Hartman notices the 'obtruding irrelevance of number' in many of Sexton's poems, and suggests that this 'adds to the sharpness, evoking as in love-songs or magic rimes [. . .] the action of fate, its absurd yet demonically just jackpot'.<sup>45</sup> To which I would add that the speaker, in this poem, is victim of its unpredictability and its accumulative power. In Saussure's terms, 'language is a system of interdependent terms' (Sexton's words, 'piled up one on another / Making a kind of weight of themselves') within which 'the value of each

<sup>43</sup> "'A Woman Who Writes'", p. 217.

<sup>44</sup> Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, with Hamlet's 'Words, words, words' (II. 2. 191), is a possible intertext. See my discussion of 'A Little Uncomplicated Hymn' in the previous chapter.

<sup>45</sup> 'On To Bedlam and Part Way Back', in McClatchy, ed., pp. 118-21 (p. 120) (first publ. in *Kenyon Review*, XXII.4 (1960)).

term results solely from the simultaneous presence of the others'.<sup>46</sup> This echoes the point made in 'Said the Poet to the Analyst' (mentioned in the previous chapter):

one word is able to pick  
out another, to manner another, until I have got  
something I might have said ...  
but did not.

In 'June 6, 1960', these 'words, words, words' cannot direct the reader to any prior order or transcendent truth – their meaning is self-relational and shifting, never fixed, always potentially disordered. One can only ascertain order by reference to other 'words' in the system, and language signifies by a process of metaphorical and metonymical equivalence. This is a crucial blow to readings of confessional writing which see the confessional word as sign of some prior, determinate truth.

Here, as in the second stanza of 'February 16, 1960', language is potentially threatening or punitive. The speaker responds to the questioning refrain, '*And where is the order? You will ask*', with a list of

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.

The aural pun on 'rights' (also suggesting the word 'writes' and that they are 'right' or correct) is significant. It implies that it is language which writes her: the words write, and are 'right'; they know their 'rights' and, ideally, put things to 'rights'. 'An Obsessive Combination', discussed in the Conclusion, similarly plays with the words 'writes', 'rites' and 'right'. In 'February 16, 1960', the subject is subordinate to, rather than in control of, a language which is predatory, assertive, punitive and also profoundly alien (hence 'masculine').

The final stanza of 'June 6, 1960' isolates – at first in the form of a metaphor – one particular word; the un-named, elusive word which, were it to be captured, might prove to be the truth (or meaning, or order) which patient (speaker) and Doctor (addressee) alike seek:

A word, a sunflower seed.  
One we would surely overlook,  
So easily lost, a dead bee.  
So vulnerable.

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<sup>46</sup> *Course in General Linguistics*, p. 114.

She is already trampled, that one,  
having traveled so far from the heart.

The metaphor of the bee is particularly important. First, as we shall see later, it is used consistently in Sexton's poems about language as a metaphor with which to encapsulate the simultaneously functional and destructive, purposive and erratic, nature of language. Second, ontologically speaking, it represents an oxymoronic metaphor for being and nothingness ('bee'/'dead'). Finally, 'Bee' is the nick-name which the poet, James Wright, bestowed on Sexton at around this time, and which she assumed in correspondence with him. Sexton and Wright were involved, for most of 1960 and intermittently thereafter, in a passionate (hence 'heart'), predominantly written, and finally failed (hence 'so vulnerable' and 'trampled') relationship.<sup>47</sup> That Sexton uses the same signifier ('Bee') for her (writing) self and for language is deeply telling.

The sense of language's autonomous, alien, evasive, potentially aggressive indeterminacy – the principle subject of 'Letters to Dr. Y.' – is developed and intensified in *The Awful Rowing Toward God*.<sup>48</sup> Like 'Letters', this volume features multiple metonyms for writing.<sup>49</sup> Almost every one of the thirty-nine poems in the volume foregrounds images of writing, language, or poetry. 'Story' figures repeatedly, as do 'say', 'song', 'speak', and 'speeches' (and their metonyms 'tongues' and 'mouth'); 'write', 'writers', and 'words in my hand' (and the metonyms 'fingers' and 'hands'); and 'lines', 'typewriter', 'naming' and 'Logos'. The volume's very title gestures towards language's indeterminacy: 'Awful' may be read as 'solemnly impressive', or, as 'causing dread; terrible, appalling' [*Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*]. The homonym of 'rowing' reads, initially, as rowing a boat, and this is the sense elaborated in the final poem of the volume, 'The Rowing Endeth': 'I am mooring my rowboat / at the dock of the island called God.' However, it may also be taken to signify 'arguing' (having a row). In many ways, this is a resonant reading bearing in mind the contradictions and uncertainty explored within the text, and the final 'rowing' which ends in resolution (a 'Rejoice-Chorus at our two triumphs').

The two possible readings of 'rowing' exemplify the crucial point which Sexton makes in 'Is It True?':

Do you understand?  
Can you read my hieroglyphics?  
No language is perfect.

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<sup>47</sup> Middlebrook, *Biography*, pp. 128-34. See also Middlebrook, 'Anne Sexton: The Making of *The Awful Rowing Toward God*', pp. 223-35.

<sup>48</sup> This volume, although published before the 'Letters to Dr. Y.' sequence, generally contains poems written some time later.

<sup>49</sup> I use 'writing' in the Derridean sense of 'all that gives rise to an inscription in general, whether it is literal or not'. *Of Grammatology*, p. 9.



.....  
 That's why language fails.  
 Because to one, shit is a feeder of plants,  
 to another the evil that permeates them.<sup>50</sup>

Language 'fails' because the signifier 'shit' has numerous potential signifieds.

Notwithstanding the directness of expression (to invoke Linda Wagner-Martin's assertion that it would be difficult to find anything more 'direct' than 'shit'), it is not possible to be certain about the speaker's referent (or, in Wagner-Martin's terms, precisely what 'she was saying'). 'Is It True?' – like the other poems discussed in this chapter – reveals an intense (and self-reflexive) ambiguity about the status of the language within which it is couched, and about the futility of trying to use any language code (English, hieroglyphics) to communicate. With this in mind, one can read the homonym 'Rowing' in the volume title as signifying 'to one' the action of rowing a boat, while representing 'to another' a disagreement between two parties. 'Rowing' may also be read as a reference to the process of writing – specifically, of writing poetry (the act of arranging language in rows or lines in order to reach or communicate something to someone).<sup>51</sup>

The poems in *The Awful Rowing Toward God* expose the failure of words to deliver what is expected of them. They exemplify, *contra* Kammer and Juhasz's view, the impermanence of the printed word, the transience of language, and the absence of referentiality. The volume's opening poem, 'Rowing', draws instant attention to its own textuality: 'A story, a story! / (Let it go. Let it come).' This is a writing which is to make its own way in the world – independent of any authorial control. The poem conveys, in waves of cumulative lines (punctuated with the refrains 'I grew, I grew' and 'I am rowing, I am rowing', which emphasise the repetitive and ceaseless nature of the task), the futility of trying to use language as a route to truth or meaning. 'Rowing' (metaphorically, writing) gets one nowhere: 'but I am rowing, I am rowing, / though the wind pushes me back.'

Similarly, the third poem in the volume, 'The Children', opens: 'The children are all crying in their pens / and the surf carries their cries away.' Again, within the economy of Sexton's references to language, 'pens' may be read both as a reference to children's play-pens and as a metaphor for writing. That 'crying in[to] their pens' may be read as a disparaging reference to the confessional poet's work (the poet here infantilised as one of 'the

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<sup>50</sup> Sexton's sense of the identity between phonetic language and the ideogram (hieroglyphics) is particularly resonant in the context of contemporary debates about language. For Saussure, ideographic script should – notwithstanding its apparent differences from phonetic writing – be considered as simply another example of a linguistic system. *Course in General Linguistics*, p. 26. For Derrida, hieroglyphics function as the necessary other of 'alphabetic' writing. *Of Grammatology*, p. 25.

<sup>51</sup> See William Shurr for a discussion of the parallels with Emily Dickinson's 'rowing' metaphors. 'Mysticism and Suicide: Anne Sexton's Last Poetry', in Wagner-Martin, ed., pp. 193-210 (first publ. in *Soundings*, 68 (1985)).

children' seen releasing private emotion via the flow of ink from their pens) is confirmed subsequently in the poem:

They are writing down their life  
on the wings of an elf  
who then dissolves.

A similar image is used in 'Jesus, the Actor, Plays the Holy Ghost' (AR) in order to suggest the fragility and temporality of the written word (an image which has a similar effect to the sunken paper boat in 'End, Middle, Beginning', discussed in Chapter Four):

I take the yellow papers  
and I write on them  
but they crumble like men's ashes.

It is the artifice and transience of the text which are emphasised. In a challenge to the structures and beliefs of the Christian humanist tradition, the truth and permanence of the Gospel is shown to be mere words on a page – material, and thus vulnerable, and patently not a sign of power or transcendental purpose.

In addition, Sexton emphasises the inadequacy of the writer. From a purely physical point of view, the flexibility of the whole arm is necessary for an effective writing style. Sexton, however, imagines a part of the arm dissolved in water, and thus useless: 'There will be water, / My elbows will be salt.' A similar image appears in 'Rowing', where the speaker's childhood memories centre around her physical inability to write:

Then there was school,  
the little straight rows of chairs,  
blotting my name over and over,  
but undersea all the time,  
a stranger whose elbows wouldn't work.

Sexton also refutes the assumption – explicit in Juhasz, but latent elsewhere – that words are hers to 'work', to shape and manipulate as she pleases, that language is an essentially plastic and passive medium. To Sexton, language (metonymically represented in numerous poems in this volume and elsewhere by the image of typewriter) is far from subordinate and malleable. It is mechanistic, domineering, and autonomous. It is, above all, dissociated from the author, self-willed and responsible for generating its own meaning. The supposedly originating author, in this model, becomes the tool of the machine. As Sexton explicitly stated, on

submitting the manuscript of *The Awful Rowing Toward God* to her agent: 'It's a bit "odd" but after all, *I* didn't do it, the typewriter did.'<sup>52</sup>

In 'Frenzy' (AR), for example, it is the typewriter and not some prior originating 'author', which is responsible for the text:

I am, each day,  
typing out the God  
my typewriter believes in.

'Frenzy', incidentally, may be read as an account of the process of composing this whole volume. At the time of writing, Sexton revealed: 'I am working at the dead heat coming from the muse's mouth',<sup>53</sup> and in retrospect she commented that *The Awful Rowing Toward God* 'was written in two-and-a-half weeks of frantic, devout inspiration'.<sup>54</sup> Thus Sexton distorts classical notions (deriving from Sophocles' *Phaedrus*) about the sources of inspirational frenzy. It is the typewriter, the machine, the process of writing which is both subject and object, source and medium.

A similar dissociation of self from text appears in the chilling, sombre, even abject poem 'The Big Boots of Pain' (MSt.). This depicts the speaker at the moment of realisation that the typewriter (or, by extension, language) is disloyal. Writing is not acquiescent (it cannot be 'worked'), instead it is alien and antagonistic:

One learns not to blab about all this  
except to yourself or the typewriter keys  
who tell no one until they get brave  
and crawl off the printed page.

In her 1966 television interview, Sexton complains that the typewriter obstructs free expression. She plays a recording of the music of Villa Llobos at full volume, and explains:

In there is something I've lost and I just can't get it out of this damned typewriter [. . .] I feel like words are phoney compared to music [. . .] if it would come out of my fingers somehow [. . .] something in that and I don't know what it is; would come out, but I don't know. It never really has properly.

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<sup>52</sup> *Letters*, p. 403 (7 February 1974). This contradicts Charles Olson's view of the way ahead for contemporary poetry. He perceives the typewriter to be in the service of the poet: as the 'personal and instantaneous recorder of the poets' work'. Sexton does not share this perception. For her, the typewriter is the source, not the 'recorder' of, or vehicle for, the writing. 'Projective Verse', in *The Poetics of the New American Poetry*, ed. by Donald Allen and Warren Tallman (New York: Grove, 1973), pp. 147-58 (p. 155).

<sup>53</sup> Anne Sexton, Letter to Paul Kurt Ackerman, 10 February 1973, HRHRC.

<sup>54</sup> Anne Sexton, Letter to Brian Sweeney, 6 April 6 1973, HRHRC.

Sexton describes her sense of the abject failure of words to evoke the experience suggested by the music (an indication, perhaps, of the irreconcilability of the symbolic and semiotic orders). As she speaks, she angrily gestures towards the keys of the typewriter which stands on the desk beside her: 'Can I put into words what that feels, that music feels like? It's a terribly difficult thing but it moves me, if it moves me, I'm already moved see I'm working with these clumsy horrible things.'<sup>55</sup>

Sexton proceeds to distinguish between listening to music (which is a purely aural act) and creating the poem (which is first visual, and only secondarily aural): 'Hear, I don't hear, I watch; then I see my, my . . . ear is so tuned to what I see that I know without thinking.'<sup>56</sup> The aural origins of Sexton's writing have been well documented,<sup>57</sup> but this physical, concrete dimension of her poetic practice – the importance of the physical properties of the words as they appear on the page – has not hitherto been recognised. Certainly, it exemplifies that connection with the objectivists and, for example, with Robert Creeley, which Perloff has inferred. However, it also sets Sexton apart from some of the key principles of Olson's projective verse (which Perloff also proposes as a precursor). Whereas, for Olson, it is 'the breath, the breathing as distinguished from the hearing' which is important, one might argue that, for Sexton, it is 'the sight as distinguished from the hearing'. For Olson, 'that verse will only do in which a poet manages to register both the acquisitions of his ear *and* the pressures of his breath.'<sup>58</sup> For Sexton, it is the acquisitions of her *eye* which are primary.

To return to the motif of the typewriter (or, metonymically, writing): that it is watchful, uncooperative, and potentially judgmental is demonstrated in a number of poems. 'The Room of My Life' (AR) is dominated by the vast, solid, omniscient typewriter: 'the forty-eight keys of the typewriter / each an eyeball that is never shut.' The typewriter's surveillance suggests, first, that the speaker in this room (or life) is under constant scrutiny. Second, it confirms that meaning derives from the machine rather than from its operator (the speaker of the poem). The typewriter is personified, yet the contradictory effect of this is to reinforce the mechanistic features of language. Interestingly, Sexton had engrossed the typescript of her unpublished poem 'The Thought Disease' with the words 'Fix this', and it is possible to read this early (1960) poem as a draft of 'The Room of My Life' (which the

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<sup>55</sup> 'Anne Sexton', National Educational Television outtakes (1 March 1966), American Poetry Archives, San Francisco State University. In another poem, 'Music Swims Back to Me', conventional signifying systems are redundant ('there are no signposts in this room' and 'no signs to tell the way'). Instead, music becomes the signifier: 'la la la, Oh music swims back to me.' Music operates within its own schema in contravention of orthodox logic (it 'pours over the sense').

<sup>56</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>57</sup> See Maxine Kumin 'A Friendship Remembered', in McClatchy, ed., pp.103-10 and 'A Nurturing Relationship: A Conversation with Anne Sexton and Maxine Kumin, April 15 1974' [interview with Elaine Showalter and Carol Smith], *Women's Studies*, 4 (1976), 115-36.

<sup>58</sup> 'Projective Verse', p. 149.

typescript shows, was written in January 1973). In both poems, the typewriter, and the letters, phonemes and words which it represents, are defamiliarised.

'The Room of My Life' reads as a description of the literal and figurative site or source of writing (the room/life represents the physical and psychic space from which the writing emerges). Here, Sexton exploits – by taking literally – the process by which the confessional writer lays herself bare. She invites her readers in, such that they can more effectively scrutinise and understand what is going on inside: 'Here / in the room of my life.' This space, the scene of writing, is predominantly a place of disorder and uncertainty: 'in the room of my life / the objects keep changing.' The typewriter, as we have seen, is on guard, watching its owner's and user's every move. The books are in cut-throat (but essentially trivial) competition with each other ('the books, each a contestant in a beauty contest'). The writer's chair swallows up and destroys any creature which sits on it, exuding murderous intent: 'the black chair, a dog coffin made of Naugahyde.' Everywhere, there are objects waiting to trip up, ensnare, or injure the speaker/writer:

The sockets on the wall  
waiting like a cave of bees,  
the gold rug  
a conversation of heels and toes,  
the fireplace  
a knife waiting for someone to pick it up,

Even the windows (representing illumination and thereby, in Platonic thought, insight and understanding) make a vicious threat (they 'drive the trees like nails into my heart'). Similarly, the lights in this room are destructive and vindictive ('the lights / poking at me'). The poem closes with the dreadful sense that even in the writer's supposedly sacrosanct study, and even when writing about what she knows best ('my life'), she is ultimately the subject, and victim, of a deceitful and malicious language. The objects with which she has crowded her room and her life have assumed an independent life of their own, 'compelled' not by her inner trauma, but by language:

nothing is just what it seems to be.  
My objects dream and wear new costumes,  
compelled to, it seems, by all the words in my hands  
and the sea that bangs in my throat.

The typewriter functions both as the autonomous source of writing and as a demanding and judgmental vehicle of surveillance. The specific allusions in 'The Room of My Life', 'Is It True?' and elsewhere to typewriter *keys* are thus particularly significant. First, the implicit association of 'lock' with 'key' sustains the impression of the typewriter's

(writing's) controlling and prohibitive function. Second, the motif of the typewriter's keys acknowledges – and subsequently interrogates – orthodox assumptions about language's propensity to open the door, or give access, to meaning and truth.<sup>59</sup> From such a perspective, language provides the key, opening the door to the hitherto hidden and giving access to the previously unknown. Thus the image of the typewriter key may be read as a potent and optimistic symbol for the process by which language unlocks, or releases, what lies inside. In a letter to Tillie Olsen, Sexton implicitly makes this connection (the metaphor of 'spring[ing] outward' suggesting the action of springing, or breaking, a lock):

I hate to work by hand, hate my hand. I'm not too friendly with the typewriter either these days . . . no poems . . . a silence like a snail growing inward . . . whereas typewriter keys should/could spring outward.<sup>60</sup>

Sexton's use of this metaphor indicates her frustration (hence the emphasis on what the 'typewriter keys should/could' do) with language's inability, or refusal, to free her.

In Sexton's *Transformations*, too, the image of the key is employed in order to explore the possibilities and/or limitations of language (in the sense of its capacity to open experience up for scrutiny or display) and to test whether words can indeed deliver such a liberating release. Throughout the volume, questions about language, about the roles of teller and listener, about speech and silence, about discursive and linguistic power, are foregrounded. The prefatory poem, 'The Gold Key', by means of its emphasis on metonymies of writing (speaking, arms, book, mouth, story), introduces the predominant theme of the whole volume:

The speaker in this case  
is a middle-aged witch, me --  
tangled on my two great arms,  
my face in a book  
and my mouth wide,  
ready to tell you a story or two.

The point is not simply that the witch (usually the villainous object of the fairytale) has assumed the position of subject, but that she has assumed a voice. It is not her presence, even

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<sup>59</sup> Sexton implicitly refutes William Carlos Williams's suggestion that language is the key ('words are the keys that unlock the mind'), 'The Poem as a Field of Action', in *Selected Essays*, pp. 280-91 (p. 282). For Sexton, the words/keys are as likely to restrict as to liberate thought.

<sup>60</sup> Anne Sexton, Letter to Tillie Olsen, 2 October 1965, HRHRC. Sexton emphasised the importance to her writing of her acquaintanceship with Tillie Olsen in her interview with Martha White of the Radcliffe Institute of Independent Study: 'Hearing Tillie's seminar probably changed my writing as much as anything [. . .] the whole theory of failure and how you can waste yourself.' Radcliffe Institute Archives.

at centre-stage, which is significant, it is the fact that she speaks.<sup>61</sup> The psychoanalytic connotations of 'this case' are worthy of note. 'The Gold Key', as the prefatory poem, provides access to 'this case' (*Transformations*). Again, Freud's 'Dora', and the importance of 'keys' (or the search for keys to an understanding of the 'case'), forms a palimpsest. Freud's analysis suggests a connection between locks, keys (as a symbol of the genitals) and rooms (as a metaphor for women). As he concludes, 'sexuality is the key.'<sup>62</sup> Jane Gallop argues, in her essay 'Keys to Dora', that there are in fact multiple keys to Dora's story, including the reader's own voyeuristic desire, which motivates a search for the key by which to interpret and possess the truth.<sup>63</sup>

In *Transformations*, the speaker-witch highlights the significance of 'the key'. She speaks directly to her audience ('I have come to remind you') who are at once the individuals named in the poem and the wider readership ('all of you'), and she is at pains to emphasise our shared desire for knowledge and understanding. We all want to own that key that 'should/could' give access to the truth: 'we must have the answers.' And although one child ('let me present to you this boy') is selected to find and use the key to this case, there is a marked insistence on the fact that his role is symbolic of all of us:

He is each of us.  
I mean you.  
I mean me.<sup>64</sup>

The monosyllables and repetitions in the last two lines quoted here linger on and emphasise our shared involvement. Of course, the key belongs in a lock (the lithograph illustrations which accompany the original volume of *Transformations* emphasise this implicit connection by depicting, in close-up, an eye peering through a key-hole).<sup>65</sup> The relationship between the key and the lock represents a metaphor for language – for the necessary link between signifier and signified, word and referent, poem and truth. Hence, and ideally, when the key engages with the lock meaning is revealed.

Yet the point is made that the key offers only possibilities, not answers, suggestions rather than solutions. When the boy, on everybody's behalf, 'turns the key', the result is mystification rather than clarity:

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<sup>61</sup> Roland Barthes argues that: 'If psychoanalysis is condemned, it is not because it thinks but because it speaks; if one could confine it to being a purely medical practice and immobilize the patient [...] they would worry about it as little as they do about acupuncture.' *Criticism and Truth*, p. 43.

<sup>62</sup> 'Fragment of an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria' ['Dora'], pp. 137, 102, 156.

<sup>63</sup> *In Dora's Case: Freud, Hysteria, Feminism*, ed. by Charles Bernheimer and Claire Kahane, (London: Virago, 1985), pp. 200-20 (p. 206).

<sup>64</sup> 'you' / 'me' echoes the closing words ('my face, your face') of 'For John', discussed in my Conclusion.

Presto!  
 It opens this book of odd tales  
 which transform the Brothers Grimm.  
 Transform?  
 As if an enlarged paper clip  
 could be a piece of sculpture.  
 (And it could.)

Sexton foregrounds issues of interpretation, and highlights the indeterminacy of writing and the arbitrariness of the sign. To paraphrase 'Is It True?' ('to one, shit is a feeder of plants, / to another the evil that permeates them'), 'to one' 'an enlarged paper clip / could be a piece of sculpture', but 'to another' it is simply an item of stationery. Even when we think we have hold of the key (language), its signification remains uncertain.

In subsequent poems in the collection, we find similar doubts about the potential of language to act as the key to insight or understanding. In 'Rumpelstiltskin', the one-time miller's daughter (now Queen) is faced with the task of finding the dwarf's real name in order to avoid losing her child to him. She must find the (nominal) key to his identity in order to achieve freedom. So long as Rumpelstiltskin retains secret possession of the name, he has the power. Control seems to transfer *from* Rumpelstiltskin when she discovers, or unlocks, his secret:

The queen was delighted.  
 She had the name!  
 Her breath blew bubbles.

Yet the nominal key (access to his name) fails to provide the full access, or insight, which it promises. Although deprived of his name, Rumpelstiltskin lives on: 'one part soft as a woman, / one part a barbed hook.' The poem ostensibly resolves the puzzle of – or finds the key to – the dwarf's identity. Yet as Rumpelstiltskin's final act shows, the key, or the name (or language itself?), can never be understood as providing a single, transcendent answer or truth. All that it can do is give access to yet another linguistic door to be opened, to a further sequence of complex signs.

As we have seen, use of the key brings its own risks. It is possible to see these poems as palimpsests of the Pandora's box myth and of the fairy-tale, 'Bluebeard' (revisited as the title story of Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber*),<sup>66</sup> with its prohibition against unlocking

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<sup>65</sup> See 'A Reminiscence' by Barbara Swan (the book's illustrator), in McClatchy, ed., pp. 81-88.

<sup>66</sup> Angela Carter, *The Bloody Chamber* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981).



the door which obscures Bluebeard's murderous secrets.<sup>67</sup> 'Locked Doors', in *The Awful Rowing Toward God*, develops some of these themes. Here, what lies behind the locked doors can only be imagined:

there is a locked room up there  
with an iron door that can't be opened.  
It has all your dreams in it.  
It is hell.

The scene is reminiscent of Bluebeard's castle: a place of cruelty where physical contact is prohibited or punished ('The people inside have no water / and are never allowed to touch'). This is a place of repression – 'They are mute / They do not cry help' – and finally, of death: 'their hearts are covered with grubs.' The speaker (and metaphorically, the confessional poet) attempts to reach these people (the imprisoned, the repressed, the unresponsive) through language, to unlock the 'iron door' (the physical door of their prison, and the metaphorical door of their own repression). Yet her efforts are futile. Again, the ability and will to wield the key does not guarantee that communication will be established. The key which promises access and insight is rusty – that is, imperfect, marked, ineffective. In Perrault's 'Bluebeard', the key is tainted with blood (red, like the rust in Sexton's poem), and this is read as a sign of the wife's treachery and unworthiness.<sup>68</sup> 'Locked Doors' concludes with the speaker's profound sense of her own unworthiness, of the inadequacy of her own key (language) to perform the task asked of it:

I would like to unlock that door,  
turn the rusty key  
and hold each fallen one in my arms  
but I cannot, I cannot.  
I can only sit here on earth  
at my place at the table.

'Riding the Elevator into the Sky' (AR), from the same volume as 'Locked Doors', proposes a similar tension between desire and prohibition. The subject of this poem, like Pandora or Bluebeard's wife, succumbs to the temptation of viewing what remains hidden. The

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<sup>67</sup> There are traditional fairytale connections between the key and the voice, prohibition and desire. Bruno Bettelheim describes a Grimm story 'Our Lady's Child' in which a poor girl is cared for by the Virgin Mary: 'much as in the very different tale of "Bluebeard," the Virgin entrusts the girl with the keys to thirteen doors, all but one of which she may open. The girl cannot resist this temptation, lies about her actions, and in consequence has to return to earth, mute. She undergoes severe ordeals and is about to be burned at the stake. At this moment as she desires only to confess her misdeed, she regains her voice to do so, and is granted by the Virgin "happiness for her whole life".' *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1978), p. 14.

<sup>68</sup> The colour red features elsewhere in Sexton's poetry and connotes blood, violence and, for example in 'The Double Image', 'Suicide Note' and 'Christmas Eve', the volatile mother/daughter relationship.

compulsion to unlock the door proves irresistible, although in this case, turning the key gives access to indeterminacy rather than resolution; it

opens something –  
 some useful door –  
 somewhere –  
 up there.

That language may be volatile, erratic, self-possessed, is confirmed in the recurrent metaphor, mentioned briefly earlier, of the word as ‘bee’ and of language as ‘bee-like’. As Diane Wood Middlebrook notes, one of the side-effects of Thorazine (the medication which Sexton was prescribed to control her manic episodes) was a sensation akin to bees stinging the skin. She comments that the drug also had sedative properties, and produced a distinct decline in Sexton’s linguistic and poetic capacities.<sup>69</sup> However, Middlebrook does not make the crucial connection between this prescription and metaphors in Sexton’s poetry of bees as belligerent and linguistically damaging. For Sexton, the bee is simultaneously violent and destructive, useful and susceptible to domestication. The bee offers a sophisticated metaphor for inspiration and burn-out, volatility and vulnerability, desire and necessity. In addition to her own experience with Thorazine, it is arguable that – coming some eight years after the publication of Plath’s *Ariel* with its sequence of bee poems – Sexton also had her writing (and her struggle to write) in mind.<sup>70</sup>

In Sexton’s ‘Words’ (AR), the image of the bees (here ‘swarming insects’) emphasises the cumulative power of words, their unpredictability and volatility. They are likely to swarm out of control, and under their own direction, at any moment:

Be careful of words,  
 even the miraculous ones.  
 For the miraculous we do our best,  
 sometimes they swarm like insects.<sup>71</sup>

This bears comparison with Plath’s ‘Words’ which opens with the threatening ‘axes’ and, more importantly, with her ‘The Arrival of the Bee Box’ which draws specific attention to the force of the bees as a community, and uses explicitly linguistic images. Listening to the bees trapped in the box, Plath’s speaker exclaims:

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<sup>69</sup> *Biography*, pp. 221-32.

<sup>70</sup> Sylvia Plath wrote to Sexton about ‘keeping bees and raising potatoes’, Letter to Anne Sexton, 21 August 1962, HRHRC. In ‘The Bar Fly Ought to Sing’ (p. 10), Sexton recalls: ‘Sylvia wrote of one child, keeping bees, another child, my poems’ – a memory which surfaces in her poem ‘Sylvia’s Death’.

<sup>71</sup> See also the speaker’s complaint in ‘Hurry Up Please It’s Time’: ‘they don’t want that / they want bee stings.’

The unintelligible syllables.  
 It is like a Roman mob,  
 Small, taken one by one, but my god, together!<sup>72</sup>

The images recall Sexton's 'Words, words, words' from 'June 6, 1960', and her explanation that 'one word is able to pick / out another, to manner another' from 'Said the Poet to the Analyst'. The subject of 'Words' is objectified and reified, and also revered. The performative power of language (its ability to make things happen, or work miracles) is acknowledged, but is also subject to a caution. The poem is predicated on the understanding that language is beyond the speaker's control. The paradox is that language, although understood to be performative, is here forcing the speaker to perform – to do justice to, or do her best for, the 'miraculous' words.

Yet Sexton's poem also offers an important recognition of the potential beneficence of language, what it might be able to do if only its powers could be harnessed, or one's own antipathy and fear (Plath's 'my god, together!') could be quashed. For although sometimes these word 'swarm like insects', at other times they 'leave not a sting but a kiss':

They can be as good as fingers.  
 They can be as trusty as the rock  
 you stick your bottom on.  
 But they can be both daisies and bruises.

Words offer extremes of pleasure and pain interchangeably. Like bees, which may signify contradictory things (flowers/pollen or stings), 'they can be both daisies and bruises' (we recall the image of the 'dead bee' in the 'Letter to Dr. Y.' of 'June 6, 1960', discussed earlier, which signifies life and death, being and nothingness). The potential of language is described in disconcertingly erotic ways: words may leave 'a kiss', may be 'as good as fingers', or 'as trusty as a rock / you stick your bottom on'. The speaker's relationship with language is, then, a sexual or even masochistic one (the courtship or act of attrition which I mentioned in the introduction to this chapter). In spite of the bruising received at the hands of demonic and unpredictable language, 'Yet I am in love with words.' In images of innocence, fertility and organic growth (again sexualised – the lap, the legs, the passionate face), words are revered in language which echoes that of a love poem:

They are doves falling out of the ceiling.  
 They are six holy oranges sitting in my lap.

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<sup>72</sup> See also Plath's 'Words, Heard by Accident, Over the Phone'.

They are the trees, the legs of summer,  
and the sun, its passionate face.<sup>73</sup>

Again, we recall Plath's bee poems and the distinctly sexual connotations of, for example, 'The Bee Meeting' (with its bride-like veil, its flowers, and its witnesses to the 'wedding' and defloration of the virgin bride). Similarly, in Sexton's poem 'Frenzy', the speaker masochistically calls to the bees, sacrificing herself in order to acquire the inspiration which they proffer. In a final, subliminal gesture towards Sylvia Plath's English poems (represented by the zenith of *Ariel*),<sup>74</sup> she prays that the frenzy which is sustaining her writing

like bees stinging the heart all morning,  
will keep the angels  
with their windows open,  
wide as an English bathtub.

However, the attempt in 'Words' to use language in order to evoke plenitude, abundance and contentment spills over or exceeds its own limits. The glimpse at the fertile possibilities of language ('six holy oranges', the sun's 'passionate face') is snatched away. As in 'Just Once' (discussed in Chapter Four), the epiphany is momentary and we are left with a more rudimentary confession about the inadequacy of words:

Yet often they fail me.  
I have so much I want to say,  
so many images, words, proverbs, etc.  
But the words aren't good enough,  
the wrong ones kiss me.  
Sometimes I fly like an eagle  
but with the wings of a wren.

The abbreviating device 'etc.' paradoxically expresses its own failure of articulation, demonstrating that the 'words, words, words, / piled up one on another' (to quote from 'Letters to Dr. Y.') are indeed not 'good enough'. The limitations of the word are displayed in the monotonous monosyllables of the lines, 'the wrong ones kiss me' and 'but with the wings

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<sup>73</sup> The simile of the orange in 'Words' is interesting. In Sexton's work, it represents fertility, radiance, sustenance and holism. The orange, as opposed to the apple (a signifier of women's sin) is an image of female potential. In 'Hurry Up Please', the speaker has 'swallowed an orange, being a woman'. Hélène Cixous celebrates the orange as the source of women's self-realisation and thus community: 'to all of the women whose voices are like hands that come to meet our souls when we are searching for the secret [. . .] I dedicate the gift of the orange.' Cixous's earlier allusion, incidentally, to an external and discrete 'writing' which is self-empowered and separate from the speaker (as, for example, in her comment that 'a writing came, with gleaming hands in the darkness' and 'a writing found me when I was unfindable to myself') parallels the autonomy of language in Sexton's writing. *Vivre L'orange*, (Paris: des femmes, 1979), pp. 16, 12.

<sup>74</sup> For a reading of *Ariel*'s English roots, see Tracy Brain, 'Your Puddle-Jumping Daughter', *English*, 47.187 (1998), 17-39.

of a wren'. The poem closes with a reiteration of the speaker's responsibility towards, and subservience to, language:

But I try to take care  
and be gentle to them.  
Words and eggs must be handled with care.  
Once broken they are impossible  
things to repair.

The connotations of this superficially simplistic (emphasised by the rhyme of 'care' and 'repair') truism are many. First, the lines offer a caution against breaking one's word (that is, being untruthful): eggs – like oranges – signify creativity, and, in their fragility, they offer a reminder of the writer's responsibility. Second, there is a latent recognition of that implied connection (language to referent, text to truth) which sustains the speaker's faith in the language being used and the reader's trust in the text's authenticity. These could, it is suggested, be shattered at any time. Thus, crucially, the permanence, truthfulness and referentiality of language is once more cast into doubt.

Notwithstanding the promise of its title, Sexton's 'Love Song' (LD) (written in 1963, some ten years earlier than 'Words') is already exercised by the potentially destructive, violent, and annihilating nature, first of language, and then by extension, of the writing self. Further, like 'Little Uncomplicated Hymn', it questions how, if at all, one can translate 'love' into 'song' (experience into poetry/language):

I was  
the girl of the chain letter,  
the girl full of talk of coffins and keyholes,  
the one of the telephone bills,  
the wrinkled photo and lost connections.

The writing self is out of control, victim of a language which seems to have taken on a life of its own (hence 'chain letter', signifying both an unwanted, seemingly self-generated and binding correspondence, and the propensity of language to yield meaning by means of a kind of chain reaction).<sup>75</sup> The reference to 'keyholes' or, more specifically, to 'talk of [...] keyholes', marks a latent but significantly incomplete allusion to language's potential to function as a key. Here, there is no key, not even truly a 'keyhole', but only 'talk of one'. This is the scene of 'lost connections'.<sup>76</sup> Language fails, and we are left with abstraction, ellipsis, aporia. The speaker refers to herself as

the one who kept saying –

<sup>75</sup> See Saussure's notion of a syntagmatic chain, p. 123.

<sup>76</sup> An echo here of the last line of Lowell's 'Memories of Left Street and Lepke'? *Life Studies* (London: Faber and Faber, 1959; repr. 1985).

*Listen! Listen!*  
*We must never! We must Never!*  
 And all those things . . .

The vicious and precise imagery of parts of this poem indicate language's performative potential (as J.L. Austin proposes: 'the issuing of the utterance is the performing of an action', or, as Hillis Miller puts it, a 'true performative [. . .] bring[s] something into being that exists only in the words or by means of the words').<sup>77</sup> Sexton makes reference (speaking about herself in the third-person, as though to dissociate herself from the violence of the language) to

an old red hook in her mouth,  
 the mouth that kept bleeding  
 into the terrible fields of her soul ...

Language is self-lacerating just as it describes self-laceration. Similarly, in 'The Dead Heart' (AR), it is the performative force of the single word 'EVIL' (significantly, in form and effect, a reversal of the imperative to 'LIVE') which kills the speaker's heart, and thus metaphorically the writing. The word is capitalised for emphasis and as though to reinforce its status as a command, its performative responsibility:

How did it die?  
 I called it EVIL  
 I said to it, your poems stink like vomit.  
 I didn't stay to hear the last sentence.  
 It died on the word EVIL.  
 I did it with my tongue.

In 'Love Song', however, there is a shift in tone after this moment of abjection (the bleeding mouth, the desolate soul). The poem slows down, and the violence gives way to acquiescence, to a cessation of hostilities. The speaker abandons her struggle against writing and gives way to its fumbling uncertainty: 'and then she'd be as safe as / as delicate as...' As the repetitions and ellipses indicate, the (chain) letter is left open, since closure and meaning cannot be forced. In the final section of 'Love Song', there is a profound sense of relief attendant on the

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<sup>77</sup> J.L. Austin, *How To Do Things With Words*, ed. by J.O. Urmson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962), pp. 6-7; Hillis Miller, *Tropes*, p. 148. The implicit or explicit statement, 'I confess', may, arguably, be read as a performative in Austin's sense that: 'to say something is to do something' (p. 12); however, it is also arguable that the ostensible performatives uttered by Sexton ('I confess', 'I lie', etc.) fail or, in Austin's terms, are 'unhappy' (p. 14). A performative may be regarded as 'unhappy' if the procedure is not executed by all parties (in the case of a confession, by penitent and confessor), or, where the speaker's intention or commitment fails, or where the action, having been uttered, is not completed in practice (pp. 15, 40, 45-6). As an example of an 'unhappy' performative, see Sexton's comment, quoted in Chapter One: 'I haven't forgiven my father. I just wrote that I did.'

decision to accept language's intrinsic indeterminacy. Not to have to continue the doomed struggle to reduce language to a single, fixed, meaning is, paradoxically, the way to comprehend it. In 'Love Song', as in 'A Little Uncomplicated Hymn', all that can be expressed is the impossibility of expression. As the former concludes:

Oh! There is no translating  
that ocean,  
that field of music,  
that theater,  
that field of ponies.<sup>78</sup>

Similarly, 'Hurry Up Please It's Time', with its sophisticated interrogation of the process of language acquisition ('learning to talk is a complex business'), closes with an acknowledgement of its own linguistic failure: 'we can't translate the language.' This, arguably, is the problem which lies at the heart of Sexton's complex, but nevertheless vital, study of language. Like her modernist precursors and her postmodernist successors, she is profoundly exercised by problems of translation, of transformation, of 'metaphorical [. . .] explanation' (to appropriate Sexton's comments on 'Is It True?'). How does one turn perception, or 'thought' (in the words of 'The Thought Disease'), or 'direct experience' (to quote Linda Wagner-Martin), into words which are, after all, perpetually shifting, elusive, indeterminate, non-referential?

It is in the sequence of poems, 'O Ye Tongues', which closes *The Death Notebooks* (the volume in which 'Hurry Up Please it's Time' is published), that questions about language, and specifically about translation, come to the fore. As a number of critics have noted, the sequence of ten distinct 'Psalms' which makes up the group is loosely based on the eighteenth-century English poet, Christopher Smart's *Jubilate Agno*, and indeed 'Christopher' figures in the poem as the brother/companion of the speaker.<sup>79</sup> Sexton's sequence features many of the same metaphors and metonyms for writing as have been discussed thus far (bees, typewriters, locks, 'ink', and the 'print on the page', for example). 'O Ye Tongues', like previous poems, depicts writing as a magical act (the line, 'we swallow magic and we deliver Anne', from the 'Fourth Psalm' confirms the importance of linguistic 'tricks' in Sexton's poetics). It also implies, as we saw in Chapter Three, that the persona 'Anne' is

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<sup>78</sup> As Derrida suggests, it is a principle of metaphysics that writing is a phonetic translation of language, which is, in turn a translation of "mental experiences" which are, in turn, a translation of truth. This is an ontology which Sexton's 'Oh! There is no translating' challenges. *Of Grammatology*, pp. 10-11.

<sup>79</sup> Sexton was introduced to Smart's *Jubilate Agno* in 1967. Anne Sexton, Letter to Nathaniel Tarn, 13 September 1967, HRHRC. Patricia Meyer Spacks suggests, of *Jubilate Agno*, that it 'insists on full attention to the meaning and possibilities of words'. Sexton's 'Letter Written During a January Northeaster' adopts a similar idiom, insisting on the importance of attending to 'the possibilities of the word'. *The Poetry of Vision: Five Eighteenth-Century Poets* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1967), p. 129.

performatively produced, or conjured up, by the magic of writing.<sup>80</sup> However, it is also the case, as we saw in Chapter Four, that the writing self is a fragmented or dissociated self which can only be represented (translated?) by the figure of synecdoche (in the 'Eighth Psalm', by her 'ten long fingers'). The 'Fourth Psalm', like 'Hurry Up Please', compares the writing act with the first creative offering – in Freudian terms, the 'gift' of the faeces: 'For I shat and Christopher smiled and said let the air be sweet with your soil.' Writing, then, is the necessary elimination of bodily waste (or the translation of food/experience into 'shit', as 'Is It True?' would have it).

The sequence represents a final attempt to understand and control language – to apprehend or reach some reconciliation with it such that it can productively be used, and meaning brought to bear, or, such that experience and thought can be translated. It attempts to exploit the performative potential of language, appropriating – even pre-empting, in its opening lines – the place of God, God's Word, *Logos*: 'Let there be a God.'<sup>81</sup> This is, of course, a bold, even heretical, step, yet one which confirms the ambiguous faith ('is it true?') represented elsewhere in Sexton's writing. Sexton's speaker simultaneously undermines the notion of God's pre-eminence (significantly, she summons 'a', not *the* God) and confirms it by appropriating His powerful idiom (specifically, by mimicking His words in the opening lines and, more generally, by adopting the idiom and antiphonal form of the Biblical Psalms). Throughout the ten Psalms of 'O Ye Tongues', Sexton's protagonist may be seen commanding, praising and appealing to God, assuming authority over His creation ('Let there be seasons') and the right to give benediction ('Bless with the locust'). As though to demonstrate the power of language (or of *Logos*), the scope of 'O Ye Tongues' ranges from the private, personal and confessional ('For I shat and Christopher smiled') to the public, impersonal and shared ('For America is a land of Commies and Prohibitionists'). Sexton's poem is a provocative song of praise, appeal and explanation which, notwithstanding its defiant posture, culminates, in the final Psalm, with a recognition of the inevitable failure and limitations of language.

To return to the metaphors of translation found in 'Hurry Up Please It's Time' and 'Love Song', 'O Ye Tongues' attempts to 'translate' Christopher Smart's 'translation' of the Psalms (*Jubilate Agno*) – Psalms which are, themselves, a 'translation' (a rendering into writing) of the Word of God. As Patricia Meyer Spacks concludes of Smart's writing:

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<sup>80</sup> Sexton explains: '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 [. . .] All I am is the trick of words writing themselves.' Qtd in Middlebrook, *Biography*, p. 82. Similarly, to her agent, Sexton writes: 'whatever I am I am because I wrote it.' *Letters*, p. 288 (14 April 1966).

<sup>81</sup> Stan Smith describes a similar figure in Eliot's 'Mr. Eliot's Sunday Morning Service' as 'an ordinary statement about origins'. *The Origins of Modernism: Eliot, Pound, Yeats and the Rhetorics of Renewal* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1994), p. 120.



Smart, the translator of Horace, working in the asylum on his version – a sort of translation – of the Psalms and of the parables, finds in his efforts with language the promise of his salvation. For there is no doubt in his mind that language in general, poetry in particular, exists – like all the natural creation – to praise the Lord.<sup>82</sup>

Yet Sexton's attempt (and arguably Smart's pre-text) is doomed to failure. By the tenth and final psalm, the speaker has realised that, the ambition of her opening lines notwithstanding, she cannot 'translate *the* language' (that is, the primary, originary Word of God). As J. Hillis-Miller has suggested in his study of religious and secular parables, 'The Word [. . .] is demonstrably untranslatable.'<sup>83</sup> There is no adequate signifying system, and the attempt to appropriate the ultimate (*Logos*) has failed. The only language open to her is predicated on silence: 'For I am placing fist over fist on rock and plunging into the altitude of words. The silence of words.' This insight is, I would argue, crucial to an understanding of the confessional project. Although we may be beguiled by the frankness and ostensible authenticity of confessional revelation, it is precisely in that which cannot be said, that which remains unstated, silent, untranslated (and untranslatable) into words, that truth may reside. There is, indeed, in the words of 'Love Song', 'no translating'.

Patricia Meyer Spacks draws attention to Christopher Smart's punning on the word 'translation':

Let Libni rejoice with the Redshank, who  
Migrates not but is translated to the  
Upper regions.  
For I have translated in the charity, which  
makes things better & I shall be trans-  
lated myself at the last.<sup>84</sup>

She suggests that 'the double meaning of *translate* [to represent in another language, and to 'convey to heaven without death' (*Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*)] provides a way of expressing the power of language'.<sup>85</sup> In Sexton's 'O Ye Tongues', translation – or, more properly, its failure – expresses the ineffectiveness of language, its inability to convey experience or subjectivity. The poem's closing lines ('For God was as large as a sunlamp and

<sup>82</sup> Spacks, *The Poetry of Vision*, pp. 142-3.

<sup>83</sup> *Tropes*, p. 144. Hillis Miller suggests that: 'The failure of translation is not a result of the incompatibility of one idiom and another [. . .] the failure of translation is the result of the absence of any adequate original in any humanly comprehensible language.'

<sup>84</sup> Qtd in Spacks, *The Poetry of Vision*, p. 142.

<sup>85</sup> *ibid.* Diana Hume George suggests that Sexton's poem 'Wanting to Die' (which discusses suicidal urges) foregrounds the difficulties of 'translating from a foreign language' (first, translating action into words, and second, translating the wish to die into a language which, implicitly 'asserts life'). 'Anne Sexton's Suicide Poems', *Journal of Popular Culture*, 18 (1984), 17-31 (pp.21-3).

laughed his heat and us and therefore we did not cringe at the death hole') return us, inescapably, to the beginning of the poem (with its parody of the first, generative, logocentric act: 'Let there be a God as large as a sunlamp to laugh his heat / at you'). Like 'Is It True?', 'O Ye Tongues' finally abandons hope of finding a resolution. It surrenders to the condition of living in uncertainty, rather than persisting with a desperate and doomed attempt to find and tell a truth which is ever-evasive, ever-indefinable, ever-untranslatable.

## Conclusion

## 'The Cracked Mirror'

Sexton's poetry is profoundly self-conscious about its own language, about the dynamics, expectations and limitations of confession, about subjectivity, representation and performance, and about truth and deception. Its subject is not, as her critics typically suggest, the life and suffering of the historical Anne Sexton. Its subject is writing. Yet this *textual* self-consciousness has not, hitherto, been recognised. The self-reflexivity which I have identified in her work has typically been (mis)interpreted as a sign of an unhealthy (because personal) self-obsession, and as evidence of Sexton's own culpable narcissism. Joyce Carol Oates summarises such views thus: 'Sexton has been criticized for the intensity of her preoccupations: always the self, the victimized, bullying, narcissistic self.'<sup>1</sup> Alan Williamson complains, of the 'later Sexton', that she has become 'the uneasy narcissist, self-indulgent and sarcastic at once'.<sup>2</sup> Patricia Meyer Spacks condemns Sexton's 'shrill narcissism' and 'insistent mirroring',<sup>3</sup> and Helen Vendler pointedly gives thanks for a rare volume in which the poet 'turn[s] away from the morass of narcissism'.<sup>4</sup> As Alicia Ostriker concludes: 'Anne Sexton is the easiest poet in the world to condescend to. Critics get in line for the pleasure of filing her under N for Narcissist.'<sup>5</sup>

Indeed, confessional poetry, as a mode, has traditionally been indicted as the preserve of the narcissist ('confessional' and 'narcissistic' often being used synonymously to signal disapprobation). So, Elizabeth Bruss refers to 'the narcissistic indulgence of the confessional tradition'.<sup>6</sup> Edward Lucie-Smith (writing in *Critical Quarterly*) argues that, in contemporary poetry, 'introversion seems to have triumphed over experiment. The poet gazes with obsessive narcissism at his own reflection in the mirror of art.'<sup>7</sup> W. H. Auden alleges, in the essays grouped as 'The Well of Narcissus', that 'literary confessors are contemptible'.<sup>8</sup> Al Alvarez, in 'Beyond All This Fiddle,' distinguishes Robert Lowell's *Life Studies* from the work of 'vulgar' confessional poets, concluding – in Lowell's defence – that *Life Studies* 'is left with something more sustaining than mere narcissism'.<sup>9</sup> The accusation of 'narcissism' is paradigmatic of all that is most regrettable (most simplistic, most misleading, least enquiring)

<sup>1</sup> 'On *The Awful Rowing Toward God*', in McClatchy, ed., p. 144.

<sup>2</sup> 'Confession and Tragedy', *Poetry* V, 142 (June 1983), pp. 170-78 (178).

<sup>3</sup> 'On *45 Mercy Street*', p. 188.

<sup>4</sup> Helen Vendler, 'Malevolent Flippancy', in Colburn, ed., *Telling the Tale*, pp. 437-46 (p. 441).

<sup>5</sup> 'That Story: The Changes of Anne Sexton', in Colburn, ed., *Telling the Tale*, pp. 263-87 (p. 263).

<sup>6</sup> Bruss, p. 18.

<sup>7</sup> Edward Lucie-Smith, 'A Murderous Art?', *Critical Quarterly*, 6.4 (Winter 1964), 355-63 (p. 357).

<sup>8</sup> W. H. Auden, 'Hic et Ille' [in Chapter III: The Well of Narcissus], *The Dyer's Hand and Other Essays* (London: Faber and Faber, 1963), pp. 93-106 (p. 99). Published in the United States in 1962.

<sup>9</sup> Al Alvarez, 'Beyond All This Fiddle', pp. 230, 231.

in Sexton criticism. The term, when used pejoratively in this way, is symptomatic of a reading which emphasises biography over writing, indeed which sees ‘confession’ as a pathological response rather than a wilful and productive act. It exemplifies a normative approach to poetry: one which assumes that language is referential, that the text offers a reflection of the ‘real’ experience of the author, and that the poem presents a clear, transparent, image of the truth.<sup>10</sup>

In this conclusion, I propose that the ‘preoccupations’ (in Oates’s terms) evidenced in Sexton’s poetry are – as I suggested above and have argued throughout the thesis – with writing rather than with the self; with ‘*telling* the truth’ rather than ‘telling the *truth*’ (to borrow Leigh Gilmore’s distinction).<sup>11</sup> Sexton’s ‘insistent mirroring’ is of the process of confession rather than of its object (the penitent and her alleged sin). Thus, the apparent self-absorption of Anne Sexton (poet) may more productively be read as the self-absorption of Sexton’s writing. What appears to be a personal, and regrettable, self-regard should, instead, be read as a sophisticated and self-reflexive *textual* narcissism (that is, a mimesis of process rather than of product), of the kind delineated by Linda Hutcheon in her book *Narcissistic Narrative: The Metafictional Paradox*.<sup>12</sup> Using Hutcheon’s argument as a framework, it is possible to re-evaluate the adjective ‘narcissistic’, to efface its reductive and pathological connotations, and to see it as a potentially fruitful descriptor of Sexton’s work.<sup>13</sup>

Within the context of Hutcheon’s argument, the adjective ‘narcissistic’ describes a writing which ‘self-consciously represents its own creative processes’ and which is textually, rather than biographically, ‘self-reflective, self-informing, self-reflexive, auto-referential.’<sup>14</sup> In ‘narcissistic narrative’ (or contemporary metafiction or postmodern fiction, to mention the synonyms which Hutcheon uses) – as, I would argue, in Sexton’s work – it is *poiesis* (the act of making) which is mirrored, not the experience or identity of the maker. In this respect, it may further be argued that in its deeply self-reflexive contemplation of its own discursive processes, Sexton’s poetry unexpectedly anticipates many of the practices of postmodernism (a point to which I will return). Crucially, Hutcheon regards the *poiesis* which is being mirrored as a ‘process shared by writer and reader’.<sup>15</sup> The narcissistic text draws attention to

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<sup>10</sup> Leigh Gilmore identifies a similar problem in readings of the language of autobiography as ‘in some nonmysterious way a pure mirror of the writer’s life’. *Autobiographics*, p. 35.

<sup>11</sup> *ibid.* p. 121.

<sup>12</sup> That ‘narcissistic’ is a critically loaded term is recognised by Hutcheon. She insists that her use of the word is ‘not intended as derogatory’, and explains – using a list of synonyms which could have been culled from Sexton criticism – that in the case of her own study, ‘other potentially pejorative terms, such as introspective, introverted, and self-conscious, are likewise meant to be critically neutral’. *Narcissistic Narrative*, p. 1.

<sup>13</sup> Hutcheon’s initial point is that new metafiction (such as the work of John Barth) forces us to rethink our view of the novel as a mimetic genre. Equally, I would argue, the evidence of Sexton’s self-reflexive poetry forces us to rethink our views about the referentiality of confessionalism.

<sup>14</sup> *Narcissistic Narrative*, pp. xii, 25, 1.

<sup>15</sup> *ibid.* p. 41.

– even explicitly thematises – the act of *reading* in order to demonstrate that meaning and truth are the product of a discursive relationship, rather than the property of some prior, originating author.<sup>16</sup> As Hutcheon explains, ‘now it is the *reader* who is being forced to acknowledge his active creative role.’<sup>17</sup> To which I would add that, as we saw in Sexton’s ‘Talking to Sheep’ and ‘The Letting Down of the Hair’, it is the *writer* who is being ‘forced’ to concede her authority.

As has been indicated, Hutcheon’s predominant interest in *Narcissistic Narrative* is in fiction. Many of the examples she chooses, and the conclusions she draws, derive from her readings of the contemporary novel, and from her comparison of these texts with those of the dominant (that is, realist) tradition. Indeed, Hutcheon makes the point of distinguishing between poetry and fiction, arguing that, in this context, poetry is in advance of the novel: ‘Of all the literary genres, the novel is the one which has perhaps most resisted being “rescued” from the myth of the instrumentality of language. Poetry escaped with the aid of the Symbolists, the New Critics, and others.’<sup>18</sup> Further, she suggests that, ‘whereas poetic language is now *more or less* accepted as autonomous and intransitive, fiction and narrative still suggest a transitive and referential use of words.’<sup>19</sup> In both respects (and this is, again, a point to which I will return), I would disagree with Hutcheon. Confession, unlike much other modern poetry (but in common with the fiction which is Hutcheon’s primary subject), has *not* yet been liberated from this ‘myth of the instrumentality of language’. The language of the confessional text continues to be read as ‘transitive and referential’, as a truthful representation of the lived experience of the author. Confessional poetry is persistently read as an expressive/realist mode, offering privileged and reliable insight into personal experience.<sup>20</sup> Sexton’s brand of confession, like ‘narcissistic narrative’, resists in multiple ways such reductive and simplistic readings. It is aware – and flaunts its awareness – that its truths are arbitrary, its authority disputable, and that its putative originality has been displaced by a discursive (and productive) relationship between text and reader. Sexton’s apparent narcissism masks a more knowing, and theoretically astute, engagement with the problematic

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<sup>16</sup> *ibid.* p. xvi. Hutcheon describes postmodernism’s challenge to ‘the romantic/modernist notions of self-expression, authenticity, and originality.’ p. 14.

<sup>17</sup> *ibid.* p. 41.

<sup>18</sup> *ibid.* p. 87.

<sup>19</sup> *ibid.* p. 88 [my emphasis].

<sup>20</sup> In *Politics* (p. 64), Hutcheon concedes some common ground, although the argument which she cites as evidence for postmodern tendencies in poetry (from Marjorie Perloff’s *The Dance of the Intellect: Studies in the Poetry of the Pound Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 158) excludes ‘the lyric expression of personal emotions’ (and, by implication, confessional poetry). Elsewhere, Perloff defines postmodern poetry in terms of its difference from the personal poetry which preceded it: ‘the more radical poetries of the past few decades,’ she argues, are characterised by ‘a turn toward *artifice*, toward poetry as making or praxis rather than poetry as impassioned speech, as self-expression’. ‘The Changing Face of Common Intercourse: Talk Poetry, Talk Show, and the Scene of Writing’, in *Artifice and Indeterminacy: An Anthology of New Poetics*, ed. by Christopher Beech (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1998), pp. 77-106 (p. 93).

processes of writing and representation than orthodox critiques (of the kinds outlined above) would allow.

It is necessary, before proceeding with this argument, to understand the roots of the concept of narcissism, and to assess its resonance, not only in Sexton's poetry, but also more generally. The myth of Narcissus is related in Book III of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Ovid tells the story of Narcissus (a beautiful and desirable young man) and the talkative nymph Echo (who 'cannot stay silent when another person speaks, but yet has not learned to speak first herself').<sup>21</sup> One day, Narcissus (while out catching deer) is seen by Echo. She falls in love with – and pursues – him, although she is perpetually frustrated by her inability to voice her desire. Narcissus becomes separated from his companions and calls out to them, a cry that is echoed by Echo, initiating a dialogue which culminates in Narcissus finally inviting his respondent to meet him. When Echo emerges from hiding and embraces Narcissus, he is repulsed and casts her off. Such is Echo's shame that she conceals herself in the woods and caves, until finally her body wastes away, leaving only her voice.

Echo is not the first admirer to have been treated so cruelly, and now, as punishment, one of Narcissus's previous unrequited lovers condemns him: "May he himself fall in love with another, as we have done with him! May he too be unable to gain his loved one!" Subsequently, Narcissus catches sight of his own reflection in a perfect pool of clear water. Enthralled by the image, he at first mistakes it for that of another: 'Unwittingly, he desired himself, and was himself the object of his own approval, at once seeking and sought.' Desperately, and futilely, Narcissus tries to grasp at his own reflection. He is admonished by the narrator: 'the thing you are seeing does not exist: only turn aside and you will lose what you love' and finally realises that, like Echo, he will never possess the object of his love.<sup>22</sup> He, too, wastes away and dies, leaving, in place of his body, a circle of flowers.

The myth of Narcissus is important to Sexton's poetics in several respects and certainly has a far deeper significance than simplistic accusations of narcissistic self-regard would allow. As James Goodwin has argued (in the context of the origins of autobiography): 'the figure of Narcissus represents complexes – or, in other words, structures of great intellectual and affective force – that are indicative of the functions and consequences of self-knowledge at different stages in our cultural history.' He cites interpretations offered by Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan as particularly influential readings of the Narcissus myth. Goodwin's view that 'Freud adopted Narcissus, as he did Oedipus, as a paradigm of psychical

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<sup>21</sup> *Metamorphoses*, p. 83

<sup>22</sup> *ibid.* p. 85.

development' succinctly summarises Sexton's own engagement with these stories.<sup>23</sup> The myth offers Sexton a framework within which to develop themes of self-love and desire; it offers productive metaphors (such as that of the mirror and the cave), and it lends the structural and linguistic potential of the Echo.<sup>24</sup>

The poems which I will discuss here ('For John, Who Begs Me Not to Enquire Further' ['For John'], and 'An Obsessive Combination of Ontological Inscape, Trickery and Love' ['An Obsessive Combination']) are, I would argue, narcissistic within the context of Linda Hutcheon's definition of the term. Each poem self-consciously displays its own 'processes of production and reception' in order to reach, and convey, a better understanding – not of the experience ostensibly at the source of the poem – but of the way in which confession works, the way in which the seemingly private and subjective is made public and meaningful. In the words of 'An Obsessive Combination', it lays bare the processes by which the writing 'makes sense'. Both poems, then, may productively be read in terms of their mimesis of their own writing (and self-reflexive anticipation of their own reading).<sup>25</sup>

Diane Wood Middlebrook describes 'For John' as a 'defense [. . .] of the whole genre of poetry that would soon be labelled "confessional"'.<sup>26</sup> Diana Hume George declares that 'the autobiographical *I* becomes a spokesperson for the poetic and personal authenticity of the confessional stance'.<sup>27</sup> Suzanne Juhasz declares it to be 'an aesthetics of personal poetry'.<sup>28</sup> The importance of the poem as an expression of Sexton's poetics is beyond dispute. 'For John' does indeed mark out Sexton's position as a poet, and her conception of, and aspirations for, the confessional mode. However, I would argue that its importance lies in its exemplification of the ways in which her work achieves its effects, rather than in its defence of what it reveals.

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<sup>23</sup> James Goodwin, 'Narcissus and Autobiography', *Genre*, XII (1979), 69-92 (pp. 69, 70). Lacan's formulation of the idea of the mirror stage provides an important perspective on Sexton's appropriation of narcissistic process as a means of constituting, and revealing, identity (for example, in 'The Double Image' and 'The Division of Parts').

<sup>24</sup> As important as Narcissus himself is the figure of Tiresias, whose presence frames Ovid's narrative (as, indeed, it frames Sophocles's Oedipus story, another important source for Sexton's poetic examination of truth and evasion). The myth of Narcissus represents the first example of Tiresias's 'power to know the future' (the connection between truth-telling and sooth-saying has already been commented on in connection with 'Hurry Up Please It's Time').

<sup>25</sup> Hutcheon distinguishes between overt and covert forms of narcissism. In the former, 'self-consciousness and self-reflexivity are clearly evident, usually explicitly thematized.' In the latter, 'this process would be structuralized, internalized, actualized.' In 'For John', both forms are apparent. A mirror (or similar reflective surface) is explicitly present in the text (it is 'productive as the genetic core of the work') and works as a metaphor or catalyst for a number of other, more subtle ('covert') narcissistic processes (p. 7). In 'An Obsessive Combination', which is preoccupied by (and mirrors) its own linguistic strategies, the 'covert' form is dominant.

<sup>26</sup> *Biography*, p. 100.

<sup>27</sup> *Oedipus Anne*, p. 101.

<sup>28</sup> 'Seeking the Exit or the Home', p.262.

'For John' achieves its effects, in part, by anticipating (and parodying) orthodox expectations of its speaker's narcissism. It parades its insistent first-person voice (which, in another context, the poet Denise Levertov suggests is gratuitously narcissistic),<sup>29</sup> its emphatically domestic concerns ('the commonplaces', the 'kitchen'), and its protagonist's prolonged self-scrutiny in the mirror.<sup>30</sup> The poem resounds with images for the self, for self-admiration, idealization, and subjective pleasure. Lines end with terms of self-absorption ('beautiful', 'mind', 'mirror', 'me', 'myself', 'private', 'special', 'dear', 'face') which emphasise the narcissistic impulse at play. Yet the text's flamboyant narcissism is beguiling, masking the absence or dissipation of the self.<sup>31</sup> The pleasurable self-abandonment is countermanded by a contradictory impulse towards clarification and control ('not that', 'order', 'worth learning', 'lesson') and by a recognition of the demands of community – of other rather than self ('you', 'your', 'something outside', 'someone', 'anyone'). The characteristic confessional 'I' (the intimate, first-person address) does not emerge until line five, and is swiftly counterbalanced by the 'you' – the explicit (John) or implicit (the unspecified reader) addressee whose presence (although always latent in and instrumental to confession) is here, unusually, rendered visible within the text. The backward and forward movement of both dialogue and action replicates that of a confession (the penitent speaking and the confessor listening) and recalls Narcissus and Echo and their interminable verbal exchanges. Further, the speaker and John/any reader are depicted in the finely balanced nuances of the poetic language (confirmed in the final couplet: 'my kitchen, your kitchen, / my face, your face') to be in a situation of mutually vengeful and predatory fate akin to that of Narcissus and Echo (and paradigmatic of that which Sexton explores in 'Talking to Sheep' and 'The Letting Down of the Hair').<sup>32</sup>

Sexton's poem explicitly addresses the critical anxiety which, as we have seen, is attendant on many readings of confessional poetry. Specifically, it responds to a letter which Sexton had received from her mentor, the poet and teacher John Holmes, in which he expresses profound reservations about what he perceived to be the narrow narcissism of her work. Latent in the 'I'/'you' exchange which I have identified in the poem is a dialogue between Sexton (the implied author) and Holmes (the implied addressee). Scrutiny of Holmes's original letter to Sexton reveals the extent to which 'For John' repudiates his accusations. For example, her privileging of the 'selfish death' may be read as a defiant

<sup>29</sup> 'Biography and the Poet', *Ohio Review*, 48 (1992), 7-18 (p. 11).

<sup>30</sup> Hutcheon, *Poetics*, p. 23; *Narcissistic Narrative*, pp. 24, 72.

<sup>31</sup> Marjorie Perloff argues that in postmodern poetry, 'the Romantic or Modernist cult of personality has given way to what the new poets call "the dispersal of the speaking subject," the denial of the unitary, authoritative ego.' This, I would argue, is precisely the achievement of Sexton's poem. *Dance*, p. x.

<sup>32</sup> Narcissus is condemned: 'May he himself fall in love with another, as we have done with him! May he too be unable to gain his loved one!' Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, p. 85.



challenge to Holmes' view that she should efface her 'hospital and psychiatric experiences [which seem] to me very selfish'. Holmes accuses her of 'forcing others to listen' and complains that, in her work, there is 'nothing given the listeners, nothing that teaches them or helps them'. He abjures her to 'do something else, outside yourself'.<sup>33</sup> Sexton's speaker counters that she does teach something, that she offers a 'lesson' which is 'worth learning'. This is 'something special' and defiantly 'something outside of myself'.

'For John' insists that there is 'sense' and 'order' in even the most private and seemingly abject of experiences:

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

By opening the poem with the emphatic 'Not' Sexton confronts, from the outset, the criticisms which she anticipates encountering, and proceeds to refute them with her arguments in the subsequent two lines. Her point is emphasised by the half-rhyme of 'was' at the end of the second line which counter-balances and negates the 'Not' of the first line. Like a mirror, it 'reverses the lateral polarity of the original form' (as James Goodwin remarks of Rousseau's anagrammatical pseudonym 'Vaussore').<sup>34</sup> Sexton's binary 'not/was' (specifically, the way in which the negative and positive poles mirror each other) provides an example of Hutcheon's 'covert' form of textual narcissism whereby catoptrics (the properties of the mirror) are taken, not as a manifest object or theme, but as a latent structuring principle. Other covertly narcissistic devices include the early reference (in line 2) to 'the end', which marks a subtle and self-reflexive foreshadowing of this text's own symmetrical, and supremely ordered, resolution. The syntax of the first line (with its emphatic '*not* that it was beautiful') refuses the chief motivation ascribed to Narcissus – that is, love of his own beauty. Sexton suggests that it is not the product (the 'beautiful' object) which is worthy of attention but the process – the ordering, the reading, the making of 'sense'. The 'lesson' which can be learnt by scrutiny of the 'narrow diary of my mind' and 'the commonplaces of the asylum' is valuable because it is a lesson which can be shared. 'Commonplaces' indicates the possible common ground which unites speaker and reader. Moreover, in its pun on commonplace book, it subtly and self-reflexively invokes the process of textualisation (including that carried out in this very poem) by which the 'lesson' will be delivered. More generally, the opening lines of the poem

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<sup>33</sup> John Holmes, Letter to Anne Sexton, 8 February 1959, HRHRC. Manuscripts in the Anne Sexton collection at the HRHRC indicate that the poem was drafted on 12 February 1959. It was published in Sexton's first volume *To Bedlam and Part Way Back* (1960).

<sup>34</sup> Goodwin, p. 83.

foreground the hermeneutic process (of reading and evaluation) by which meaning will be received.

Fundamental to Sexton's explanation in 'For John' of how meaning is realised and shared are the metaphors of mirrors (first the 'cracked mirror' of line seven, and later the inverted glass bowl). The mirrors function overtly in the poem to portray (or mirror) the texts' own processes of contemplation and reflection.<sup>35</sup> The poem concedes that personal narcissism (of which Sexton stands accused) is a limiting practice. The subject's initial self-scrutiny in the 'cracked mirror' offers no reassurance, for only 'my own selfish death / outstared me'.<sup>36</sup> She seeks in the mirror confirmation of her identity, yet finds only distortion and fragmentation: a disfigured reflection which is in contrasting or disproportionate size (hence the excessively 'selfish death' which dominates, or 'outstares'), and which is inverted (Sexton's living subject looks for signs of life, and finds only evidence of death).<sup>37</sup> Looking in the mirror should be a rewarding and progressive moment (in Lacanian terms, a necessary step towards successful assumption of the 'function as subject'),<sup>38</sup> but in this poem, there is no such progression. There is no pleasure in such introspection (nor, by extension, in the act of confession) and considerable psychic risk.

Here and subsequently (with the introduction of the metaphor of the glass bowl), the speaker gazes at the mirror, expecting to see only her own self given back to her, but what she sees exceeds (or 'outstare[s]') this private conundrum. In addition to her own face, she sees reflected the larger context which surrounds, or frames, her. The background within which she is situated is unavoidably reflected in, and thus perceived through and beyond, the glass. As Jonathan Miller explains, 'most things which appear in a mirror duplicate what can be seen in its immediate vicinity.'<sup>39</sup> Equally, when the reader contemplates the mirror (reads the poem), she thinks that she is looking at someone ('something') else. What she sees – alongside the putative object of her gaze – is herself in the process of observing. Thus, the very act of reading this poem forces the reader to recognise her own participation in the

<sup>35</sup> The *mis-en-abyme* is a device which thematises the process of reflection that the text both enacts and describes. Hutcheon, *Narcissistic Narrative*, p. 56.

<sup>36</sup> The story of 'Snow White' – and particularly the role of the mirror as harbinger of misfortune – is an obvious palimpsest. See Sexton's *Transformations*.

<sup>37</sup> James Goodwin reads the invocation against self-knowledge expressed by Tiresias to Sophocles's Oedipus and to Ovid's Narcissus as confirmation that, 'while it is inevitable that some men will seek to know themselves [...] the expense will be life itself.' Goodwin, p. 75.

<sup>38</sup> In Lacanian terms, the speaker discovers an unsatisfactory *gestalt*: 'the total form of the body by which the subject anticipates in a mirage the maturation of his power is given to him only as a *gestalt*, that is to say, in an exteriority in which this form is certainly more constituent than constituted, but in which it appears to him above all in a contrasting size (*un relief de stature*) that fixes it and in a symmetry that inverts it, in contrast with the turbulent movements that the subject feels are animating him. Thus, this *Gestalt* [...] by these two aspects of its appearance, symbolizes the mental permanence of the *I*, at the same time as it prefigures its alienating destination. Lacan, 'The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the *I* as revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience', in *Ecrits*, p. 2.

<sup>39</sup> *On Reflection* (London: National Gallery Publications, 1998), p. 12.

discourse, and renders inescapable Sexton's point about the larger, public, significance of what had once seemed 'private' and 'a small thing'.

'For John' demonstrates that the narcissistic gesture becomes productive and meaningful only when it is shared. The 'selfish' gaze must – if it is to mean anything 'outside of myself' – be subject to dispersal and dissemination. The fragmentation of the cracked mirror is instrumental in bringing this process about. The 'cracked mirror' in and of the text offers no clear image, no direct mimesis, but only fragmented, diffuse – but nevertheless multiple and scattered – shards. A similar process is encapsulated in the image of the lucky star in 'An Obsessive Combination' which shines its 'inside out'.<sup>40</sup> It is only by refraction that it touches (a metaphor used also in 'An Obsessive Combination') and gives meaning to the (necessary) reader.

The image of the 'inverted' (or convex) glass bowl in 'For John' (an equally imperfect reflective surface) permits further exploration of this crucial metaphor:

I tapped my own head;  
it was glass, an inverted bowl.  
It is a small thing  
to rage in your own bowl.

The inversion lends the bowl the same imperfect, unpredictable capacities as the earlier 'cracked mirror'.<sup>41</sup> As Jonathan Miller, again, points out, 'in contrast to a plain or flat surface, which faithfully reproduces the proportions of whatever it reflects, a curved surface systematically disfigures it.'<sup>42</sup> The image represents, and alerts us to, the confessional text's own distortions and unreliability. It teaches us that confessional poetry is not, after all, 'transitive and referential' (to quote Hutcheon again). An inverted bowl simultaneously contains and refracts. Like the 'cracked' mirror, it collects and then disseminates meaning, forming an important element in Sexton's defence of the public responsibility of her work. The aural pun on 'bowl' (bowel/toilet bowl?) again foregrounds the scatological but necessary process by which inner experience is brought forth.

That the speaker 'tap[s]' her 'own head' confirms the potential contiguity of self and other, private and public. It represents the process by which that which is on the inside is transformed into 'something outside of myself'. For 'tapped' signifies both the process of

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<sup>40</sup> Sexton makes a similar point in her discussion of the function of metaphor when she explains that it works because it makes 'meanings ray out from each other'. *Crawshaw Lectures* (7) p. 5, HRHRC. See Chapter Five for Sexton's allusion to the 'crystal truth' (which is, in fact, potentially cracked and distorted).

<sup>41</sup> Marjorie Perloff cites W.B. Yeats's assertion that "'form must be full, sphere-like, single'" as opposed to fragmented and impressionistic. Sexton's metaphor, I would argue, permits the co-existence of full spherical form and refraction. *Dance*, p. viii.

<sup>42</sup> Jonathan Miller, p. 43.

siphoning or leaching or extracting insights from inside the head (perhaps for personal relief) and the act of striking or hammering or beating out a pattern (a poem?) on the outside, perhaps for the education or entertainment of others. The speaker may 'tap' (make a sound) in order to initiate a dialogue, to seek a response, or echo.<sup>43</sup> The metaphor also represents the psychoanalytic 'tapping' of the potentially rich and unexplored vein of the unconscious. As Sexton explains in a 1962 letter: 'the vein I'm still tapping is so inward that I dare not bring forth poems.'<sup>44</sup> Tapping on the inverted glass bowl metaphorically represents the dual act of internal scrutiny and external display which is at the heart of Sexton's poetry. In discussion of her poem 'The Fortress' (which, unusually, began as a prose draft), she describes the simultaneous 'tapping' of the surface (the formal properties of the poem) and the depths (its subjective resonance): 'the complicated syllabic form and intricate rhyme pulled out of me something that was deeper than what I had written in the surface writing.'<sup>45</sup> 'Tapping' thus signifies the meeting of the inside and the outside, the private and the public, the subject and the reader, and as such, is a crucial symbol of confessional discourse.<sup>46</sup>

The inverted bowl, being three-dimensional, permits the observer to see all sides of the object, to gain a more complete impression.<sup>47</sup> Yet it also signifies the entrapment and vulnerability of the subject. The notion of the speaker 'raging' in her 'own bowl' suggests a furious frustration at being encircled, or imprisoned, by glass ('tapped' calls up the rhyme word 'trapped'). The subject's (willed?) imprisonment within a glass bowl forms a particularly potent metaphor for the confession, where the isolated speaker lives out her psychic trauma under the full glare of public scrutiny – like an angry creature caught in a glass specimen jar. We are reminded of the woman in the cupola in 'The Letting Down of the Hair' or the Sibyl of Cumae who prefaces Eliot's *The Waste Land* (and thus figures in Sexton's 'Hurry Up Please').

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<sup>43</sup> As noted in Chapter Four, one can trace the influence of Henry James's *The Golden Bowl*. Sexton annotated her copy of the book throughout, and there are many resemblances between the properties of his (golden) bowl and hers. In addition, the image of 'tapping' is used to similar effect in both texts. In *The Golden Bowl*, Maggie has (metaphorically) 'sounded with a tap or two one of the rare porcelain plates. She had knocked, in short – though she could scarcely have said whether for admission or for what [...] and had waited to see what would happen. Something *had* happened: it was as if a sound, at her touch, after a little, had come back to her from within.' (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1987), p. 328.

<sup>44</sup> *Letters*, p. 153 (26 December 1962). Such relief is the subject of John Holmes's complaint: 'it's all a release for you, but what is it for anyone else except a spectacle of someone experiencing release?'

<sup>45</sup> Anne Sexton and Maxine Kumin, seminar on poetry, audiotape (13 February 1962), Radcliffe Institute Archives.

<sup>46</sup> See Chapter Six, 'tapping' or 'striking' the keys of a typewriter is a metonym for writing. In 'Iron Hans' (TR), Sexton writes: 'Take a woman talking, / purging herself with rhymes, / drumming words out like a typewriter.' Tacit in all of these images is the sense of purging or blood letting.

<sup>47</sup> As Jean-Jacques Rousseau explains: 'I should like in some way to make my soul transparent to the reader's eye, and for that purpose I am trying to present it from all points of view, to show it in all lights.' p. 169.

Another prominent contemporary poem to use such an image is John Ashbery's 'Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror'.<sup>48</sup> Ashbery's poem contemplates Parmigianino's painting of that name, and in particular, the resonance of the convex mirror which is both the source (the artist paints from his reflection in it) and product of the painting (the finished portrait is painted on a convex wooden form which replicates that of the mirror). Ashbery, too, acknowledges that such a self-portrait is distorted, and distorting:

The velleities of the rounded reflecting surface  
 (It is the first mirror portrait),  
 So that you could be fooled for a moment  
 Before you realize the reflection  
 Isn't yours. [lines 231-35]

In Ashbery's poem, as in Sexton's, the convex mirror privileges surface over depth (Ashbery writes: 'everything is surface. The surface is what's there' [line 80]). In both poems, the public display of the curved mirror emphasises the outward-looking, social, discursive nature of what had previously been understood as a purely introspective narcissism. The imperative in each (as indeed in 'The Letting Down of the Hair') is not merely to gaze narcissistically upon the self (a futile act: 'it is a small thing / to rage in your own bowl'), but to share that which is found with the reader. Sexton wields her glass bowl so that its 'cracked stars' shine forth – disseminating meaning. Ashbery's convex mirror similarly reaches outwards, being refracted in the 'sawtoothed fragments' of a puddle, in 'certain spars' (timbers used to extend a ship's sail), and finally reverberating more widely: throughout 'the city' in 'the gibbous / Mirrored eye of an insect'.<sup>49</sup>

As we saw in the opening lines of her poem, Sexton explicitly acknowledges and confronts the reader's reluctance to participate in the hermeneutic process which it reveals. Her defiant wielding of the bowl (specifically in line 27, but more generally in the poem as a whole) forces the reader to participate in the narcissistic process, prevents her from looking away, inscribes a place for her within the text as one part of the mirrored scene:<sup>50</sup>

<sup>48</sup> John Ashbery, *Selected Poems* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1994).

<sup>49</sup> This is a telling image, given that the insect's compound eye is made of many separate lenses. Each is useless in isolation, but works with the others to produce a mosaic-like vision of the world.

<sup>50</sup> The prohibition against turning away appears in a number of texts concerning narcissism. Goodwin quotes a passage from *The Confessions of Saint Augustine* in which Augustine is compelled by God to face himself: "[Y]ou, O Lord, turned me back upon myself [...] If I tried to turn my gaze from myself ... once again you placed me in front of myself" (p. 71). Ovid's Narcissus is warned: 'the thing you are seeking does not exist: only turn aside and you will lose what you love.' *Metamorphoses*, p. 85. The 'primary and normal narcissism' which Freud postulates, is epitomised in 'the paraphrenic's turning away from the external world'. 'On Narcissism', in *On Metapsychology*, pp. 59-97 (p. 66). Maxine Kumin recalls her own, initial, distaste for Sexton's life and writing: 'something in me very much wanted to turn aside from this.' 'A Nurturing Relationship: An Interview with Anne Sexton and Maxine Kumin', p. 117.

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.

Equally, Ashbery's poem explicitly reminds us that the self-portrait 'is a metaphor / Made to include us, we are a part of it' (lines 302-3). Both poems, then, may be read as a contemplation of the process by which art (Parmigianino's painting, Sexton's poem, Ashbery's self-portrait with a 'pencil') enters into a productive and mutually sustaining relationship with the reader.

The textual self-consciousness of Ashbery's poem has frequently been noted. As James McCorkle succinctly puts it: 'Of recent poets, none is so tellingly self-reflexive as John Ashbery.'<sup>51</sup> However, as the comments I made in my introduction will indicate, this conscious and purposive textual narcissism has *not* hitherto been recognised in Sexton's writing. Indeed, for this sophisticated self-reflexivity to be identified and confirmed as characteristic of Ashbery's writing (and of the work of a number of other postmodern writers), it has been necessary to deny its presence in Sexton's work – to reduce confessionalism to this emergent poetry's 'other' (a will to classify foreshadowed, perhaps, in Ashbery's suggestion in 'Self-Portrait' that 'If they are to become classics / They must decide which side they are on' [lines 284-85]). Critics have typified Ashbery's work (and other 'post'-confessional writing) by contrasting it with what they perceive to be its opposite. So, Harold Bloom declares that Ashbery 'writes out of so profound a subjectivity as to make "confessional" verse seem as self-defeating as that mode truly has been, from Coleridge (its inventor) down to Lowell and his disciples'.<sup>52</sup> And Laurence Lieberman celebrates Ashbery's presentation of self: 'swept clear of melodrama, the news-hawking debris of personality, all the detritus comprising the stock-in-trade of the confessional poets' school.'<sup>53</sup> However, I would suggest that the vehemence of these rejections of the confessional 'other' demonstrates a misunderstanding of the confessional project, and reveals – while it attempts to deny – a profound commonality of poetic interests.

In 'For John', Sexton is at pains to emphasise that what she is showing us is not a pure, unmediated reflection of lived experience; rather that it is a fabrication: an object

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<sup>51</sup> *The Still Performance: Writing, Self and Interconnection in Five Postmodern American Poets* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1989), p. 46.

<sup>52</sup> 'John Ashbery: The Charity of the Hard Moments', in *Contemporary Poetry in America: Essays and Interviews*, ed. by Robert Boyers (New York: Schocken, 1974), pp. 110-38 (p.117-8).

<sup>53</sup> Laurence Lieberman, *Unassigned Frequencies: American Poetry in Review* (Urbana & Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1977), p. 23.

masked or disguised (dressed with a ‘new skin’). Although the inverted bowl resonates with refracted meaning (with ‘cracked stars shining’, signifying, in Platonic thought, insight and illumination), this is a product of the author’s intervention (her act of ‘dressing’ or disguising the bowl).<sup>54</sup> Again, as we saw in Chapter Five, truth and lies are indistinguishable – even synonymous: the ‘cracked stars’ shine ‘like a complicated lie’. In a genre apparently predicated on revelation (on peeling back the layers of memory), this acknowledgement that the essence of confession lies in dressing up, rather than undressing, in disguise rather than nakedness, in deceit rather than honesty, is supremely telling.

The concluding section of ‘For John’ is anticipated in, and deflects the reader’s attention back to, the beginning:

Not that it was beautiful,  
but that I found some order there.  
There ought to be something special  
for someone.

This functions as a strategy of containment, like the frame of a mirror, or the rim of a bowl, or the banks of Narcissus’s pond. The reader – like Narcissus – has become enthralled by the reflection glimpsed in the mirror/text. Just when we think that we have achieved a resolution and may break free, we are taken back to the beginning in an endless, circular mimesis – an inverted bowl which traps speaker and reader alike.<sup>55</sup> In the simultaneously transparent and reflective bowl, we look for self and find other, we look for other and find self, and thus we see ‘my kitchen, your kitchen / my face, your face’.<sup>56</sup> This is a fundamentally narcissistic moment, self-consciously laid bare and engaged in by speaker and reader alike (hence the direct address):

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.

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<sup>54</sup> Similarly, the surface of Parmigianino’s self-portrait in Ashbery’s poem glows with potential significations: it is a ‘silver blur’ (line 141), its ‘cover burnishes’ (line 164), it has a ‘disguising radiance’ (line 540). Sexton’s bowl, too, radiates with meaning – but only as a result of her intervention (she dresses it in luminous ‘orange’ so that it shines ‘like a strange sun’).

<sup>55</sup> Such circularity is characteristic of the narcissistic fiction which Hutcheon describes. John Barth’s ‘Frame-Tale’ is paradigmatic of this. It contains a Möbius strip, inscribed without beginning or end: ‘ONCE UPON A TIME THERE WAS A STORY THAT BEGAN.’ *Lost in the Funhouse: Fiction for Print, Tape, Live Voice* (New York: Anchor, 1988), pp. 1-2. Sexton worked with Barth at Boston University, see Middlebrook, *Biography*, p. 357.

<sup>56</sup> As James Goodwin comments of Narcissus’s fate: ‘Narcissus discovers, though at the cost of his life, a man is both himself and not-himself, self and other, subject and object.’ p. 84.

‘Find’, like tapping, is an ambiguous verb, suggesting both disinterested discovery (that is, an accidental insight into truth) and a more sustained and deliberate origination or creation.<sup>57</sup> The implicit (‘I’/‘you’) dialogue which has sustained the whole poem is here rendered more generally inclusive (‘anyone’ invokes Everyman; ‘us all’ encapsulates both speaker and reader). The quiet, balanced, closing lines of the poem, with their symmetry and soft diminuendo, mimic the gentle sound of an Echo tailing off:

and sometimes in private,  
my kitchen, your kitchen,  
my face, your face.

This final, mirroring gesture replicates the pattern in Ovid’s *Narcissus* whereby Echo’s plight is repeated in Narcissus’s ultimate fate (neither possess the thing they love, and both waste away leaving no mortal remains).

John Holmes’s concluding message to Sexton (in the letter which inspired the poem) specifically alludes to Ovid’s tale. Holmes’s anxiety about Sexton’s writing is galvanised by his fear that Sexton’s fate may mirror that of Narcissus: ‘You must liberate your gift, and let it create new life, not gaze always hypnotized on death and the wreck of nerves.’<sup>58</sup> ‘For John’ ultimately answers John Holmes by expressly embracing the very process against which he most rails. It not only explains, it shows. Mirrors, reflective surfaces and symmetries are, in Hutcheon’s terms, ‘thematized or allegorized’ within the text, and the voices of Narcissus and Echo are persistently present.<sup>59</sup> Sexton demonstrates that narcissism does not necessarily mean introspective stasis. As in Ovid’s tale, where Narcissus’s legacy is ‘a flower with a circle of white petals round a yellow centre’, Sexton’s speaker’s self-absorption is productive.<sup>60</sup> Self-absorption is transformed into ‘something outside of myself’, something ‘special / for someone’.

In conclusion, I turn to an early (1958) – and uncollected – Sexton poem, ‘An Obsessive Combination of Ontological Inscape, Trickery and Love.’<sup>61</sup> Although dismissed by Diane Wood Middlebrook as ‘an awkward little exercise’,<sup>62</sup> I would argue that the poem is of great interest and significance. In its determined and self-conscious attempt to account for how, exactly, poetry comes into being and yields its meanings, it is entirely paradigmatic of the poetic concerns which this thesis has proposed as characteristic of Sexton’s writing.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> See also ‘production’ as a metaphor for creation and for display, discussed in Chapter Five.

<sup>58</sup> John Holmes, Letter to Anne Sexton, 8 February 1959, HRHRC.

<sup>59</sup> *Narcissistic Narrative*, p. 142.

<sup>60</sup> *Metamorphoses*, p. 87.

<sup>61</sup> See Appendix Three.

<sup>62</sup> Middlebrook, *Biography*, p. 124.

<sup>63</sup> In Hutcheon’s terms, it represents ‘process made visible’, *Narcissistic Narrative*, p. 6.



To look, first, at the title of the poem, the adjective ‘obsessive’ seems to lay itself open to accusations of confessional compulsion and self-absorption (of the kinds discussed in the first chapter). However, it transpires in the poem (as in ‘For John’) that the obsession is not with the self but with writing, with the ‘processes of production and reception’ (to quote Hutcheon again) by which meaning is generated and shared. ‘Love’, too, gives the lie to readings of confessional poetry as an expression of personal angst. This is not a poetry of ‘suffering’, it is not a response to psychological trauma; it is a purposive and fertile, rather than sterile and inadvertent, act.<sup>64</sup> Similarly, ‘ontological’ in the title shifts attention away from direct, lived, ‘raw’ (to use Robert Lowell’s term) experience to a more abstract, impersonal consideration of the condition of being. ‘Combination’, too, has considerable resonance in the context of Sexton’s poetics, invoking the linguistic displacement (‘one word is able to pick / out another, to manner another’) which we saw in ‘Said the Poet to the Analyst’ and elsewhere. It also, more importantly, signifies the combination or meeting of minds; the discursive relationship between speaker and reader required for the truth of the confession successfully to be created and disseminated. ‘Trickery’ anticipates the ‘magic’ and ‘tricks’ (the ritual of ‘Kind Sir: These Woods’) which Foucault regards as inextricably connected with confessional practice and which we have found, in Sexton’s poetry, to be so necessary to the conjuring of confessional truth.

‘Inscape’ is the lodestone of the poem and, arguably, plays a key role in explicating Sexton’s larger poetics. The noun is defined by *Webster’s Dictionary* as:

Inward significant character of quality belonging uniquely to objects or events in nature and human experience esp. as perceived by the blended observation and introspection of the poet and in turn embodied in patterns of such specific poetic elements as imagery, rhythm, rhyme, assonance, sound symbolism, and allusion.

Clearly, ‘inscape’ encapsulates the complex and seemingly contradictory process, identified in ‘For John’, by which looking inwards and looking outwards become synonymous and, further, are ‘embodied in patterns’ (‘tapped’ in the case of ‘For John’) in and/or on the text. In the words of Gerard Manley Hopkins (the most notable proponent of the notion of ‘inscape’): ‘*oftening, over-and-overing, aftering* of the inscape must take place in order to detach it to the mind and in this light poetry is speech which afters and oftens its inscape, speech couched in

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<sup>64</sup> Jones, p. 30.

a repeating figure.<sup>65</sup> Thus the inner essence is projected outwards by the same kinds of patterning and repetition (and palindromic construction) as we see in Sexton's poem. For Sexton, the term 'inscape' is suggestive of a number of disparate, and resonant, possibilities. It anticipates, as I have indicated, the exploration in this (and a number of other poems) of the inner landscape, or geography, of the mind (to adapt Seamus Heaney's phrase).<sup>66</sup> It also, in its own punning (and rhyming) multivalency, connotes the relationship between the inside (suggested by *inscape*) and the outside (implied in [*e*]scape). In one of her Crawshaw Lectures, Sexton explains that 'one writes of oneself [. . .] in order to invite in' and 'to find the way, out through experience'.<sup>67</sup> 'Inscape' reconciles or resolves this polarity of in/out, private/public, personal/impersonal.

As this analysis indicates, 'An Obsessive Combination' achieves its effects by means of the kinds of 'generative [word] play' and 'linguistic self-consciousness' identified by Hutcheon as characteristic of narcissistic narrative.<sup>68</sup> Moreover, in its 'performative' and 'playful' aspects, the poem may be said to display some of the defining features of postmodernist writing.<sup>69</sup> Hutcheon sees as typical of such texts linguistic features such as acrostics, anagrams, cryptograms, and puns.<sup>70</sup> Sexton's poem uses many of these: the title of the poem is a near acrostic, containing the word 'coital' – perhaps an allusion to the deep pleasure to be obtained from this kind of productive word-play.<sup>71</sup> The text itself features numerous aural and visual puns, homonyms and anagrams ('tiers', 'tries', 'rites', 'right', 'routes' [roots]). It also describes and features the palindrome – a device which, surprisingly, Hutcheon does not mention. I say 'surprisingly' because the palindrome, with its innate symmetry, its mirroring, doubling potential, offers a supreme example of narcissistic word-play. The palindrome appears repeatedly in Sexton's poetry (as, for example, in 'With Mercy

<sup>65</sup> 'Poetry and Verse', qtd in *Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins* (4<sup>th</sup> edn.), ed. by W. H. Gardner and N. H. Mackenzie (London: Oxford University Press, 1967; repr. 1970), p. xxii, n. 2 [Hopkins's emphasis]. Middlebrook speculates that 'An Obsessive Combination' was written during August 1958 (*Biography*, p. 124). However, as it is apparent that Sexton studied Hopkins's poetry during her time as a student in Robert Lowell's writing class (September 1958 to 1959), it is arguable that her poem originates at least one month later (*Biography*, p. 93). On Lowell and Hopkins, see Hamilton, *Robert Lowell*, p. 78 and Lowell, 'Hopkins's Sanctity', in *Collected Prose*, pp. 167-70.

<sup>66</sup> 'Englands of the Mind', in *Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968-1978* (London: Faber and Faber, 1984), 150-69.

<sup>67</sup> Crawshaw Lectures (9) p. 1, HRHRC.

<sup>68</sup> *Narcissistic Narrative*, pp. 120, 118. Indeed, it demonstrates that 'the act of reading is no longer safe, comfortable, unproblematic; the assaulted reader's confidence in, and certainty of, his very language is undermined'. p. 99.

<sup>69</sup> Perloff, *Dance*, p. 176; Hutcheon, *Politics*, p. 34.

<sup>70</sup> *Narcissistic Narrative*, p. 119. These 'call the reader's attention to the fact that the text is made up of words, words which are delightfully febrile in creative suggestiveness'. p. 101.

<sup>71</sup> In the drafts of 'For God While Sleeping' (HRHRC), Sexton devised an acrostic based on the first and last letters of each line. Addressed to the poet, George Starbuck, who was a fellow student in John Holmes's poetry workshop, the acrostic in 'For God While Sleeping' reads:

S/T/A/R/B/U/C/K/S/L/U/S/T/I/S/N/A/U/G/H/T/Y/A/N/D/S/I/C/K/H/E/  
T/u/c/k/s/h/i/s/t/r/i/c/k/i/n/a/c/a/u/s/t/i/c/a/c/r/o/s/t/i/c'

for the Greedy' and 'Hurry Up Please'), and in 'An Obsessive Combination', she explores and articulates its particular resonance.

The opening lines of the poem ('Busy, with an idea for a code, I write / signals hurrying from left to right') confirm the self-reflexivity of the title. The prominence in the first sentence of the word 'Busy' suggests not only that the speaker is preoccupied (obsessed?) but also that this is important work (busy-ness/business). We are reminded of the admission in 'With Mercy for the Greedy' that the speaker is 'born doing reference work in sin'. 'Busy' (business) suggests, too, that this work may prove profitable. Jonah's declaration in 'Making a Living' that 'it will profit me to understand this' is invoked. As I argued of 'obsessive' in the title, the fascination here is not with personal experience, but with ideas (with an 'idea for a code' in the first line, and with 'reasons' in line four). Pointedly, in this early confessional poem, as in 'For John', the confessional 'I' is not instantly apparent (it does not appear until the end of the first line) and is thus rendered subordinate to the epistemological process.

That the poem is 'a code', and that writing 'signals', confirms Sexton's persistent interest in the hermeneutic process by which meaning is deduced.<sup>72</sup> The specific reference to 'code' evokes the problems of reading the past, of cracking the code of the Great-Aunt's elliptical letters home from Paris (discussed in Chapter Four), and of sharing that understanding with an audience which may, equally, struggle to decipher the meaning. As Sexton writes in 'Is It True?': 'Do you understand / can you read my hieroglyphics?' 'Code' is also a deeply self-reflexive metaphor for the ways in which confessional writing might obscure (as we will see in a moment, I use the verb advisedly) rather than, as is commonly thought, lay bare its secrets. As I have argued throughout this thesis, Sexton is concerned as much with hiding, deceiving and lying as with frankness and revelation. The line-break after 'write' suggests (as the rest of the poem confirms) that the 'signals' are autonomous. The poet writes, yet in what seems to be a distinct movement, it is the 'signals' which hurry across the page. Language, in this poem (as in the poems from *The Awful Rowing Towards God*), may pre-exist and dominate the subject, may construct rather than reflect experience. As Hutcheon argues: 'in literature, words create worlds; they are not necessarily counters, however adequate, to any extraliterary reality. In that very fact lies their aesthetic validity and their ontological status.'<sup>73</sup>

Writing, however, is also potentially disordered (and disordering). Hence, these 'signals' are 'hurrying'

<sup>72</sup> In a (possibly draft) reply to Holmes's letter, written on the same day as the poem, Sexton refers to 'For John' and explains: 'I wave to you from a distant shore, that I send semaphore signals that you may find my signal no matter how foreign the language.' *Letters*, p. 59 (12 February 1959).

<sup>73</sup> *Narcissistic Narrative*, pp. 102-3.

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.

‘Rites’, with its religious (last rites) and judicial (formal, ritualistic, and knowing one’s ‘rights’) connotations, is a deceptively powerful metaphor for confessional writing. In ‘An Obsessive Combination’, Sexton lays bare the seemingly magical process by which ‘write’ becomes ‘right.’ This notion of writing as magical, or a trick, and therefore self-possessed, beyond the control of the patently unauthoritative author, is also common. In ‘You, Dr. Martin’, Sexton writes ‘we are magic talking to itself’,<sup>74</sup> and in ‘Flee on Your Donkey’: ‘disorder is not what it was. / I have lost the trick of it!’ In ‘An Obsessive Combination’, Sexton demonstrates how this spell (itself a hidden pun – highlighting the importance of a change of spelling, for example, from ‘tiers’ to ‘rites’) weaves the spell in the poem. Here, ‘making sense’ is writing/righting things, and it is rites (magic, ritual, the ‘trickery’ alluded to in the title) which does this (we are reminded of the witch ‘rearranging the disaligned’ in ‘Her Kind’). The two (‘rites’/magic and ‘writes’/process) are inextricably linked, like an object and its reflection in a mirror.

However, what converts magic (‘rites’) into meaning (‘sense’) is the conscious process (the ‘busy[ness]’) of writing, the trying (‘tries’) of the poet. Asked, in an interview, to comment on the relationship between ‘inspiration’ and ‘training’, Sexton explained:

It’s just like a runner getting into training or a fighter hitting a punching bag. You need to be in shape. You need the means, the equipment to be equal to the moment of inspiration when it comes. Otherwise you can do nothing.<sup>75</sup>

The anagrammatic word-play of ‘tiers’ (with its aural pun on ‘tears’) / ‘tries’ / ‘rites’ self-reflexively exemplifies the possibilities of this magical and transformative process. It is the deliberate and cerebral labour required to make this spell work which is foregrounded. So too, in ‘For John’, the speaker emphasises her own dedication to the process of explanation: ‘I’ to ‘you’ (‘And if I tried / to give you something else’), the process of ‘find[ing]’ order. Once again, Sexton disputes common perceptions of the spontaneous, compulsive nature of confessional poetry.

The image of the physical and orderly progression of language across the page (‘left to right’) offers a metaphor for the way in which the act of confession is, typically, thought to put things ‘right’ (in the therapeutic sense). ‘The Errand’, discussed in Chapter Five, uses a

<sup>74</sup> This represents, in itself, a form of narcissism – the self talking to the self. It recurs also in ‘Flee on Your Donkey’: ‘In this place everyone talks to his own mouth.’

<sup>75</sup> Interview with Brigitte Weeks, p. 115.

similar image for an equally 'busy' attempt to put 'right' by 'writing': 'I've been going right on, page by page.' It is not the simple act of release, the 'tapping' of the wellspring of inner compulsion, that puts things to rights, but rather the linguistic process, the textualisation, the act of 'writing'. However, as the addendum in the next line of 'An Obsessive Combination' ('or right to left') indicates, the act of confession may compound rather than resolve problems. It may not offer the 'expressive-purgative release' expected by Ostriker and others, but instead, may complicate, confuse, worsen, make sinister.<sup>76</sup>

As we saw in 'Kind Sir: These Woods' (Chapter One) and the 'Memoir' poems (Chapter Four), it is sometimes necessary (and fruitful) to go by way of darkness rather than illumination (as Eliot suggests in 'East Coker'), to lose oneself in the dark, before one can find oneself. The 'obscure routes' here, like the turn to the *sinister* ('right to left') suggests an early and tacit appropriation of the witch's voice (seen in 'Her Kind', 'The Gold Key' and 'The Black Art', amongst others). In 'Her Kind', the witch/speaker's natural milieu is the dark (the poem opens with her performing her night-time 'hitch'). Yet her fate is played out on the 'last bright routes' – suggesting, finally, her propensity to bridge or efface the gap between dark and light, private and public.

'An Obsessive Combination' (like 'Her Kind', 'For John', 'Crossing the Atlantic', 'Hurry Up Please' and 'Is Is True?') asserts that understanding or illumination (although classically dependent on the presence of light) may emerge from the dark (from the private, the unseemly, the sinister) which is thereby recuperated as a viable source for poetry.<sup>77</sup> It proffers a sophisticated, self-reflexive and insistent defence of the process by which 'unlovely places' or 'the worst of anyone' (to paraphrase 'For John') may yield insight. The poem offers an early confirmation of Sexton's persistent interest in understanding and explaining how it is that abject experience (that of the rat or the dog, of the rejected, the inhuman, the visceral, sordid or excremental) can, 'amazingly', be transformed into radiant meaning. In 'An Obsessive Combination', the palindromic metaphor of 'RATS' magically (and semantically) transformed into 'STAR' exemplifies this process:

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.

<sup>76</sup> *Stealing the Language*, p. 126.

<sup>77</sup> In her reply to Holmes's letter (cited above), Sexton refers to the obscuring of her own 'light': 'because you can see a young light within me, hidden but possible and I can see your special sensitive light, always constant . . . I will blink in your direction. And that is a bridge, from my window to your window (no door!) . . .' *Letters*, p. 60 (12 February 1959).

Significantly, 'RATS' is turned into 'STAR' by going backwards ('right to left') – a linguistic metaphor for the process of looking backwards (in psychoanalytic, autobiographical and confessional terms).

The metaphor of the 'Rats star' (used, as we saw in Chapter One, in 'With Mercy for the Greedy' to describe the linguistic self-reflexivity of confessional writing) anticipates the palindrome in 'Hurry Up Please' by which 'Ms. Dog' (servile, inhuman) can, equally 'amazingly and funnily' (and by a similar process of anagrammatic and palindromic substitution), become 'God'. It confirms that detritus, or waste (we recall Dickey's anxiety about being soiled by Sexton's refuse, and wishing to deposit it into 'the nearest ashcan'), can productively be transformed. ('Hurry Up Please It's Time' uses a similar metaphor – of the 'candy wrapper' taken 'to a book binder'). In each case, nothing is made into something, brought into being (hence 'Ontological' in the present poem's title). The 'STAR' here is the subject's own generative act, her own genesis, her own light created out of the darkness ('STAR' made out of 'RATS'). In this respect, it paves the way for the process which I have discussed in 'For John' by which the dark (the 'narrow diary of my mind') produces and refracts a wider and brighter significance; by which the private is made public, by which 'inscape' can reveal 'something outside of myself'. In 'An Obsessive Combination', specifically, it is the gesture by which the 'STAR' turns its 'five lucky pins inside out'.

The enthusiastic explanatory rhetoric of the second half of the poem, with its hyperbolic adverbs – 'suddenly', 'amazingly' and 'funnily', and its incredulous and gleeful aside ('for my own liking') – gives way, in the final clause, to a more sceptical and resigned tone:

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  
I touched and a miracle I really wrote.

The tentative 'as if' (like the querulous 'surely' in the final clause of 'Sweeney', discussed in Chapter Two) concedes the possibility that words (and by extension, the confessional text) may not deliver what is expected of them, that – to quote 'Hurry Up Please' – 'language fails'. Just as in 'Is It True?', the speaker is unable to believe in the glorious ascension and, instead, must be satisfied with simply being (ontology), so here, the speaker cannot credit the 'STAR' which seem to have emerged from 'RATS'. As we saw in 'Just Once', epiphanous moments of this kind cannot endure; hence the change in 'An Obsessive Combination' from the present tense and immediacy of action of the body of the poem to the past tense ('I touched', 'I wrote') of the final line. 'An Obsessive Combination' warns that the word-play

by which 'RATS' becomes 'STAR', and a miracle is conjured, remains just that: semantic 'trickery', a 'spell' and not an act which can have any lasting impact on lived experience.

'An Obsessive Combination', one of Sexton's earliest poems, anticipates many of the concerns of her later work. It is paradigmatic of her writing in that it is unable (or unwilling) to achieve closure. Sexton refuses the temptations of an easy and satisfying conclusion, and ends, instead, on an open-ended and conditional note ('as if it were'). In Hutcheon's terms – and like many of the postmodern texts which she considers – it 'admits its own provisionality'.<sup>78</sup> 'An Obsessive Combination' is about fragmentation, distortion, misrepresentation and, finally, about the impossibility of resolution. In this respect, it finds an echo in such poems as 'Is It True?', 'O Ye Tongues' and 'End, Middle, Beginning', which also foreground their own open-endedness, their own indeterminacy, their own inability – or unwillingness – to impose direction and order. Perloff sees as characteristic of modern (that is, pre-postmodernist) poetry the eventual realisation of 'some sort of epiphany, a moment of insight or vision with which the poem closes'.<sup>79</sup> Yet, as we have seen, this is not a characteristic of Sexton's work. Rather, her poetry features an – arguably postmodernist – tendency to 'frustrate our desire for closure', a tendency towards equivocation and indeterminacy.<sup>80</sup> In 'Flee on Your Donkey', Sexton's speaker makes an apparently determined flight from the mental asylum, yet her escape is made by donkey which, pointedly, she rides backwards. Thus, the return to order takes place in conditions of disorder, and the journey out is accompanied by a yearning gaze back in. Although Steven Hoffman insists that the protagonist 'does make her escape from the stultifying world of the hospital', it is arguable that there is no such closure.<sup>81</sup>

Sexton's reluctance to conclude her writing on a resounding, authoritative and thus normative and reassuring note is sign of a refusal to concede to totalisation, and of a wish to keep multiple interpretative possibilities open. The right reserved in her poetry is the right to appropriate the middle ground, the medial space between the inside and the outside, the private and the public (equally, between truth and lies, autobiography and fiction, confession and obfuscation). Her poetry represents, in Hutcheon's words, 'a questioning of commonly accepted values of our culture (closure, teleology and subjectivity), a questioning that is totally dependent upon that which it interrogates. This is perhaps the most basic formulation possible of the paradox of the postmodern.'<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> *Poetics*, p. 13.

<sup>79</sup> *Dance*, pp. 156-7.

<sup>80</sup> *ibid.* p. 161.

<sup>81</sup> Steven K. Hoffman, p. 703.

<sup>82</sup> Hutcheon, *Poetics*, p. 42.

Sexton's writing exemplifies what John Cage has proposed as the way forward for postmodernism: "The situation must be yes-and-no not either-or."<sup>83</sup> In the terms of these poems, it must be in-and-out ('Flee on your Donkey'), I-and-you ('For John'), RATS-and-STAR ('An Obsessive Combination'). Looking back to 'Her Kind' (Sexton's 'signature poem', discussed in Chapter One),<sup>84</sup> it must be light-and-dark, order-and-disorder, life-and-death, being-and-nothingness. As Irving Weinman, a student with Sexton in Lowell's writing class, confirms: 'she was not an either/or poet.'<sup>85</sup> Subjectivity itself can only ever be claimed partially, tentatively and in terms of contradiction and simultaneity. The kind of woman – and the kind of writer – which Sexton *is*, simultaneously is *not*: 'a woman like that *is not* a woman, quite / I have been her kind.' Her poetry embraces the possibilities offered by such ambivalence: it refuses to choose – refuses to close, even; it resists categorisation, and revels in its own indeterminacy. In a lecture which Sexton delivered at Boston College in 1962, she quotes from an article written by Philip Rahv some twenty years earlier, in which he speculates about the direction of American poetry. Sexton is particularly interested in Rahv's argument that poetry of "bare experience" has been "virtually exhausted". She comments: 'That was pretty depressing . . . if my theme (and it seemed to be MINE) was exhausted then I was in trouble.' Yet she takes heart from what she describes as Rahv's final 'ambiguous almost left over statement' ("what lies beyond is still unclear,") declaring, in characteristically equivocal, but nevertheless deeply resonant terms, 'I lie beyond.'<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> Qtd in Perloff, *Dance*, p. 183. Sexton's poetry, like the postmodern writing which is Hutcheon's subject, is not susceptible to being 'described in "either"/"or" terms'. Hutcheon, *Poetics*, p. 50.

<sup>84</sup> Linda Gray Sexton, *Searching*, p. 292.

<sup>85</sup> Interview with the author, November 1992.

<sup>86</sup> Anne Sexton, unpublished draft of talk to Boston College, HRHRC. The Rahv essay which is Sexton's subject is, 'The Cult of Experience in American Writing', *Partisan Review*, 7 (1940), 412-24.



## APPENDIX ONE:

## Four unpublished poems

Unless otherwise indicated, spelling and typographical errors have been corrected. Partially obscured lines indicate Sexton's manuscript deletions.

## 'Dog-God Fights the Dollars'

[Extracts from lines 1-8 and 15-18]

~~Dog-God was out fighting the dollars.  
He wanted to conquer them. Green  
like shields, black knife~~

Dog-God was out fighting the dollars.  
He wanted to conquer them, the large  
green shields, the sharp black knives  
and oh the numbers, the marvelous  
numbers smelling like whiskey and sweat.  
~~Dog-God was a bandit, he was a mugger,  
he was a friar praying to their faces,  
the ones, the fives, the fiftys, the hundreds.  
He was a farmer, planting them in rows,  
he was an Ad-man, writing their copy  
he was president designating their  
disposal, Dog-God was ailing. Dollars  
were his cure. He was all alone and he  
could not find them, those herbs, these  
powders and he had no water. The rain  
of bucks would not come and his life  
was vanishing. I will draw God a picture,  
he said, and he will bring me sustenance.~~

[lines 1-8]

.....  
they lived together in the shadow,  
each day falling downward into the money machine  
until they could make no noises, except  
with their tap shoes, clicking like dimes.

[lines 15-18]

(Oct 4, 1972), HRHRC.

## APPENDIX ONE: (contd.)

## 'Dog-God's Wife Adopts a Monkey'

[Extracts from lines 1-22, 26-32 and 40-49]

At first when he came he belonged  
~~to the father~~, the mother-in-law, (Dog-god)  
 the sister-in-law and they fondled him,  
 they rubbed his blood and then  
 put him back outdoors in his cage.  
 I couldn't really keep the monkey,  
 the mother-in-law said. ~~You keep him~~. too dirty.  
 The sister-in-law said, if he wouldn't  
 stand there waiting for his bottom  
 to be wiped, I'd take him. Dog-God  
 said, I wonder who gave him to us,  
 it must be some kind of joke.  
 Dog-god's wife said, well you can't  
 keep him outdoors in the winter,  
 we'll simply have to train him  
 to use the toilet. Dog-god said,  
 I wonder who gave him to us, this  
 must be a dream. ~~We can't bring up~~  
~~a god damn monkey~~. She went to the cage  
 and unlocked it and held the monkey  
 in her arms, cherub nose, blessed tummy,  
 flesh to flesh, madonna soft.

[lines 1-22]

.....  
 But I won't  
 love you if you don't use the toilet  
 like the rest of us and she pulled down  
 her pants and showed him how. Then she  
 took her own cock in her hand, her own  
 visionary spout, and showed him how to go  
 the other way.

[lines 26-32]

.....  
 He was fully clothed  
 but she noted he had never been to school.  
 His manners were perfect and his speech  
 Correct but he had never been to school.  
 You've wasted your life, she said, you're  
 twenty now and have nothing to do.  
 In this case, she resolved, you could  
 be a poet, a kind of seer, a kind  
 of monkey, and she woke up, trailing  
 her tail.

[lines 40-49]

(Oct 8, 1972), HRHRC.

## APPENDIX ONE: (Contd.)

## 'The Thought Disease'

Overhead the books are noisy.  
 I try to write.  
 The wallpaper is old,  
 the color of soured wine.  
 Thirty unwashed window panes  
 smoke in the weak March light.  
 Underneath,  
 the typewriter keys are beige thumbs.  
 I write at my mother'd desk,  
 but the words are mine.  
 Also, I have died here twice,  
 but that was last year,  
 a poison that I tried.

This year, I've been watching  
 the alphabet, ~~that nesting bunch~~  
 my words, that nesting bunch of  
 figures popping out of my thumbs.  
 Taking them separately, I see the legs  
 of children, pigs, chickens, a bald head,  
 boards to walk over, sticks bent by hands.

These dear families...  
 a, you are a world of your own  
 with an umbrella over you head;  
 b and d is a fat mine month old baby  
 looking in front of a mirror;  
 c, is shell, cup handle and coat hook,  
 is [sic] the eye of a lobster;  
 h is chair and j is barbless hook;  
 l is a flag on a golf course;  
 m is a radiator and n is a gravestone  
 and o, old o, old god, is a shout  
 from the end of a long pipe;  
 p pokes out like a muscle and is  
 the nose of a clown while q is a fat nine  
 and forgetting the others I see s,  
 that snake, that swan,  
 with a knife you are money.

(April 18, 1960), HRHRC.

## APPENDIX ONE: (Contd.)

'The Collaberator' [sic]

[Extracts from lines 1-13, 21-34, 44-49 and 53-61 of 120 lines.]

Now he has taken it over.  
 As there was no stopping his tearing apart,  
 there is no stopping his building up.  
 He is trying to make a theatre out of it,  
 gathering players and a staging.  
 He is, in fact, constructing a building out of it,  
 beams, planks and boards.  
 He seized onto it until it was suitable material  
 for a structure.  
 He seasoned it with his own breath.  
 I am helpless to stop him.  
 I, who would bomb cities with words  
 cannot stop him from constructing our house.  
 .....

[lines 1-13]

At first it was mine.  
 A deaf mute, I made it all with fingers.  
 I had no tongue for it and further  
 it was personal, a small possession.  
 In the beginning it was a passion. True!  
 But in the beginning I was so obsessed  
 with wrapping it up that I did not consider  
 it was something I would ever own.  
 True it was only words.  
 But words, when you bring them forth  
 take on certain human characteristics.  
 I started out with little burials and tortures.  
 I made it entirely out of deformed things  
 that bloomed as I stuffed them up the cage.  
 .....

[lines 21-34]

And you ask how this can be done?  
 Words do it. Words grow inside of me,  
 even then I murder them and out them in a sack.  
 Words vibrate, however. Pump on in spite of it.  
 Words sometimes refuse to be put in place.  
 And yet, I tell you, I did it to them.  
 .....

[lines 44-49]

So of course I let him in on it.  
 Perhaps this will amuse him, I thought,  
 To hold this heavy object for a while.  
 But instantly his mouth flew open  
 as if he held the carcass [sic] of a Weasel

## APPENDIX ONE: (Contd.)

into which a hornet nest had oddly bred.  
He put his ear to it and heard  
the terrible movings.  
Then he knew.

[lines 53-61]

(July 10, 1965), HRHRC.

## APPENDIX TWO:

‘From the 15<sup>th</sup> Century Farce of Maistre Pierre Pathelin’

[See my discussion of ‘Talking to Sheep’, Chapter Three, p. 74]

But here is what to do: they will contest  
your every word. In cases such as this  
confessions are so very detrimental,  
devilishly harmful to a man.  
So this is what we then must do. As soon  
as you are called to give your evidence  
you will reply with nothing by [sic] a cry  
of ‘Baa!’ to everything that you are asked.  
And if it happens that they turn and curse  
you saying ‘Rotten swine! God send a plague  
upon the beggar! Do you mock the Court?’  
Say ‘Baa’, and ‘Ah!’ I’ll say, ‘He’s simple minded,  
thinks he’s talking to his sheep!’ And should  
they clamour fit to burst, be sure that not  
another word does issue from your lips.

HRHRC.

## APPENDIX THREE:

## An uncollected poem

'An Obsessive Combination of Ontological Inscape, Trickery and Love'

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  
I touched and a miracle I really wrote.

(First published in *Voices: A Journal of Poetry*, 169 (1959), 34;  
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