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"A SECRET! A SECRET!":
CONFESSION AND AUTOBIOGRAPHY
IN THE POETRY OF
ROBERT LOWELL, SYLVIA PLATH, AND
TED HUGHES

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

in

The Department of English

by

Helen Lynne Sugarman
B.A., Colby College, 1989
M.A., The Catholic University of America, 1993
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# Table of Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</td>
<td>ii</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
<td>v</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>CHAPTER</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>ONE</strong> DEFINITIONS AND CONFESSIONAL TRADITIONS</td>
<td>8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TWO</strong> ROBERT LOWELL'S LIFE STUDIES: CONFESSIONAL</td>
<td>42</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>POETRY'S MISMOTIVATED CANONIZATION</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>THREE</strong> SYLVIA PLATH'S MISINTERPRETED &quot;CONFESSION&quot;</td>
<td>94</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>FOUR</strong> TED HUGHES'S UNEASY PROGRESS TOWARDS</td>
<td>149</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CONFESSION</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>FIVE</strong> SHEDDING NEW LIGHT ON THE &quot;CENTRAL MEANINGS&quot;</td>
<td>204</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CONFESSION, TRANSFORMATIVE REMEMBERING, AND THE</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>POETRY OF SHARON OLDS</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>WORKS CITED</strong></td>
<td>242</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>VITA</strong></td>
<td>251</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Abstract

This study explores the impact of changing definitions of confession on the critical reception and interpretation of the poetry of Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath, and Ted Hughes. In light of the ongoing criticism concerning "confessional poetry" in the forty-one years since Robert Lowell's *Life Studies* (1959) was published, it may seem difficult to justify yet another study of confessional poetry. However, the term has been so thoroughly assimilated into our critical vocabulary that we have lost an authentic sense of its meaning.

"Confessional poetry" is in some ways an arbitrary term that has a very tenuous connection with the poetry it purports to describe. Even though the original sense of the term "confession" was a religious one, the term "confessional poetry" was coined in response to specific (and secular) poetic techniques employed by Robert Lowell in *Life Studies*. Over the past forty-one years, the connotations of the term have become increasingly wide-ranging. Poets as diverse as Lowell, Anne Sexton, Sylvia Plath, Ted Hughes, and Sharon Olds have been called "confessional" poets—as have John Berryman, Theodore Roethke, Frank Bidart, Jack Gilbert, and Louise Glück. Despite great variation in the extent to which details of these poets' lives appear in their work, even the hint of
an autobiographical element to their work often ensures that they will be labeled as "confessional" poets. Consequently, formulating any sort of standard criteria by which to evaluate "confessional poetry" has become very difficult. Further, in the cases of the poets in this study—Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath, and Ted Hughes—we have often neglected to ask where, specifically, the "confessional" label originates.

Since the appearance of W.D. Snodgrass's *Heart's Needle* and Robert Lowell's *Life Studies* in 1959, the body of criticism surrounding confessional poetry has functioned as Hepworth and Turner's "external control" of its definition (albeit from many different perspectives). Ultimately, although the central requirements of confessional poetry remain the same—intimacy, a sense of guilt, and a difference in status between the confessor and the confessant—it is still impossible for critics to irrevocably determine what poetry is "confessional" and what is not.
Introduction

In light of the ongoing criticism concerning “confessional poetry” in the forty-one years since Robert Lowell’s *Life Studies* (1959) was published, it may seem difficult to justify yet another study of it. However, since *Life Studies’* appearance, the term “confessional” has frequently been used to describe the work—and the aesthetic—of an increasingly diverse group of poets, often without any interrogation of the term itself.

In fact, it seems that the term has been so thoroughly assimilated into our critical vocabulary that we have lost an authentic sense of its meaning. “Confessional poetry” is in some ways an arbitrary term that has a very tenuous connection with the poetry it purports to describe. Even though the original sense of the term “confession” was a religious one, the term “confessional poetry” was coined in response to specific (and secular) poetic strategies and techniques employed by Robert Lowell in *Life Studies*.

Although the term does purport to describe the apparent intimacy of this poetry, it also implies a difference in status between the poem’s speaker and the audience or addressee of the poem. Such a clear-cut differential is only rarely found in most of the poetry labeled as “confessional” poetry. In addition, the term
seems to suggest an undercurrent of penitence or contrition on the part of the speaker. Such repentance is not often a part of this poetry either. To continue to use this term seems to me both inappropriate and misleading.

Ultimately, the difficulty is one of terminology; critics have attempted to apply an inherently religious term to secular poetry with the result being that it is nearly impossible to make the work of such resolutely non-religious poets as Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath, Ted Hughes, and Sharon Olds fulfill the criteria of this essentially religious term. I include Robert Lowell on this list because even though religious issues had been central to his work in Lord Weary’s Castle (1946) and The Mills of the Kavanaughs (1951), by 1959 Lowell had left the Roman Catholic Church to rejoin the Episcopal Church and he was becoming progressively more secular in his outlook.

Over the past forty-one years, the connotations of the term “confessional poetry” have become increasingly wide-ranging. Poets as diverse as Lowell, Anne Sexton, Sylvia Plath, Ted Hughes, and Sharon Olds have been called “confessional” poets—as have John Berryman, Theodore Roethke, Frank Bidart, Elizabeth Bishop, Jack Gilbert, and Louise Glück. Despite great variation in the extent to
which details of these poets’ lives appear in their work, even the hint of an autobiographical element to their work seems to ensure that they will be labeled as “confessional” poets. Consequently, formulating any sort of standard criteria by which to evaluate “confessional poetry” has become very difficult. Further, in the cases of the poets in this study—Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath, and Ted Hughes—we have often neglected to ask where, specifically, the “confessional” label originates.

Since the appearance of W.D. Snodgrass’s *Heart’s Needle* and Robert Lowell’s *Life Studies* in 1959, the body of criticism which has been written about confessional poetry has fulfilled the role of sociologists Mike Hepworth and Bryan Turner’s “external control” of its definition (albeit from many different perspectives).

Chapter One provides an overview of the confessional process itself, formulating a definition of the term “confession” and differentiating between the Roman Catholic and Protestant confessional traditions. Here, I argue that the Roman Catholic confessional process is motivated by the confessant’s need to purge himself of guilt, while the Protestant tradition is characterized by the confessor’s desire to edify his audience, thereby achieving a balance between what Frank McConnell calls
“heart-knowledge and head-knowledge” (The Confessional Imagination 4).

Chapter Two explores the critical reception of Lowell's Life Studies and the process by which it was enshrined as the first "official" book of confessional poetry. Even though there were other poets whose work also broke with many of the tenets of modernism, Lowell’s book was the publication that established the "official" version of confessional poetry.

The breadth of Lowell’s reputation alone ensured a more substantial critical response to his new work than other, less firmly established poets might expect. This sense of critical obligation is borne out by the fact that, whereas nine scholarly journals and ten more "mainstream" magazines reviewed Life Studies, only eight scholarly journals reviewed W.D Snodgrass’s Heart’s Needle in spite of it having won the Pulitzer Prize for 1960. Only three reviewed Anne Sexton’s To Bedlam and Partway Back (1960), six reviewed John Berryman’s 77 Dream Songs (1964), and Sylvia Plath’s posthumously published Ariel (1965) received only seven notices in scholarly journals. Even though Life Studies was by no means the only "confessional" poetry published at the time, it was nonetheless the critical reception of that book in particular which provided the now traditional definition...
of confessional poetry—a definition which has existed virtually unchanged for the past forty-one years.

Sylvia Plath’s position as a “confessional” poet is the subject of Chapter Three, which argues that Plath’s work is often interpreted confessionally for two reasons. First, when Robert Lowell (known at the time as a confessional poet) called her work “confessional” in his foreword to Ariel, no one questioned his use of the term and he did not explain it. Second, confessional poetry was so closely associated with psychoanalysis and mental illness that it was almost inevitable that Plath’s poetry would be read in light of her suicide and her history of depression and mental instability. This chapter traces the process by which these issues came to overshadow the potential for a reading of Plath’s work which was not unduly influenced by biographical knowledge.

Ted Hughes, seldom read as a confessional poet, nonetheless does incorporate confessional techniques in his work. In Chapter Four, I argue that the publication of Birthday Letters (1998), eighty-eight poems addressed to his late wife Sylvia Plath, necessitates a retrospective re-reading of The Hawk in the Rain (1957), Crow (1970), and Remains of Elmet (1979) in light of the issues raised by the autobiographical content of Birthday Letters. Although Hughes is not often a traditionally
confessional poet by any stretch of the imagination, his willingness to acknowledge the relationship between his own life and his poetry becomes stronger and more direct as his career progresses. By the end of his last book—Birthday Letters—he has almost completely reversed the traditional confessional process, acting as a confessor figure to his readers' role as confessant. The process by which he achieves this reversal is traced in Chapter Four.

In Chapter Five I conclude my study, considering the work of Sharon Olds as an example of the current state of "confessional poetry." Not only does Olds's work fulfill many of the traditional expectations of "confessional poetry," but it reflects some of the more contentious issues surrounding it as well, especially issues of definition and categorization.

1 One of the earliest books specifically about the confessional poets was Robert Phillips' The Confessional Poets (1973), but M.L. Rosenthal wrote The Modern Poets (1960), in which he treats Theodore Roethke and Robert Lowell specifically as confessional poets, as well The New Poets (1967), in which he continues his analysis. For a more recent look at the "confessional" phenomenon, see Jed Rasula's The American Poetry Wax Museum, in which, in addition to the usual confessional "suspects," he includes Ginsberg, Kinnell, and Rilke (despite the fact that he is not American). More recently, Thomas Travisano's Midcentury Quartet: Bishop, Lowell, Jarrell, Berryman, and the Making of a Postmodern Aesthetic (2000) revisits the confessional controversy.

2 In Confession: Studies in Deviance and Religion (1982), Mike Hepworth and Bryan Turner characterize "external control" of the confession process as the procedures which must be followed if a confession is to be considered
valid. This "external control" is manifested through the existence of "confessional theories" (6)—what Hepworth and Turner call "official viewpoints" surrounding the process of confession. In the case of confessional poetry, these "theories" include the various definitions of the term and the criticism written about it. The process by which Robert Lowell’s Life Studies entered the literary canon as the most important example of modern American confessional poetry illustrates the ways in which literary criticism functioned as a "confessional theory" governing the way that book was initially read. That process is the subject of Chapter Two.
Chapter One
Definitions and Confessional Traditions

In *The Confessional Poets* (1973), Robert Phillips defines the "confessional mode" as follows: "It is that writing which is highly subjective, which is in direct opposition to that other school of which Auden and Eliot are modern members—writers who strove to all but obliterate their own concrete personalities in their poems" (4). The foundation of confessional poetry is, then, for Phillips, a conscious emphasis on the poet’s self: the poet’s "self" is the "sole poetic symbol." Confessional poets "are artists whose total mythology is the lost self; writing confessional poetry is an ego-centered, though not an egocentric, act" (7-8). In *Escape From the Self* (1977), Karl Malkoff uses the work of Norman O. Brown to make the same point. The self, Malkoff argues, is the conventional means of making sense of the world and of assigning meaning to experience. Consequently, it is through the self that all interpretation must be filtered. In light of its role in assigning meaning to experience, the self is particularly important to confessional poetry. In *Democracy and Poetry* (1975), Robert Penn Warren attributes a specifically corrective function to the self, which he defines as follows: "in individuation, the felt principle of significant unity" (xii). He further delineates two
characteristics of the term "significant": first, the
term implies that the self is continuous; it is "a
development in time, with a past and a future" (xiii). In
addition, the self is responsible; it is its owner’s
"moral identity, recognizing itself as capable of praise
or blame" (xiii). It is this aspect of the self—its
potentially corrective function—that is most important to
confessional poetry as I will define it in this study.

Historically, the most important requirement for a
confessional poem was that the poem be intimate, sometimes
uncomfortably so. Traditional definitions of confessional
poetry have grounded themselves in the intimacy of the
poems, a focus which does not take fully into account the
power dynamics inherent in a truly confessional poem; in
addition, these traditional definitions do not provide a
means by which to address the speaker’s apparent guilt
and/or self-incrimination.

In confession, the confessant is confessing a wrong
to the confessor. Consequently, the ideal act of
confession is naturally motivated by a sense of shame,
self-judgment, and complicity—feelings which, the
confessant hopes, confession will assuage. Confession has
been defined as a quasi-therapeutic process of self-
progression towards a new and/or improved state.
Centrally important for this project is the fact that
confession is also a literary mechanism, what Jonathan Holden calls an inventio, rather than a true psychological state. Whether a confession takes place inside or outside a poem, the difference in status between the participants means that the effect of this hierarchical relationship is a more appropriate criterion by which to characterize confession. Confession then becomes a means by which the confessant holds himself accountable for his actions before an audience more powerful than he is. The power dynamics seem clear in this configuration of the confessional process: the confessor, as the person with the power to forgive, to pronounce absolution, holds power over the confessant because the confessant believes that the confessor’s reaction will influence his life. The confessor’s power may result from higher status, as in a Roman Catholic priest’s symbolic function as God’s representative on earth, or, alternatively, the source of the confessor’s power may be his personal relationship with the confessant, as when the confessor is someone whose good opinion is important to the confessant. This type of power is most obviously embodied by friends or therapists.

Michel Foucault describes the confessor as “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" (History of Sexuality 61-62). The New Catholic Encyclopedia states that "one must confess one's faith in answer to legitimate questions by lawful authority" (289, emphasis mine). "Lawful authority," in this case, applies to those people empowered by the Church to absolve penitents of their sins—specifically, ordained clergy.

On the other hand, the potentially pedagogical relationship between the confessor and the confessant that is found in the Protestant confessional tradition is the focus of Frank McConnell's The Confessional Imagination: A Reading of Wordsworth's Prelude (1974). For McConnell, the Protestant confessional tradition differs from the Catholic tradition in both its purpose and in the role fulfilled by its audience. The most important purposes that McConnell finds in Protestant confession are the confessant's desire to edify the confessor, and, second, the confessant's belief that making a successful confession signifies his election into a community of believers. According to McConnell, a successful confession should be a conversion experience for the confessor. Because the confessor assimilates the confessant's confession, his edification is accomplished. McConnell describes the process as follows:

The key concept, both for The Prelude and for Protestant confession, is that of
Edification: confession seeks a mode of conviction beyond rhetoric, since it attempts to confront human form with human form, consciousness with consciousness at the most introspective level. Thereby the will is moved to action and the perception, memory, and sense of self to literal re-formation. . . Edification, then, implies in the confessions a closer and more aggressive relationship of speaker to auditors than is implied in other, more meditative styles of devotional writing. Ideally, the confession does not issue in an impulse towards conversion but actually is a conversion for the auditor. (28-29)

This interpretation of the confessional process does not foreground guilt and remorse in the same way that the more Catholic approach to confession does; further, the hierarchy which exists between an individual Roman Catholic confessant and his particular confessor is absent in the Protestant tradition. Whereas the Catholic confessor’s power over the confessant results from his symbolically higher religious status, in the Protestant tradition the positions are reversed. The confessant is, in a sense, the more powerful because he has knowledge that the confessor lacks. The confessant’s source of power is his ability to impart his knowledge to his hearer. Their relationship is ultimately pedagogical.

Protestant use of the word “confession” seems much closer to “profession,” as in a profession of faith. In this situation, the speaker is accomplishing an important goal: communicating his knowledge in the hopes that his auditor will then apply it to his own life. Second, the
fact that the confessant possesses this knowledge symbolizes his membership in a particular group. For example, by actively teaching English, a professor of English signifies that he is a member of the group of people who are entitled to call themselves English professors. A more positive connotation is also attached to a profession simply by virtue of its prefix.

Significantly, the role of the speaker/confessant differs in confessions and professions. One of the most significant differences is that the content of a profession is in one sense inherently more self-directed than that of a confession. If, in fact, a confession is made in response to an outside initiative, then the content of a confession carries less scope for spontaneous composition than does a profession because the speaker is being forced to respond to an accusation or charge against him. The circumstances to which he is responding have been created for him; therefore the quality and tone of the confessant's response simply become other reflections of either the power of the confessor, the circumstances behind the confession, or both.

A profession allows the speaker to more spontaneously create not only the circumstances of his speech, but the content of it as well, since he is not dependent on the goodwill of his auditors. In terms of "confessional
poetry, then, it seems plausible to differentiate between the power-based (or "Catholic") confessional poetry of my argument and the traditional view of confessional poetry, in which there is no significant difference in the status of the two participants.

McConnell's argument is germane to a discussion of twentieth-century confessional poetry because his view of the confessional process embodies the central characteristics of the traditional definition of confessional poetry. For the past forty years, in order for poetry to be considered "confessional," it was expected to fulfill the following criteria: it must be not only personal, but intimate, and ideally it must describe an experience which has somehow changed the confessant. In addition, because readers are often inclined to identify the speaking voice of the poem as that of the poet himself, the events and experiences described in "confessional" poems are often assumed to be verifiably true.

Again, the problem of definition is raised. That poetry which has been labeled "confessional" in the past would, it seems to me, be more properly characterized as autobiographical—autobiographical on the part of the speaker, who may or may not be the poet himself. Nearly all of Sharon Olds's work falls into this category, for
example. In her poems—as will be clear in chapter five—the speaker is relating events and experiences from her own life (hence, the autobiographical label), yet with neither the power differential nor the guilt inherent in any sort of confession. Olds prefers to call her work "apparently personal" (Blossom 30) and that term may ultimately be more appropriate. Significantly, in this definition of this sort of poetry, whether or not the speaking voice is truly that of the speaker becomes a moot point.

Even though the traditional view of confession encompasses nearly all the poetry which critics have labeled "confessional," it does not address the confessant’s need to purge himself of guilt or to express remorse for a perceived wrongdoing. McConnell’s argument does not account for the fundamental feeling of sin and its concurrent senses of shame and self-judgment—both of which are central to my definition of the confessional process. In addition, the "confession" found in truly confessional poetry, as in other types of confessional transactions, must be addressed to a clearly defined and actively engaged, participating audience. Confession, whether in the Catholic or the Protestant tradition, is a transaction that must be shared in order to be successful. McConnell alludes to Protestant confessional literature in
calling confession a process of justification (4, McConnell's emphasis), of coming to acknowledge the existence of one's past, complete with its sins and lapses.\textsuperscript{3}

In this type of confessional process, the confessant is forced not only to understand himself, but also to take responsibility for himself. In this sense, Protestant confession can be compared to a therapeutic confession, in which the therapist/confessor functions more like a facilitator—someone through whom the confessant will filter ideas and from whom the confessant hopes to receive unbiased comments—than as a judge.

In Roman Catholic confession, the confessor is expected to serve as a judge, to evaluate and impose sentence. It is important to remember that the Roman Catholic confessor does not have the power to actually forgive the confessant's sins, but he is expected to assign appropriate punishment for them. Even though, according to Roman Catholic doctrine, God has already forgiven the confessant, in order to be absolved by the priest the confessant must agree to do the assigned penance. On the other hand, McConnell's description of how the Protestant confessant learns to own his past shows the integration of language used to express this justification as well as the intellectual and emotional
process lying at the center of the traditional definition of confessional poetry:

In religious confession, the central narrative is best described in that favorite term of the confessants themselves, justification. It is possible for the confessant to own his past only because the plot of his past is a divinely ordained plot manifesting the grace of God: the confessant experiences a sense of being written by the divine Author himself. . . . The movement of heart, will, and intellect is, for the true Protestant confessant, a single act of speech, and if it fails to become such, if it fragments itself into "head-knowledge" and "heart-knowledge," then the confessant knows that something is wrong, that his election is not yet complete. (4)

If, in fact, the "plot" of the Protestant confessant's past is a reflection of God's benevolence, then the sense of "being written by the divine Author" that results from a successful confession implies not only that the confessant is controlled by God, but also that he can unquestioningly accept that control, ceding his will to God's. Consequently, should the confessant fail to integrate "heart-knowledge" and "head-knowledge," his confession will fail because he is thwarting the will of God by refusing to accept God's power over him.

For example, in the Confessions, St. Augustine says that he confesses his sins so that God will forgive him and allow him to reconcile his identity to his physical acts: "For love of Thy love I do it, reviewing my most wicked ways in the very bitterness of my remembrance, that
Thou mayest grow sweet unto me...while turned from Thee, the One Good, I lost myself among a multiplicity of things" (24). Although Augustine is clearly making a religious confession with God as his intended audience, his method also serves the therapeutic purpose of confession. His crime, he states, is that he "could not discern the clear brightness of love from the fog of lustfulness" (24), and in communicating with God, he hopes to find the means to come to terms with himself as he really is (i.e., as he believes God sees him), to acknowledge his true identity so that he can move forward in his life. For the confessant in a general sense, as for Augustine here, confession allows him to determine his identity according to the way he believes the confessor sees him. In the Confessions, Augustine cedes control of his identity to his audience—in this case, God:

I will confess what I know of myself, I will confess also what I know not of myself. And that because what I do know of myself, I know by Thy shining upon me; and what I know not of myself, so long know I not it, until my darkness be made as the noon-day in Thy countenance. (156, my emphasis)

Augustine’s dependence on his all-powerful God can in some ways be compared to the search for acceptance and validation that Sharon Hymer discusses in the context of a therapeutic confession. In that situation, if the patient’s confession is accepted non-judgmentally by the
therapist, he can then embrace a more positive view of himself: perhaps he is not really such a bad person after all, if the therapist (who has the power to judge him) is able to accept him without judging him. This perception of the therapist’s validation allows the patient-confessant to accept himself.

Because of his dependence on the more powerful figure of either a religious confessor or a therapist, a confessant in either circumstances is incapable of perceiving himself objectively—at least in regard to the issues with which the confession is concerned. Without the input of his confessor or therapist, the confessant is unable to formulate any sort of accurate self-perception at all; he is dependent on the confessor’s forgiveness of acceptance if he is to see himself as a member of the community again.

Augustine again provides a clear illustration of this phenomenon. In the Confessions, he continually characterizes himself as one who is almost entirely without any redeeming characteristics, yet a more objective view would deny this conception of himself:

But what did this further me, imagining that Thou, O Lord God, the Truth, wert a vast and bright body, and I a fragment of that body? Perverseness too great! But such was I. Nor do I blush, O my God, to confess to Thee Thy mercies towards me and to call upon Thee, who blushed not then to profess to men my blasphemies, and to bark against Thee. What
profited me then my nimble wit in those sciences and all those most knotty volumes, unravelled by me, without aid from human instruction; seeing I erred so fouly, and with such sacrilegious shamefulness, in the doctrine of piety? (63)

A contemporary reader of the Confessions might find it implausible that Augustine could not reconcile even the existence of his love of academic learning with his love for God, believing instead that anything outside a perfect, agape love was sinful. However, his shame at his former pursuits does provide an illustration of his inability to view himself objectively. Even the more rigorous theologian of the time would not have treated Augustine's love of knowledge as a mortal sin of the same magnitude as murder, for example. Augustine's lack of objectivity renders him incapable of formulating a realistic view of himself.

It appears that the writer of a "confessional" poem often follows a process analogous to McConnell's definition of a Protestant religious confession. Not only does the poet/confessant edify his readers, but he uses his experience to formulate his identity and to understand his place in the universe. One could argue that, in revising his life, the writer is doing godly work, but that argument would assume a direct connection between poetry and theology that is usually absent. It might be more appropriate, given the role that
In viewing confession most importantly as the confessant's story of his journey to consciousness of God's power over him, McConnell implies that confession is also a quest through which the confessant will come to understand his own place in the universe. Any description of this quest for identity is naturally characterized by great personal intimacy on the part of the confessant. Listening to this confession, the confessor may be forced to hear that which may make him uncomfortable. In fact, the defining characteristic of the prevailing historical definition of confessional poetry embraced by such critics as M.L. Rosenthal, Robert Phillips, Ralph Mills, Marjorie Perloff, and James E.B. Breslin is intimacy, not guilt.

Although confession is necessarily intimate, intimacy is not its only characteristic. Regardless of its context—whether the confession takes place in a confessional poem, in a religious ritual, in therapy, or in response to a criminal charge—each confession must meet certain additional criteria. One of the most important of these criteria is the existence of a clearly defined relationship between the confessor and the confessant in

21
the roles of audience and speaker. The audience hearing the confession is always present to the speaker, whether it is visible (priest, therapist, or judge) or not (God, the person reading the poem), and the confessor’s reaction always has the potential to influence the confessant’s self-perception. For example, Robert Lowell’s “Night Sweat” (1964) is addressed to his wife. After she has nursed him through an illness, he says:

> my wife...your lightness alters everything, and tears the black web from the spider’s sack, as your heart hops and flutters like a hare. Poor turtle, tortoise, if I cannot clear the surface of these troubled waters here, absolve me, help me, Dear Heart, as you bear this world’s dead weight and cycle on your back. (22-28)

Lowell does not articulate it, but it seems logical to assume that he believes that his well-being will be diminished even further if his wife refuses to help or forgive him. At the same time, however, he is conscious of the burden he is asking her to bear. Because her reaction is the key to his view of himself, she is clearly the more powerful participant in this relationship.

In the confession of “Night Sweat” and in confession in general, the confessor’s “power” stems from his ability to use his reaction to influence the confessant, even, in some cases, to almost author the confessant’s self-esteem. In *Confessions in Psychotherapy* (1988), psychotherapist Sharon Hymer considers confession in terms
of risk: if the confessant believes that, after his confession, the confessor might reject him, he is unlikely to communicate confessionally. According to Hymer’s formulation of confessional risk, if Lowell believes that his wife is unlikely to help him, then it is logical to assume that he would not take the risk of asking her. If Lowell’s wife were to refuse his request, he would be forced to confront his demons without her, a confrontation which would force him to reassess his identity in light of her betrayal. If she helps him, he knows he has value in her eyes; if she does not, his perception of his value is diminished.

As illustrated by "Night Sweat," the confessant’s need to formulate a more positive conception of his own identity through an admission of sin, guilt, shame, or wrongdoing is different from the motivations behind many other types of verbal transactions. Further, this motivation must necessarily be clear to the confessant or he would have no reason to assume the risk inherent in confession. For example, religious penitents seek forgiveness and absolution, just as the person who makes a legal confession acknowledges that he is guilty of a crime. Likewise, the person who makes a therapeutic confession is motivated by the need to "find redemption through communion with a sympathetic other" (Hymer 38).
In all three situations, the confessant believes that confessing is beneficial—spiritually, legally, or emotionally. Regardless of the type of benefit, this perceived benefit is one of the central requirements of confession as a whole.

The answer to the question of who should bear the responsibility for “authoring” our identities or self-perceptions is often much less clear for us than it was for Augustine, over 1600 years ago. If we are not able to formulate concrete views of our own identities, neither are we sure that we want to cede the power to do so to anyone else. Sharon Hymer points out that social factors such as a rising divorce rate, “geographical unrootedness,” a less cohesive family life, and declining religious faith have narrowed the pool of accessible confessors for most people (2). Since many people in the twentieth century have neither a family doctor nor a personal servant, both of whom in the past might have served as unofficial confessors, people have been forced to explore other avenues. Often, psychotherapy has filled this confessional gap, resulting in at least a partial conflation of religion and psychoanalysis.  

Sociologists Mike Hepworth and Bryan Turner report in Confession: Studies in Deviance and Religion (1988) that one reason for the conflation of religion and
psychoanalysis is that even though "the Protestant emphasis on guilt and individual responsibility is compatible with certain psychoanalytic assumptions about the nature of the individual, Protestantism was hostile to any form of institutionalized confession and to any attempt at external psychic direction of the individual penitent" (58). Unlike the Catholic Church and its emphasis on individual confession, confession in Protestant churches is more often public and communal. Since the entire congregation confesses their sins together, the individual risk assumed by each confessant may appear to be diminished. In addition, since God is still the audience, the confessant does take a spiritual risk in confessing.

In addition, the risk may appear to be less obviously individualized because the Protestant minister does not function as God's symbolic representative in the same way that the Catholic priest does. Therefore, the risk taken by the confessant is a private one (in the sense that the risk is known to the confessant alone) instead of a public one (of which others are cognizant). It becomes a question of how the risk is perceived, rather than its degree.

Although individual Protestant ministers are often willing to make themselves available to congregants for
individual discussion and counsel, those discussions are not the same as a formal confessional ritual. There is, of course, a long tradition of pastoral counseling in both Catholic and Protestant churches, but the issues addressed in a counseling situation are different than those addressed in a formal confessional ritual. Along with the more complex demands of an increasingly industrial society came increasingly complicated moral dilemmas which the religious confessant-confessor relationship could not always accommodate. As a result, the confessional process became more secular. Ultimately, Hepworth and Turner argue, "Freudian analysis came to perform social functions which had been once exercised by the Christian care of souls" (60).

Equally as important as the secularization of confession, the United States at the end of the 1940s and into the 1950s was facing moral and intellectual dilemmas that were, in some senses, more wrenching and farther reaching than at nearly any other time in our history. Not only had the economic prosperity that resulted from World War II ensured that the American economy was in better shape than any other economy in the world, but the atomic bomb had ensured that we were politically and militarily the powerful nation on earth. However, these years also encompassed the beginning of the Cold War as
well as the American obsession with the evils of
Communism. The revelations of Nazi atrocities, the
Nuremberg Trials, and the McCarthy hearings had shaken the
foundations of the American people’s collective faith in
human decency, forcing us to find new ways to confront our
own insecurities. Two of the most important ways were
making psychoanalytic confessions and watching or
listening to public confessions. In light of the
flourishing market for True Confessions and other popular
tabloids of the time, it’s not surprising that the
intimacy of confessional poetry encouraged critics and
readers to draw parallels between it and the intimacy of a
therapeutic confession. Simultaneously, the public aspect
of confessional poetry—the poet’s willingness to share
intimate details in such a public way—often allowed
readers to find their own lives reflected in the poetry.

For example, readers’ own experiences may directly
influence their interpretation of an untitled poem in
Ellen Bryant Voigt’s Kyrie (1995). The poem’s speaker is
a teacher looking back at her reaction to her students as
they come down with the flu during the influenza pandemic
of 1918. She says:

When the youngest
started to cry, flushed and scared,
I just couldn’t touch her, I let her cry.
Their teacher, and I let them cry. (11-14)
Clearly, the speaker in the poem is not Voigt herself, who not only is not old enough to have experienced the epidemic, but was never an elementary school teacher. Rather, the speaker is a persona Voigt has adopted. A confessional reading of the poem might infer that at some point in her life Voigt may have felt that she should have done something but did not, and that the poem is one way to approach the issue. However, what, if anything, the themes discussed in the poem have to do with actual events in Voigt’s personal life is not important. What is important is the way the reader interprets the “confession” of the poem, whether or not the reader finds himself reflected in it—and as a result, is given a deeper understanding of himself and of his own life.

When the speaker in Voigt’s untitled poem says, “I just couldn’t touch her, I let her cry,” the reader is encouraged to find himself reflected in the poem. Many people have experienced times when, like the speaker in the poem, they have used fear or discomfort as an excuse for evading responsibility. In Voigt’s poem, the guilt resulting from such an evasion is the speaker’s motive for confessing, and the confession itself becomes the vehicle by which the reader, along with the speaker, revisits and re-experiences the original event.
The experiences described by the speakers of confessional poems (for example, mental illness or alcoholism) encouraged the reading public to find their own experiences in the speakers’ lives—at least as those lives are depicted in the poetry. Consequently, the apparent “truth” of a given poem became an important criterion by which the success or failure of a confessional poem could be justified.

In “Against Sincerity” (1994), Louise Gluck comments on both the poet’s ability to create himself and on the potential difficulties that such a creation can engender for the poet:

The idea of “man talking to men,” the premise of honesty, depends on a delineated speaker. And it is precisely on this point that confusion arises, since the success of such a poetry creates in its readers a firm belief in the reality of that speaker, which is expressed as the identification of the speaker with the poet. This belief is what the poet means to engender: difficulty comes when he begins to participate in the audience’s mistake. (42)

Ultimately what the poet must guard against is the possibility of falling under the spell of his own creation; he must continually remain conscious of the boundaries between the “self” that he has created in the poem and the “self” as which he lives the rest of his life. Only in this way can the poet—or the confessant—control the edification of his readers or auditors.
In this reading process, not only did the poem bear the responsibility for telling the "truth" about the poet’s life, but because the readers expected the poem to speak to their lives as well, the same poem was often required to carry the added weight of the readers’ self-perceptions. In “The Hospital” (Notebook, 1968), describing a stay in a mental hospital, Robert Lowell comments:

We’re lost here if we follow what we read
... trips to the hospital. ...
Others are strapped to their cots, thrust out in hallways,
...
they are whatever crinkles, plugged to tubes and plugged to jugs of dim blue doctored water, held feet above them to lift the eye to heaven—these look dead, unlike the others, they are alive. (1, 4, 9, 11-14)

Lowell’s perception of the sheer physical degradation that his illness has worked on him is central here. In John Berryman’s “Dream Song 54,” Henry, too, is in the hospital:

Insulting, they put guard rails up, as if it were a crib!
... I have been operating from nothing, like a dog after its tail more slowly, losing altitude. (7-8; 10-12)

In the poems, the speakers are rebelling against society’s attempt (symbolized by the hospital and its accoutrements) to force them to perceive themselves as “sick people,” rather than as people who happen,
temporarily, to be ill. Lowell’s tubes and IVs and Berryman’s restraining straps imply that the speakers can no longer care for themselves. Although their illnesses have changed the way that the world views them, they must fight to ensure that their own perceptions of themselves do not change. At the beginning of “The Hospital,” Lowell says that “We’re lost here if we follow what we read”—i.e., if we accept the identity that the outward symbols of the hospital thrust upon us, we will lose our true identities, the results of the unique processes by which each of us makes sense of the world.

For both Lowell and Berryman, real knowledge is self-generated. The fact that both speakers are describing experiences in which they were mentally ill begs the question of whether or not the mad person can truly know himself or understand the “truth” of his situation. However, although the poems’ speakers are mad, the poets at the time they wrote the poems were presumably sane. In addition, both Lowell and Berryman were careful observers of the phenomenon by which Americans during the 1950s and early 1960s often allowed the way they identified themselves to be determined by others’ perceptions of them. This process is similar to the process by which Augustine submitted authorship of his identity to God.
The conflict that Lowell and Berryman attempt to negotiate between self-perception and society's perceptions of them in these poems is similar to Augustine's, as well as analogous to the shift that Philip Cushman sees occurring in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century American society. In *Constructing the Self, Constructing America* (1995), Cushman argues that a shift from "character" to "personality" occurred in the early 1900s. Instead of being encouraged to formulate their identities based on externally determined moral values and a strong work ethic, people were encouraged to develop personal magnetism and individual charm: the commonly-agreed-upon conception of "character" was being replaced by "celebrity" (65).

This emphasis on individualism, on standing apart from the crowd, developed in response to large migrations to urban areas, Cushman argues. As people attempted to adjust to more crowded living conditions, they often felt that they were losing their individual identities. This confusion may have resulted, too, from the breakdown of a sense of communal identity which appears to have taken place as more and more people migrated to more urban areas. Further, as "rational," scientific explanations for things like human evolution began to replace more traditional religious explanations, the function of
religion began to change as well. During the late 1800s and early 1900s, people became less inclined to consult religion as a source for concrete answers to perplexing questions. Instead, they were more likely to perceive religion as a largely emotional resource with little scientific justification or validity. The resulting feelings of confusion and alienation seem to have encouraged people to look for ways to rediscover their individuality while simultaneously looking for stability and guidance. However, in light of their intellectual skepticism, once they found apparent stability they were often hesitant to accept it.

Cushman links this conflict between individuality and stability partly to the proliferation of consumer goods and to the advertising which attempted to sell those goods. The media attempted to convince people that they needed these goods and services to be fully formed individuals, but in reality, advertising campaigns often had a different effect. One of their more indirect results was a fragmenting of individual identity. Rather than relying on themselves to create their identities, people began viewing themselves according to the ways they believed others saw them—and that identity was most often based on material wealth, appearance, or other such characteristics of “celebrity” or “personality.” The way
that late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century people ceded authorship of their identities to the media is not unlike Augustine’s relationship with God, except that the relationship that Cushman sees is based on materialism, not spirituality.

These years also saw the publication of some of the early self-help books: Dale Carnegie’s *How to Win Friends and Influence People* (1937) is probably the most well-known, but Richard Wetherill’s *How to Succeed With People* (1949), and Virginia Bailard and Ruth Strang’s *Ways to Improve Your Personality* (1951) are typical titles of the period. Perhaps because of the pressure to meet the standards set forth in these and other similar books, a sense of failure was inevitable for those people who believed they could not fulfill those expectations. It is at this time that Cushman places the advent of what he calls the “therapeutic ethos” (67). Instead of seeing themselves as citizens, people began to consider themselves as patients who needed to be cured so that they could return to “normal” life: “Individuals ceased to be thought of as public citizens whose behavior was evaluated according to an existing moral standard, instead citizens began to be thought of as individual patients whose behavior was an uncontrollable manifestation of mental illness” (67). Two significant results of this shift are
as follows: first, since the old, almost universally accepted moral standards were gone, people were forced to realize that not only did they not know how to assume responsibility for their moral well-being, but they were frightened by such responsibility as well. In addition, this shift further underscored the idea that instead of expecting society or religion to provide moral and ethical guidance, people had to formulate their own standards for themselves.

Not only because of the early twentieth century’s increased emphasis on individuality, but also because of this “therapeutic ethos,” it followed, then, that if a particular individual could not find happiness and fulfillment inside himself, there must be something “wrong” with him and he must be in dire need of outside help. This feeling of an underlying “wrongness” created a context which facilitated the dissemination in the United States of psychoanalysis, Freud’s “talking cure.” As a result, the American obsession with the discovery and revelation of intimate secrets was born, and it is on this characterization of confession that the traditional definition of “confessional poetry” is based.

For Robert Lowell to write about his personal experience of mental illness and for John Berryman to chronicle the effects of his alcoholism required a
willingness on their parts to accept the emotional risks
inherent in presenting themselves as "abnormal."
Presenting themselves in that way was a risk, but that
risk can be a calculated one. Sometimes, in fact, within
the context of the confessant/confessor relationship, a
confessional poet will consciously choose to depict an
openly subjective "taboo" or otherwise socially
unacceptable response to an emotion or experience—perhaps
to see what the confessor's reaction will be. The "shock
value" of this type of confessor reaction is illustrated
by Anne Sexton's "The Division of Parts" (1960), in which
Sexton describes her conscious—but ultimately
unsuccessful—attempt to mourn her mother's death. Sexton
must work at grieving; it does not come easily or
naturally to her:

. . . My timely loss
is too customary to note, and yet
I planned to suffer
and I cannot. (32-25; italics mine)

Even though she had made a conscious plan to be miserable,
in the final analysis she can't do it. Although Sexton
feels that she should write a poem expressing her grief at
her mother's death, she cannot. Instead of writing an
elegy for her mother, the poem becomes an elegy for
Sexton's nonexistent capacity for grief. Her guilty
feelings about her inability to mourn her mother as she
believes she should represent a socially unacceptable or
taboo response to a parent’s death. This response pushes the poem into the confessional realm.

On one level, as in “The Division of Parts,” confessional poetry may appear to encourage the reader to read as if the poetry were a documentary record of experience—to believe, as Robert Lowell points out in an interview with Frederick Seidel, that he is hearing the “real Robert Lowell” (21) describing events which had actually happened to him, exactly as they had happened to him. According to this argument, then, this “real person” as he manifests himself in the poetry is factually and accurately relating his life as he has experienced it. Such an interpretation confuses the motivations and the functions of poetry with those of documentary film-making. In a confessional poem, the poet—usually speaking in his own voice instead of through the voice of a persona—relates his interpretation of a particular experience or event, an experience or event which may or may not be “true” in a literal sense.

I am differentiating here between what seems to be a more documentary or “event-based” confession (for example, “On this date I did this thing”), and a confession which does not address the event directly but instead addresses the speaker’s perception of the event. In this type of confession, the speaker uses his/her perception of an
experience or event (which may or may not have happened the way it appears in the poem) to illustrate a theme behind the confession. Most confessional poems are perceptual confessions. For example, in "Epiphany" (1998), a poem addressed to Sylvia Plath, Ted Hughes asks:

If I had grasped that whatever comes with a fox
Is what tests a marriage and proves it a marriage-
I would not have failed the test. Would you have failed it?
But I failed. Our marriage had failed. (64-67)

It is nearly impossible to read this poem in a literal, documentary sense; a marriage doesn’t fail in an instant. However, it is possible to read the poem perceptually, in the sense that Hughes’s recollection of his experience with the fox may represent—to him—the gradual failure of his marriage. On his way to the tube station in London, Hughes meets a man who tries to sell him a fox cub. Hughes refuses and the man continues on his way, but the exchange forces Hughes to question his identity within his marriage. Without considering whether or not he actually wants the fox himself, he asks himself what Plath would think if he brought it home. How would they cope with the practicalities of keeping a wild animal—its energy, its need for exercise and space—an animal which clearly would not fit into the daily lives of two human beings?

Hughes does not take the fox; he “walk[s] on/As if out of my own life” (55-56). The implication here is that
he has left his separate identity behind; now his life is no longer solely his, but it is bound up with Plath’s to such an extent that he no longer has a self or identity separate from the one they share together. If Hughes had understood that in order to make a marriage work, both parties must have separate individual identities apart from their identities within the marriage, would things have been different for him and Plath? The poem does not provide an answer.

In terms of confessional poetry, then, a poem that is truly confessional according to my definition will have the following characteristics: first, it will have a clearly defined (but not necessarily named) addressee in addition to its readers, although sometimes the addressee and the reader are the same. Its addressee (confessor) will be someone who, for whatever reason, has power over the poem’s speaking voice (confessant), and most importantly, there will be a clear sense of shame or self-judgment in the poem. Guilt or the need to purge oneself of remorse resulting from a perceived wrongdoing will often motivate a confessional poem, just as it will a confession. The poet or speaking voice will take responsibility for his involvement in the circumstances he explores in the poem, regardless of whether the “confession” is documentary or perceptual.
1 I will follow Erik Berggren’s lead in referring to the “confessant” (the one who is making the confession) and the “confessor” (the one who is hearing the confession).

2 Although people making professions of any kind are commonly referred to as professors, in keeping with the terminology of this project I will refer to them as professants.

3 Terminology is problematic here. I do not wish to oversimplify either the Roman Catholic or the Protestant view of confession, nor do I want readers to assume that my understanding of theology is greater than it is. Consequently, I will use “purgative” to signify what I’ve been calling the Roman Catholic view of confession because, to my way of thinking, this view emphasizes confession as a means of purging oneself of guilt. I will then refer to the more Protestant view of confession, in which the need to rid oneself of guilt is not as central, as a “non-purgative” confession.

4 Even though Augustine was Roman Catholic, the process by which he comes to accept God’s power over him seems closer to Protestant confessional practice than to Roman Catholic confessional tradition.

5 Even though it would be possible in any confessional transaction for either the confessant or the confessor to purposely manipulate the other for false purposes, I am assuming that the motives of both parties to the transaction are pure.

6 I am not using the term “psychoanalysis” in the strict Freudian sense; rather, I am using it interchangeably with “psychotherapy” to refer to therapy in general.

7 What follows is a very close summary of Cushman’s argument: see especially pages 63-69 of Constructing the Self, Constructing America.

8 Hugh Black’s The Practice of Self-Culture (1904) is a very early example of the self-help genre. Aaron M. Crane’s Right and Wrong Ways of Thinking and Their Results (1905) states in its preface that “[t]he first lesson to be learned in the school of life is to understand one’s own personality or individuality, so as to estimate it at its true value, and to be able to use it for good and avoid using it for evil” (iii). 1919’s The Culture of
Courage by Frank Channing Haddock carries the subtitle A Practical Companion Book for Unfoldment of Fearless Personality, and Haddock himself is listed on the title page as the author of Power for Success, Power of Will, Practical Psychology, Business Power, and Creative Personality.
On December 3, 1957, Allen Tate wrote to Robert Lowell, responding to some poems that Lowell had sent him, poems that would later appear in Life Studies:

all the poems about your family, including the one about you and Elizabeth [Hardwick, Lowell’s wife] are definitely bad. I do not think you ought to publish them...it is simply that by and large, and in the total effect, the poems are composed of unassimilated details, terribly intimate, and coldly noted, which might well have been transferred from the notes from your autobiography without change...Your fine poems in the past present a formal ordering of highly intractable materials: but there is an imaginative thrust towards a symbolic order that these new poems seem to lack. The new ones sound to me like messages to yourself, or perhaps they are an heroic effort of the will to come to terms with the harsh incongruities of your childhood and of your later struggles with your parents, and you are letting these scattered items of experience have their full impact on your sensibility. Quite bluntly, these details...are of interest only to you...they have no public or literary interest.

(qtd. in Hamilton 237)

Tate’s letter is significant for several reasons that are germane to a discussion of confessional poetry. First and most importantly, he is disturbed by the intimate details of the poems. Strictly on a thematic level, he is uncomfortable with Lowell’s willingness to share the “unassimilated details” of his life with the reading public. Lowell’s poems, Tate argues, appear to have no larger context apart from that of Lowell himself. Tate’s
comments foreshadow the concerns not only of Life Studies' critics, but also those made by critics of other confessional poetry, who were often discomfited by the overwhelming intimacy of the poems they reviewed, as well as by the poets' willingness to expose personal—and not necessarily flattering—details about real people. Tate is also concerned about the way that Lowell has placed himself at the center of the poem.

Not surprisingly, perhaps, for a critic as thoroughly modernist in his sensibility as Tate was, his concerns are largely formal, centered around Lowell's mode of presentation. In a 31 January letter to Lowell, he reiterates his point: "I was not put off because [these poems] were not like your old work; rather because they lacked the concentration and power, lacking as they seemed to lack, the highly formalistic organization of the old" (qtd. in Hamilton 242). Significantly, the poems that Tate praises—"Skunk Hour" and "Inauguration Day: January 1953"—both have some formal regularity. "Skunk Hour" is written in sestets, while "Inauguration Day: January 1953" is a variation on the Petrarchan sonnet form.

In addition, Tate's December letter seems to draw—albeit obliquely—some important parallels between Lowell's poetry and psychoanalysis. He raises the question of whether or not Lowell might be using these poems as
therapy, to reconcile his own psychological demons—a process which, Tate feels, could not possibly have any "public or literary interest." Once again, the underlying concern is with the intimacy of the poems, that by publishing them, Lowell would be transforming the inherently private psychoanalytic process into a necessarily more public creative one. Tate's concern is oddly prescient in light of the fact that Life Studies had not been published yet. In anticipating a potential association between psychoanalysis and poetry, Tate raises an issue that critics would debate after Life Studies' publication and which would be central to the critical reception of Sylvia Plath's Ariel (1965).

In spite of Tate's misgivings, Life Studies did appear in 1959, and in his review essay, "Poetry as Confession," M.L. Rosenthal addresses the same issues that Tate does when he comments:

We are now far from the great Romantics who, it is true, spoke directly of their emotions but did not give the game away even to themselves. They found, instead, cosmic equations and symbols, transcendental reconciliations with "this lime-tree bower my prison," titanic melancholia in the course of which, merging his sense of tragic fatality with the nightingale's song, the poet lost his personal complaint in the music of universal forlornness. (Nation 154)

For the Romantics, as Rosenthal implies, the individual self was subservient to the communal one;
personal angst was seen as a manifestation of a more common, shared feeling. By using "cosmic equations and symbols," the Romantics were able to avoid placing their individual selves—their own lives—at the center of their poetry. Consequently, their work provided the wider context that, nearly 150 years later, both Tate and Rosenthal felt was lacking in Lowell’s work. Instead of the Romantics' universal response to a universal emotion, in *Life Studies* Lowell individualizes his response to a specific situation. The fact that Lowell was willing to publicize his very intimate and personal reactions ensures that his reaction becomes an outward manifestation of a wider societal shift from the communal to the personal.

Long before the secular Romantics, emphasis in religious confession had shifted from the public to the private. In 1215, at the Fourth Lateran Council, Pope Innocent III mandated that confession would henceforth be both private and compulsory. As a result, the motivation behind confession changed, according to Mary Flowers Braswell:

The very term "penitent" implies that some change is taking place. The sinner has become one who is sorry for his past actions and is willing to undertake a prescribed punishment for them. A reformed penitent is self-aware; his encounter with the priest has taught him something about himself, and he determines to make a change in his life: he will be "good." On a very elementary level he has learned what constitutes a sin, both in thought and in deed. His experience as a penitent will make him more conscious of future actions, and he will turn
In becoming private, confession has become almost therapeutic. Not only has the focus of the confession shifted from sin's effect on the community to the ways in which taking responsibility for the sin affects the individual sinner personally, but the compulsory nature of confession ensured that the shift would become much more pervasive faster than it otherwise might have. The widespread critical discomfort that greeted Life Studies' appearance in 1959 in many ways reflected a larger discomfort felt by members of the emerging middle class as they attempted to regain their individuality in the face of the "tranquilized Fifties."

* * * * *

M.L. Rosenthal's "Poetry as Confession" originally appeared in September 1959 as a review of Robert Lowell's Life Studies. Lowell's status as a well-known literary figure almost ensured a substantial critical response to his work; because of his meticulous attention to form and meter, as well as the density of his allusions in the earlier Lord Weary's Castle (1946), his work had been embraced by the New Critics.1 Lowell's personal and professional relationships with many of the most influential critics of the day—especially Allen Tate and
Randall Jarrell—may have helped pave the way for the substantial critical response that Life Studies received. Consequently, Lowell’s stylistic changes in Life Studies appeared to represent an almost complete rebellion against these same critics’ expectations, while simultaneously expressing the potential for an entirely new direction in poetry. Allen Ginsburg, John Berryman, and W.D. Snodgrass, among others, had all produced work which was characteristic in some ways of what came to be called “confessional poetry,” but since none of them had been embraced as wholeheartedly by the New Critics as Lowell, experimentation in their work did not impose the same critical obligation to respond.

Perhaps one reason for the lack of contemporary critical response to other poets’ work was that the critical definition of “confessional” poetry formulated in the wake of Life Studies was too narrow to accommodate the differing styles and concerns of the group of confessional poets who came after Lowell. Although Rosenthal’s essay resulted in the adoption of an important critical framework for discussing “confessional” poetry, its terminology resulted in a view of confessional poetry which seems to focus almost exclusively on either the radical formal break from the dense, highly allusive poetry prized by the New Critics, or on the confusion that
critics felt in attempting to successfully interpret such work—often to the exclusion of the wider cultural and historical issues surrounding it.

Much of the criticism on *Life Studies* has concerned the personal and aesthetic issues behind Lowell's shift from the highly formalistic poetry of *Lord Weary's Castle* (1946) to the "confessional" mode of *Life Studies* or, alternatively, on confessionalism's strictly formal implications. The first perspective focuses on content over form, while the second privileges form over content. However, neither of these viewpoints can entirely account for *Life Studies'* unique relationship to the central cultural and political concerns of American society in the 1950s.

*Life Studies* appeared at a time when poetry and its critics were attempting to adapt to the changing cultural and political contexts of the Cold War era, a fact that has been largely ignored when considering *Life Studies*. Such a narrow critical focus was a logical result of the concern with "normalcy" and conformity that characterized American society during the Cold War era. A need for conformity does not satisfactorily explain the continued existence of such narrow critical parameters, however, as it does not account for Lowell's need to find a new way of formulating a viable identity in the wake of the moral and
intellectual confusion of World War II and the Cold War. Not only did these conflicts radically change the way that people viewed good and evil, but as a result, people were forced to radically reassess the ways in which they perceived themselves.

The forty-one years since Life Studies' publication provide a vantage point from which to view the book in a broader cultural, political, and historical framework. Lowell’s foregrounding of the self and his elimination of the persona in the “confessional” poetry of Life Studies represents a renewed emphasis on the Self’s attempts to actively impose order on its experience of the increasingly chaotic world of the late 1940s and early 1950s.

The influence of critical principles which had been formulated during the 1920s and 30s in response to modernism made it difficult for many of Lowell’s formally trained critics to divorce themselves from their critical roots in the face of Life Studies' overt subjectivity. At this time, not only were New Critics like John Crowe Ransom, Cleanth Brooks, Robert Penn Warren publishing widely, but they held positions of power in the literary world. John Crowe Ransom was the editor of The Kenyon Review, while Brooks and Warren edited The Southern Review. In 1959, Allen Tate had just returned from a
State Department trip to India and was teaching at the University of Minnesota. Further—and perhaps more relevant to the critical climate of the time--Brooks and Warren had published *Understanding Poetry* in 1938 for use in undergraduate classrooms. As more and more people were able to attend colleges and universities on the G.I. Bill, *Understanding Poetry* enjoyed widespread influence. Consequently, the influence of New Critical methods in the classroom was more pervasive than it otherwise might have been. On the other hand, however, increasing critical attention was being paid to the obvious subjectivity of such American Romantics as Hawthorne, Emerson, Melville, and Whitman.\(^2\)

In the early reviews of *Life Studies*, the barely suppressed discomfort behind critics' attempts to impersonally analyze the poetry within the context of Lowell's personal life clearly illustrates the lack of an adequate critical vocabulary. Reviews by Stephen Spender and John Hollander, both of which appeared within months of the book's publication, illustrate the concern with changing critical contexts. Despite their admiration for Lowell's stylistic breakthrough, neither Spender nor Hollander seems able to transcend his own critical background to such an extent that he can perform a truly successful analysis of the poems' thematic changes.
Although both reviews are largely positive, the underlying note of caution in each appears to be the result of the formalistic tradition's inability to successfully address Lowell's increasing concern with self-perception within changing critical contexts. Spender does not question the importance of Lowell's achievement in *Life Studies*, commenting in the *New Republic* that, "Robert Lowell is an outstanding pioneer extending the frontiers of language, making notable conquests of material which often seems too eccentric for poetry and consolidating it in a very strong and compact form." However, his concern with the "sheer finality" of *Life Studies'* subjectivity does raise the question of whether Lowell's shift away from the New Criticism's formalistic rigidity creates the potential for an equally unbending subjectivity.

If such potential were fulfilled, the poet's personal judgments and impressions would then become the only legitimate interpretations. Spender feels that such definitiveness would be dangerous, in that it could potentially eradicate the "invisible world which is poetry." This invisible world is by implication objectively incomprehensible, and therefore must remain open to an indefinite number of subjective interpretations. However, Spender's view is that, by characterizing his family as specifically and concretely
as he does, Lowell has not left any room for any other interpretation. Taken too far, this sort of rigid characterization runs the risk of being too specific, of freezing the experience in Lowell’s view and not allowing other interpretations into it. In “Modes of Return: Memory and Remembering in the Poetry of Robert Lowell,” Allan Johnston discusses this point in terms of the mythology Lowell has created from his own experiences. Johnston argues that, in creating this mythology, Lowell has objectified his experience, setting it apart from the “events that constitute self.” Johnston goes on to say that this objectification in fact negates the “flux of experience” Lowell felt was contained in the poems. The stasis Johnston finds seems comparable to Spender’s “sheer finality."

Although, as Robert Phillips points out, there had been a flourishing confessional tradition in poetry since Augustine’s Confessions, the poetry which appeared in the wake of Life Studies differed from that earlier confessional tradition. First, whereas earlier poets had spoken through personae, allowing themselves a certain personal distance from their subject matter, later confessional poets, following Augustine’s example in the Confessions, eliminated the persona and began to speak in their own voices, suggesting an increasingly
conversational aspect of confessional poetry. In fact, Ralph Mills argues in *Cry of the Human* that contemporary poetry is a dialogue between the selves of both the poet and the reader: "The activity in which [the poet] engages is not just the construction of objects but the fashioning of a language that will ultimately awaken and transform the inner world of... readers" (7). Through a linguistic process of increasing intimacy, the distance between the poet and the narrator of the poem is decreased in confessional poetry. By forcing the reader to experience the poem as an ongoing dialogue or process, the confessional poet establishes an active relationship between the reader and the self embodied through the experience depicted in the poem. This conception of identity, in which the poets viewed themselves primarily through the lens of their own personal experience, is entirely opposed to the modernist approach, which placed identity within a metaphysical or symbolic context.

Clearly, this sense of the poet’s "presence"--the poet’s relationship to the space he inhabits and to the space created by his existence is central to the work of confessional poets. Confessional poets often achieve such relationships by means of very personal, intimate experiences which they interpret for their readers. For example, the conflict between Lowell’s search for
individual identity and the importance of economic and social position ensures that his personal assessment in "Home After Three Months Away" is a central issue. Lowell describes a weekend visit home from a locked psychiatric ward in McLean's Hospital (Hamilton 253), and his attempts to reconstruct his identity in response to his changing circumstances can be traced in the poem. Having refused, in "Waking in the Blue," to align himself with the society represented by the "thoroughbred mental cases" of his ward, once again, as in "The Hospital," the poet must continually re-orient himself to his new environment.

Readjustment operates both on the quotidian, everyday level, in which he is still able to see himself in terms comprehensible to society ("I am forty-one,/not forty now"), and on a more abstract level, in which he is identified through relationships and events comprehensible only to him ("After thirteen weeks/my child still dabs her cheeks/to start me shaving"). The poet has not lost his authoritative ability to determine the identities of others: "...When we dress [his daughter] in her sky-blue corduroy,/she changes to a boy," although his confidence in his own authority has been diminished to such an extent that he can see himself only in terms of his illness. Because his illness precludes working, these terms leave him outside the mainstream of American society.
("Recuperating, I neither spin nor toil"). Consequently, because he has no conventional economic status, he sees himself as having no social function: "I keep no rank nor station./Cured, I am frizzled, stale, and small."

Lowell's public introspection and concern with his own subjectivity seems to have created an environment in which critics perhaps felt freer to deviate from the prevailing critical standards—standards which prized impersonality and a lack of obvious emotion—although this deviation did not create an environment in which they felt comfortable. The tacit critical confessionalism which can be traced through many of the early reviews of Life Studies is a curious reflection of the work it analyzes. Peter Davison's search in The Atlantic Monthly for an objective formal standard against which to measure Lowell's achievement is an obvious example of the conflict many critics experienced. For Davison, Lowell's stylistic innovations have not solved "the dilemma of feeling": "[I]n the texture and movement of the verse and in the very quality of the imagery...the feelings must be released again, recreated" (July 1959). Although he was himself in the throes of a poetic crisis similar to the one that Lowell had experienced between The Mills of the Kavanaughs in 1951 and Life Studies, Davison was nonetheless, he says, "slow and clumsy in absorbing
Lowell's new mode of poetry" (The Fading Smile 54). In spite of his own confusion, however, Davison's generally positive comments about the book as a whole seem to function as a sort of admission that, even in light of the book's technical flaws, he cannot join the formalists in condemning it.³

Readers are forced to experience a similar personal involvement in Anne Sexton's "Elizabeth Gone." The poem is not—as one might surmise on a first reading—about her grandmother or older friend's death. Rather, it concerns her casting off a persona she had adopted during therapy sessions with Dr. Martin Orne (Middlebrook 63). Even in light of such biographical knowledge, however, Sexton's use of the imagery of age and death does lead readers to assume that Elizabeth is a woman who has recently died and left Sexton to pick up the pieces:

You lay in the nest of your real death, Beyond the print of my nervous fingers Where they touched your moving head; Your old skin puckering, your lungs' breath Grown baby short as you looked up last At my face swinging over the human bed, And somewhere you cried, let me go let me go.

Then I sorted the loves you had left, Elizabeth, Elizabeth, until you were gone. (1-7; 26-28)

Sexton appears to feel real grief here; she remains at Elizabeth's deathbed until she can at last let Elizabeth go. Conventional critical definitions of confessional poetry cannot account for such overt fictionalization.

56

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Further, although many of the critics who reviewed Sexton’s *To Bedlam and Partway Back* (1960) seem less confused than Lowell’s critics did, they continue to be stymied by a lack of terminology with which to successfully discuss the work. Louis Simpson, reviewing the book for *The Hudson Review*, laments that, “the more poetry succeeds, the less it can be described” (292). After the confusion of the summer, however, Neil Myers brings a much more definitive comment to the Fall issue of *The Minnesota Review*, stating that the difference between Sexton’s work and the rest of the “therapeutic” genre is that she has “survived.” Myers’s demarcation of the “therapeutic” genre suggests both that he views confessional poetry as an established genre, and more importantly, that truly “confessional” poetry must necessarily be written only within the therapeutic context. In light of Sexton’s concern with her own mental illness, it seems logical to infer, too, that for Myers, the fact that she has “survived” also means that she is still sane—she has not been irrevocably drawn into her psychosis.

Interestingly, in spite of the argument that “confessional” is the same as “therapeutic,” out of all the poets who have been categorized as “confessional,” only Anne Sexton’s work fits all the conventional
requirements of Myers’ definition of truly “confessional” poetry. Sexton began writing poetry specifically in response to her therapy, and she often used it as a means to further her progress within her therapy (Middlebrook 42). Although it may appear that confessional poetry is written only by the mentally ill, it is important to recognize that Lowell, Plath, and Sexton did not write good poetry because they were ill, and they did not write good poetry when they were ill. Rather, when they were well they wrote at least partly in response to their illnesses and Lowell in particular often wrote about it, but he could not finish poems when he was ill. 4

Even though confessional poetry is not written only for therapeutic reasons, its emphasis on the poets’ private lives can sometimes make readers feel as if they were in therapy. In fact, in his review of Life Studies John Hollander searches in the poet’s personal life for the resolution between form and content, although his emphasis is ultimately still on the aesthetic unity of the work. Writing in the October 1959 issue of Poetry, Hollander comments that, “what seems most prominently to govern this new direction in Mr. Lowell’s work is the association of a new autobiographical subject matter and a poetic form that has loosened almost unrecognizably in form and meter.” Meaning is still found in technique, as
when Hollander cites the opening lines of "During Fever," in which he sees "something rather new appear[ing] when the tension of a whole bare, almost prosaic passage of report will be packed into what is more image than figure, more glimpse, even, than image." However, an essential requirement for the critical acceptance of a confessional poetics is met by Hollander's acknowledgment of the aesthetic validity of Lowell's unorthodox practices.

The "glimpse" of the poet's private life that Hollander views as the result of Lowell's use of the dramatic monologue seems to be at least a partial fulfillment of Randall Jarrell's guarded prediction in his 1947 review of Lord Weary's Castle:

Freedom is something that [Lowell] has wished to escape into, by a very strange route. . . . Some of the late poems depend less on rhetorical description and more on dramatic speech; their wholes have escaped from the hypnotic bondage of the details. ("From the Kingdom of Necessity")

Jarrell's recognition of the potential for a fundamental change in Lowell's work seems almost to predict Lowell's conscious assumption of an openly subjective position in Life Studies. The review becomes even more prophetic because Lowell did not seriously start to work on any of the Life Studies poems until 1957 (Hamilton 233).

The confusion of critics who expected Lowell to continue in the more formalistic modes of Lord Weary's Castle and The Mills of the Kavanaughhs was precipitated at
least in part by the largely unexpected shift from the
detachment of Lord Weary's Castle to his active
participation in Life Studies. Lowell had published
almost nothing between The Mills of the Kavanaughs in 1951
and Life Studies in 1959, except for early versions of
poems he later revised for Life Studies (Axelrod 116).

Viewing any poetic movement separately from the
circumstances surrounding it often simplifies the critics' job at the time the poetry is being published, although it makes scholars' work difficult for years afterward. How, for example, is one to deal with W.D. Snodgrass, whose poems in Heart's Needle are some of the best known examples of modern American confessional poetry? In spite of Lowell's public statement that he was influenced by Snodgrass (during the late 1940s and early 1950s, while Lowell was teaching at the University of Iowa, Snodgrass was working on many of the poems which later appeared in Heart's Needle), it is Lowell who is most often cited as the first major confessional poet.

Even though Snodgrass's Heart's Needle and Lowell's Life Studies appeared in 1959, and Heart's Needle had won the 1960 Pulitzer Prize, Lowell's book was the more widely reviewed. Significantly, however, both books share many features common to confessional poetry: a very personal, intimate voice; an almost obsessive thematic concern with
seemingly commonplace events—events which, although traumatic, are not dissimilar to events in readers' own lives; and a freer form than the poetry (including Lowell's early work) which had been so often praised by the New Critics.

Despite these similarities, however, in reality Snodgrass is very different from Lowell. For Snodgrass, achieving the personal, intimate style of much of Heart's Needle appears to be the natural result of a progression from the book's earlier poems to the later ones. Paul Gaston argues that the first five poems in Heart's Needle prepare the reader for the poems that follow (35). "Ten Days' Leave," the first poem in the book, is narrated in the third person, as if Snodgrass were consciously leaving himself out of the poem. Yet later on, in "These Trees Stand," he places himself unequivocally in the poem: "Snodgrass is walking through the universe."

Snodgrass's appearance in the poem becomes especially interesting in light of Karl Malkoff's argument that "contemporary American poetry is defined by its conscious refusal to acknowledge the self as "the inevitable perspective from which reality must be viewed" (3). In light of the New Criticism's widespread influence in 1959, it is not unexpected that critics should be surprised that Snodgrass refuses to hide behind a persona, preferring to
narrate his experience from his own perspective instead. The centrality of the self in the poem gives Snodgrass the authority to share his perception of his experiences with his readers in such a way that he could not have done otherwise.

In this poem, Snodgrass narrates from inside as well as outside his indecision. At the beginning of the poem, he consciously separates himself from the solidity and predictability of the trees:

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The trees stand very tall under the heavens. While they stand, if I walk, all stars traverse This steep celestial gulf their branches start. Though lovers stand at sixes and at sevens While civilizations come down with the curse, Snodgrass is walking through the universe. (1-6)
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While in the first stanza Snodgrass consciously aligns himself with the solidity and predictability of the trees and against the lovers' conflict, in which the lovers are all "at sixes and at sevens," in the second stanza all predictability is gone: "I can't make any world go around your house." The name of his addressee is his only link with an ordered world. Unfortunately, that name only accentuates his confusion by leading him further and further away from the mundane: "Your name's safe conduct into love or verse" (11). Neither love nor verse, the poem implies, is easily understood. When he repeats "Snodgrass is walking through the universe" at the end of the second stanza, "Snodgrass" represents the self in
flight from his own indecision, while simultaneously looking back at the other self trapped inside it.

The insider’s viewpoint of the second stanza is replaced by his ambivalent stance toward his poetic vocation in the third:

Your mind’s absurd, miraculous as sperm
And as decisive. If you can’t coerce
One thing outside yourself, why you’re the poet!
...
She can’t make up your mind. Soon as you know it,
Your firmament grows touchable and firm.
(13-15; 16-17; my emphasis)

In his realization that his lover cannot help him make this decision, Snodgrass appears to be entirely outside himself; he has created another, less confident poetic self with which to argue. Significantly, Snodgrass-- unlike the other early confessional poets--did not originally plan to be a poet. Coming from a musical background, he began writing poetry almost by chance at the University of Iowa, where he had gone to study playwriting (“A Liberal Education” 445-46). Consequently, such uncertainty about his poetic ability is not surprising. Lowell, Plath, and Berryman (Sexton is the exception) had very few doubts as to their poetic vocations. For these poets, it was their personal conflicts which provided material for their most confessional poetry. Although Snodgrass too writes about personal difficulties, poems such as “April Inventory” and
"A Cardinal" often are concerned with perceived professional inadequacies.

Second, in spite of his professions to the contrary (Sugarman 6), Snodgrass appears to be the most well-adjusted of the early confessional poets. Even though he has been married five times and has spent many years in therapy, Snodgrass has never been a patient in a mental hospital. In a world which seems to demand sanity and conformity, the early confessional poets often clung fiercely to their sense of tortured alienation, believing that their best work stemmed from the difficulty they experienced with everyday life. In a general sense, male poets appeared to believe that their illnesses helped their writing--whereas Plath and Sexton appeared to be much more ashamed of their problems. Both of them took steps to actively combat their illnesses and both were careful to emphasize that there was no causal relationship between illness and poetry. Although Berryman, Lowell, and Roethke all sought help, Berryman and Roethke in particular were much more likely to emphasize illness' relation to their work.

For Snodgrass, although he does want to gain readers' sympathy, it sometimes appears more important to Snodgrass that he have a forum in which to tell his story. The everyday events with which he is concerned in Heart's
Needle are not outside the scope of most readers’
imaginations--returning to his childhood home after a long
period of time, watching himself grow older, watching a
cardinal in the woods, losing a little daughter in a
divorce. Like the other confessional poets, Snodgrass
manages to place the experience into a context with which
the reader can identify, yet his experience of the event
always remains his own. Although the speaker’s individual
perceptions of his own experience are absolutely central
to confessional poetry, an equally important aspect is the
reader’s ability to find himself reflected in the poem.
Snodgrass’s inability—in this poem, at least—to transcend
his own experience seems to point to an important
limitation to the confessional method as it was practiced
in the late 1950s and early 1960s. In “A Cardinal,” the
experience of escaping to the woods is a very common one,
yet the solidarity he feels with the cardinal is uniquely
his own:

We whistle in the dark
to drive the devils off.
Each dog creates his bark.
Even I, in navy blues,
I whistled “Wachet Auf”
to tell the sailors who. (180-86)

Both the bird and the poet are dependent on their voices--
both real and poetic--to establish their identities in the
world.
The reader's identification with Snodgrass's experience is not unlike Diana Hume George's comment that, in identifying with the "infantile preoccupations" of Anne Sexton's poetry, readers must reconcile themselves to the fact that the issues in the poetry belong to them as well ("The Poetic Heroism of Anne Sexton"). When reading Sexton or Snodgrass, the audience must accept their own involvement in the issues of the poetry.

Life Studies, too, encourages Lowell and his readers to accept their complicity in the experiences described in the poems. In writing Life Studies, Lowell's emphasis on the self and the personal authority gained by the elimination of the persona allowed him to use Jarrell's "dramatic speech" to combine confessionalism's self-analysis with a changing conception of the poet's role. Consequently, in Life Studies Lowell was able to consciously manipulate emotional details in a way that was impossible in the more tightly structured forms of Lord Weary's Castle. For example, his progression in "Grandparents" (1959) from annoyance with "those adults champing for their ritual Friday spin" to his final acknowledgment of his rebellion against his need for the past his grandparents represent ("Grandpa! Have me, hold me, cherish me!") illustrates his newfound capacity for self-analysis. His final assessment of his actions at the
end of the poem ("disloyal still,/I doodle handlebar/mustaches on the last Russian Czar") implies that he is fully cognizant of his own involvement in the process by which the past his grandparents symbolize has become inaccessible to him.

Further, Lowell’s obvious emotional involvement in “Grandparents” can be fruitfully contrasted with his objective, almost clinical tone in “In Memory of Arthur Winslow” (1943). In the earlier poem, Lowell depicts his grandfather’s objectification ("This Easter, Arthur Winslow, less than dead,/Your people set you up in Phillips’ House") and his own recognition of the past his grandfather symbolizes. The final image of the poem’s first section, in which "...the ghost of the risen Jesus walks the waves to run/Arthur upon a trumpeting black swan/Beyond Charles River to Acheron/where the wide waters and their voyager are one," allows the adult Lowell to reverse the relationship between himself and his grandfather. His grandfather is identified as “Arthur,” as if he were the child and Lowell the adult, in spite of the fact that the speaking voice of the adult poet has not yet achieved personal or poetic distance from which to make any sort of analysis. Clearly, Lowell’s use of the persona in this poem does not permit him to acknowledge
his active involvement in his grandfather’s objectification.

A similar unasked-for involvement in the issues of the poetry may be why many readers feel uncomfortable reading some of the best confessional poetry of this period. Because of its concern with subjects not usually considered suitable for poetry and its emphasis on very personal, often degrading or embarrassing experiences or reactions, the content of confessional poetry was sometimes problematic for these readers.

For example, in “In Celebration of My Uterus” (1969), Anne Sexton equates the physical existence of her uterus with her gendered existence as a woman, and the simple fact that the poem is addressed directly to her uterus almost certainly would have made many readers uncomfortable. Diane Middlebrook points out that this poem was written during a time when Sexton had been experiencing some health problems and a hysterectomy had been considered (255). However, in light of the beginnings of the feminist movement, the poem can be seen in some ways as a slap in the face to the predominantly male medical profession, in that the poem’s speaker refuses to allow them to remove it—removing her uterus, the poem implies, would fundamentally change Sexton’s perception of herself as a woman:
They wanted to cut you out
but they will not.
They said you were immeasurably empty
but you are not.
They said you were sick unto dying
but they were wrong.
You are singing like a school girl.
You are not torn.

Sweet weight,
in celebration of the woman I am
and of the soul of the woman I am
and of the central creature and its delight
I sing for you. I dare to live. (3-13)

In the poem, Sexton celebrates her good fortune at escaping the hysterectomy (“’A blight had been forecast and has been cast out’” [24]) and provides a list of all the various things that women might be doing, the implication being that they have the ability to do all these tasks because they have maintained their gendered existences—due, in part, to their uteri.⁹

Readers’ feelings of embarrassment or forced intimacy are not surprising, however, because according to Robert Phillips in The Confessional Poets, confessional poetry is inherently highly emotional, as opposed to the reticence and impersonality of modernist poetry. This openness also allows confessional poets to break almost all existing taboos on subject matter. Robert Lowell’s poems on mental illness, W.D. Snodgrass’s poems about his divorce, and Anne Sexton’s poems about masturbation, menstruation, and other bodily functions are some of the most well-known examples of these taboos being broken. More recently,
Sharon Olds's poetry detailing instances of childhood sexual abuse and incest often encourages a confessional reading, regardless of how morbid or unpleasant her subject matter may be.

The need for an authoritative critical vocabulary highlighted by Lowell's rebellion against prevailing critical expectations proved especially receptive to Rosenthal's ability to categorize. Rosenthal's interpretation of poetry as confession was immediately taken up by many contemporary reviewers as the basis for their own interpretations. John Thompson in *The Kenyon Review* (Summer 1959) places the self-analysis inherent in confessional poetry in a wider context when he states that "Robert Lowell's new poems show that this distance between persona and person is not, after all, important to art, but has been a reflection of the way our culture conceived character." In creating a poetics by which these inner depths can be reached, Lowell is attempting to reach a truer, if more subjective, depiction of reality. A believable representation of a potentially malevolent reality fulfills a central requirement of confessionalism.

Authenticity had proven to be an especially troublesome matter in the postwar, postmodern period, especially for American poets, and most particularly in light of the United States' economic prosperity during the
1950s. Under Eisenhower’s Administration, the United States was experiencing a financial upswing unknown since the 1920s, a prosperity which partly manifested itself through increased economic (and hence, political) power for the middle class. The responsibility implied in the middle class’ sudden recognition of its power seems to have forced an individual reassessment among its members, as they were forced to publicly confront new social and economic implications of their role. As a result, Lowell’s attempt to regain his own individuality within the larger context of the group reflects the middle class’ struggle to come to terms with the wider implications of its new role.

In light of this dilemma, it is not surprising that although the terminology of confession provides a vocabulary for discussing the personal implications of Life Studies, it cannot adequately deal with Lowell’s specific desire to avoid the obvious conformism present in many political movements, nor can it account for the implied conformism that Lowell finds in being uninvolved. Life Studies’ appearance in 1959, at the end of the “tranquilized Fifties” (Lowell’s emphasis) can be viewed as an individual attempt to impose order on a wider cultural confusion. Although Part I of Life Studies has often been read as Lowell’s loss of faith in the
historical and cultural institutions of the past, it appears that in light of the Eisenhower years of characteristic complacency, Lowell’s apostasy echoes a wider cultural search for order in the face of the changing political circumstances of the Cold War.

Lowell’s loss of faith in historical and cultural institutions and his consequent shift towards a more consciously subjective position appears to be an inversion of the increasingly international emphasis of Eisenhower’s administration. American foreign policy during the post-war years seems to support the speculation that if a context for discussion or action could be created—i.e., if a plan could be formulated or money sent—then the United States was exempt from any deeper responsibility. For example, the United Nations was actively functioning by 1948 with the formation of the United Nations Truce Supervision Organization and the first results of the Marshall Plan were evident in 1951 with the formation of the European Coal and Steel Community. The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the Organization of American States (OAS) had come into existence by the early 1950s as well.

Criticism’s neglect of Lowell’s individual relationship to the very specific political and cultural factors which are central to Life Studies points to a
central limitation of confessionalism. While the terminology of confessionalism functions very well within clearly defined contexts as a means of discussing Lowell's search for an authentic personal identity within the political and cultural circumstances surrounding him, it cannot entirely account for Lowell's sometimes ambivalent relationship to those circumstances.

Lowell explicitly rejects a purely political and economic approach to moral accountability in favor of a more individually constructed view in "Beyond the Alps." A central irony of the poem is that it is set in "1950, the year that Pius XII defined the dogma of Mary's bodily Assumption," as opposed to placing his emphasis on an event whose political implications might have been more widely acknowledged. The heightened importance Lowell sees the crowds attributing to the Pope's decree can be partly attributed to his own need to respond to shifting political contexts, as well as to his recent deconversion from Roman Catholicism.

It is possible to read "Beyond the Alps" as a shift away from politics in general, but viewed within the context of Lowell's religious deconversion, what the poem depicts is a more specific shift away from a conscious endorsement of the conformist implications of mass response, rather than an avoidance of the political issues
themselves. Lowell had returned to the Episcopal Church in 1955 because "the [Roman Catholic] Church had served its purpose" (qtd. in Hamilton 121). In returning to the less obviously hierarchical Episcopal Church, he may have been responding to a fear that the ideological rigidity of both the Roman Catholic Church and the United States's foreign policy would eradicate the Self's ability to make successful individual and emotional decisions.

The motivations behind Lowell’s decision to re-join the Episcopal Church were fundamentally different from those behind his conversion to Catholicism. Paul Mariani places Lowell’s de-conversion from Catholicism and his rejoining of the Episcopal Church within the context of his moving back to Boston to live for the first time since he was 17. Lowell himself seemed to feel that rejoining the Episcopal Church was a logical extension both of the move and of his search for an epistemology that would not impose itself on any decisions he might make. In a letter to Elizabeth Bishop he attempts to explain his rationale:

I think most people who are Christians find profession and practice something commonsensical, cow-like, customary. . . . [religious belief is] a way of going to a country by not going, but by staying home and buying a book of maps. Then you tell other people who also stay at home looking at maps that they are not getting anywhere because they have the wrong directions. (qtd. Mariani 237)
If, in fact, he was attempting to create a spiritual environment in which to make individual decisions, then perhaps returning to the familiarity of the Episcopal Church provided that freedom.

Within "Beyond the Alps," the Catholic Church can no longer impose meaning on Lowell’s universe: “The lights of science couldn’t hold a candle/to Mary risen. . . ././. ./But who believed this? Who could understand?” (20-21; 23). Not only have the parameters of Lowell’s personal epistemological universe been distorted, but even more importantly, the fundamental means by which society has searched for meaning are no longer applicable. For Lowell, the power manifested in the Pope’s apparently reverential—but in reality quite arbitrary—action ensures that the dogma of Mary’s bodily Assumption becomes a potentially malevolent attempt to control individual thought: “God herded his people to the coup de grace-/the costumed Switzers sloped their pikes to push,/O Pius, through the monstrous human crush. . . .” (26-28). On a symbolic level, Lowell’s interpretation of the Pope’s action can be viewed as a direct corollary to Lowell’s experiences of the time, while in a critical sense it illustrates an essential limitation of confessionalism. In viewing the poet’s reaction to the Pope’s definition of Mary’s Assumption strictly as a reflection of Lowell’s
personal loss of faith, a confessional interpretation does not consider the possibility of specifically political meaning within that loss.

The shift that Lowell experiences here—away from a predominantly religious gnosiology toward a more secular, "scientific" epistemology is similar to the shift that Philip Cushman feels occurred in the early twentieth century, as "celebrity" began to subsume "character." As a result, Lowell must redefine his responses to certain aspects of Catholicism in order to ensure the validity of his self-perception within a constantly shifting moral universe, particularly during the years immediately following World War II.

In light of such upheaval, writers and intellectuals felt it necessary to redefine themselves, both politically and intellectually. Thomas Hill Schaub, in American Fiction and the Cold War (1991), and Alexander Bloom (Prodigal Sons: The New York Intellectuals and Their World, 1986) discuss these redefinitions extensively. Not only were former radicals moving towards the political center, but they were also moving away from the idea that literature in itself should directly influence the political process. For example, in 1932 Philip Rahv had rejected the Aristotelian version of catharsis without
action, arguing instead for a new sort of catharsis which
he said could be found in "proletarian" literature:

A proletarian drama, for instance, inspires the
spectator with pity as he identifies himself
with the characters on the stage; he is terror-
stricken by the horror of workers' existence
under capitalism; but these two emotions are
finally fused in the white heat of battle into a
revolutionary deed, with the weapon of
proletarian class-will in the hands of the
masses. This is the vital katharsis by which
the proletarian writer fecundates his art. ("The
Literary Class War," The New Masses August 1932)

Seventeen years later, however, in the introduction
to his 1949 study of Herman Melville, Richard Chase
specifically disavows any sort of Rahvian relationship
between literature and direct action:

My...purpose is to contribute a book on
Melville to a movement which may be described
(once again) as the new liberalism—that newly
invigorated secular thought at the dark center
of the twentieth century which...now begins to
ransom liberalism from the ruinous sellouts,
failures, and defeats of the thirties...It
must present a vision of life capable, by a
continuous act of imaginative criticism, of
avoiding...the idea that literature should
participate directly in the economic liberation
of the masses. (Melville v, qtd. Schaub 7,
emphasis mine)

A more objective and less overtly political method of
literary criticism appears to have been a comforting
solution.

However, opposed to this objectivity, Lowell's focus
on himself and his personal problems often serves as a
foil to the obsession with conformity and normality which
characterized the United States during the 1950s. After the chaos of World War II, the American people needed a way to make sense of the world and their experience in it. Since the atrocities of the Holocaust had turned their perceptions of good and evil upside down, it was no longer possible to view anything in the same way they had before the war. Alan Nadel calls this obsession with normality "containment culture":

[The obsession with and] the proliferation of normality--its stories and accoutrement, its mandates and repressions--may have been...a pervasive symptom of the trauma caused by witnessing a Great Depression, a Second World War, an ascent to atomic power, and fantasy-like economic boom in less than a generation. (xi)

Economically and emotionally, Americans' perceptions of the world and their experience in it had been radically altered during the late 40s and early 1950s. More importantly, the atrocities revealed at the Nuremberg Trials, the vindictiveness of Senator Joseph McCarthy and his followers, as well as the cruelties inflicted on those who were agitating for their civil rights had transformed our perceptions of the human capacity for evil. This confusion was reflected in the sudden influx of works exploring both the Holocaust and ethical issues in general. For example, Hannah Arendt, Reinhold Niebuhr, and Elie Wiesel first published during these years.
Lowell’s illustration in “Beyond the Alps” of the search for a new moral order highlights his empathy with the crowd’s desire for authority, while at the same time emphasizing his alienation from it. As the poet is riding the train from Rome to Paris, “Life changed to landscape” (“Beyond the Alps” 7). Suddenly life is no longer an active experience, but instead it is something to be viewed and classified. The discovery of this ability to identify allows the poet to acknowledge the brutal irony of a City of God under totalitarian rule. Conformism’s reduction of an entire group of people to a stereotype illustrates the refusal to acknowledge individual differences which is central to Lowell’s conflict.

None of the major early critics on Life Studies focuses specifically on the crowd’s reaction to the Pope’s definition, although Jerome Mazzaro (The Poetic Themes of Robert Lowell, 1970), Alan Williamson (Pity the Monsters: The Political Vision of Robert Lowell, 1974), Stephen Yenser (Circle to Circle: The Poetry of Robert Lowell, 1975), and Ian Hamilton (Robert Lowell: A Biography, 1982) view Lowell’s loss of faith in the Catholic Church as central to their readings of “Beyond the Alps,” and Stephen Gould Axelrod (Robert Lowell: Life and Art, 1978) takes it as the definitive issue in his analysis. Hyatt Waggoner (American Poets from the Puritans to the Present,
1968) states that "Life Studies is carefully arranged to justify Lowell's great decision to leave 'the City of God where it belongs'" (582).

More recently, Katharine Wallingford (Robert Lowell's Language of the Self, 1988) and William Doreski (Robert Lowell's Shifting Colors: The Poetics of the Public and the Personal, forthcoming) do not address "Beyond the Alps" at all, while Terri Witek's exhaustive analysis of the poem in Robert Lowell and Life Studies: Revising the Self (1993) focuses specifically on the process by which—over the course of many drafts of the poem—Lowell moves away from "those powerful presences that had helped shape his personal and professional identities" (11) towards "his own personality rather than that of others, his own systems of organization rather than those received from the past" (15).

This type of intense focus on the personal implications of such shifts does not provide any means by which to consider the overtly political aspects of Lowell's work. The political views expressed in Life Studies have traditionally been considered strictly as background material against which the poet's personal conflicts are played out; in fact, his political views are central to his purpose.
The most thorough discussion of Lowell’s political views in *Life Studies* is found in Alan Williamson’s *Pity the Monsters: The Political Vision of Robert Lowell* (1974). However, rather than approaching specific events, Williamson analyzes Lowell’s work through a Freudian lens, and his definition of politics is somewhat wider than mine. Williamson defines politics as “the shape of human destiny—ranging from the pressure of a family on an anarchic individual to the cumulative action of almost the entire human race in the current crisis of technology and ecology” (1). Williamson’s analysis, then, continually casts Lowell as a victim who is continually trying to overcome his victimization, rather than an individual who is both cognizant of and actively responsible for his own actions. A crucial component of Lowell’s quest in *Life Studies* is his active attempt to reconcile his loss of faith in cultural and historical institutions to his own need for political and moral authority in the Cold War era.

Lowell’s religious deconversion provided him with the distance to realistically assess that process for himself as it took place within the larger cultural context of culture. Consequently, “When the Vatican made Mary’s Assumption dogma,/the crowds at San Pietro screamed Papa” (“Beyond the Alps” 16-17, emphasis Lowell’s). What the
crowds are embracing—and what Lowell views with increasingly ironic detachment throughout the rest of the poem—is the Holy Father’s authority, his power to name. Lowell’s use of the familial designation “Papa” implies that the crowd identifies with the (Holy) Father on a very basic, fundamental level, almost as if they were, in fact, biologically related to him. A central issue here is not so much that Lowell is questioning the existence of that authority—although he had questioned its dogma to such an extent that by leaving the Catholic Church he placed himself outside its jurisdiction—but rather, he is questioning the uses to which this power is put, whether the Pope’s authority might be better used in the service of a more overtly political issue.

The personal implications of conformity create a contrast between the crowd’s acceptance of authority and the vehemence of Lowell’s reaction against it—a contrast which is too great to be fully explained within the limits of confessionalism. “Confession” in a religious sense carries with it the expectation of absolution; therefore, a confessional reading would require that some sort of resolution be achieved at the end of the poem. The resolution Lowell depicts is unsatisfactory, for he has realized that there are no answers to be found in any of the old institutions: “there were no tickets for that
altitude/once held by Hellas, when the Goddess stood." By
the same token, however, he has no response to give
himself; we as a society have been reduced to watching
"...Paris, our black classic, breaking up/like killer
kings on an Etruscan cup." Moral constructs of the world
as American society interpreted them before World War II
no longer exist, and the resulting anxiety has so
paralyzed people that they can do nothing except wait to
see which one of the "killer kings" will prevail. This
dilemma seems to be at least a partial result of a lack of
diplomatic language with which to discuss the changing
conception of moral accountability in the aftermath of
World War II and in the face of the perceived Soviet
threat.

Beyond this realization lies a central moral dilemma
of the Cold War era: because our wartime alliance with
the Soviet Union had helped to create the context for
Stalin's expansionism, the United States felt itself
morally obligated to defend the nations affected by the
USSR's increasing influence. From the critical
perspective of 2000, Lowell's interpretation of Lepke's
experience in "Memories of West Street and Lepke" (1959)
can be viewed as another manifestation of the Cold War
era's conformist mentality. In this poem, Lowell is
cought between his status as a resident of "Boston's
hardly passionate Marlborough Street” in 1959 and his need to create some sort of identity for himself apart from this designation. He refuses to abdicate control over his thoughts as Lepke was forced to do in prison (Lepke had been lobotomized), yet he is unable to find an identity which will allow him the same self-respect he felt as a “fire-breathing Catholic C.O. .”

The fundamental disillusionment felt by traditional liberals during the 1950s created an environment which was particularly conducive to the development of a more subjective poetics, and these intellectuals’ consequent critical uncertainty may have contributed to the eventual dominance of an objective critical approach. Both radical and conservative ideologies had been so deeply shaken by the rise of totalitarianism and World War II that many artists and intellectuals began moving towards the political center.12

In American Fiction and the Cold War, Thomas Hill Schaub posits the beginning of this disillusionment in 1939, when Adolf Hitler signed the non-aggression pact with the Soviet Union. This agreement was especially traumatic to writers and intellectuals on the Left because most of them were resolutely opposed to the Nazis, but they had placed a deep emotional and intellectual faith in what they perceived as the more equitable political system
espoused by the USSR. Although the extensive atrocities of Stalin’s rule had not yet been completely revealed, liberal intellectuals did not want to believe that this decision was a foreshadowing of worse atrocities to come. Stalin’s show trials, the discovery of the Nazi concentration camps, and the Nuremberg Trials also contributed to intellectuals’ feelings of disillusionment and betrayal, feelings which were augmented by the vindictiveness of the House Un-American Activities Committee as Senator Joseph McCarthy began his anticommunist crusade.

This search for a new way to communicate what may be incommunicable within present contexts is central to Robert Lowell’s “For the Union Dead” (1964). The poem is permeated with imagery suggesting both the past’s encroachment on the present and the present’s uncertainty about how to deal with that past. Instead of the Aquarium he visited during his childhood, the adult Lowell finds a parking garage being built. In order to keep it from falling, the monument to Colonel Robert Shaw and the black soldiers he led during the Civil War must be temporarily reinforced. In 1964, however, World War II had no real memorial, which kept it firmly in Lowell’s present, which seems to beg the question that if the city cannot truly define the recent past by building a memorial to it, then
is that same past something that people must confront? People are willing to exploit the economic and commercial implications of the war, but not the emotional. The only acknowledgment for the most recent war is the billboard for the Mosler safe, the "Rock of Ages" that was not destroyed in the Hiroshima bombing.

Although the self-perception Lowell experiences in Life Studies (and, to an extent, in For The Union Dead) does not reflect the individualism for which he is searching, the fear of losing even this limited autonomy makes the contrast between his current ambivalence and his former activism (during World War II Lowell had served five months in jail as a conscientious objector) appear even sharper.

A central issue in "Memories of West Street and Lepke" is the need to overcome the apathy of his present situation. During World War II, Lowell had felt secure enough in his beliefs that he could actively respond to policies which he felt betrayed the individual’s right to free moral action. Lowell’s "Declaration of Personal Responsibility," which he published as an open letter to President Roosevelt in opposition to the saturation bombings of German cities, said in part:

...a fundamental principle of our American Democracy, one that distinguishes it from among the demagoguery and herd hypnosis of the totalitarian tyrannies,
[is] that with us each individual citizen is called upon to make voluntary and responsible decisions on issues which concern the national welfare. . . No matter how expedient I might find it to entrust my moral responsibility to the State, I realize that it is not permissible under a form of government which derives its sanctions from the rational consent of the governed. (qtd. in Hamilton 89)\textsuperscript{13}

Even though he was cognizant that by refusing to be drafted, he was risking a prison sentence, Lowell felt strongly enough about the issue to claim conscientious objector status.

In "Memories of West Street and Lepke," Abramowitz, Bioff and Brown, and Lowell himself (in prison) represented active, definitive responses to the cultural/political situation of their time. Now, in the "tranquilized Fifties" (Lowell’s emphasis), the potential for individual action is nearly non-existent, and apathy permeates all levels of society: "... even the man/scavenging filth in the back alley trash cans, has two children, a beach wagon, a helpmate, and is a ‘young Republican.’" Lowell’s ambivalent description of the "young Republican" in his back alley seems to reflect his own political conflict in the years directly after World War II. In spite of the man’s conformist political beliefs, he cannot embrace American society to such an extent that he can leave the back alley and live happily with the "common man." Lowell is experiencing an identity
crisis similar to the one he experiences is "Home After Three Months Away," although here his crisis is largely political and public; in the other poem it was predominantly personal and private.

Unlike Lowell, Czar Lepke is no longer capable of experiencing any sort of conflict. His confinement in prison has removed him from his customary moral universe, and he is completely cut off from comprehensible meaning:

Flabby, bald, lobotomized,
he drifted in a sheepish calm,
where no agonizing reappraisal
jarred his concentration on the electric chair--
hanging like an oasis in his air of lost connections. (48-53)

The electric chair is the only part of Lepke's present world which he can endow with any meaning because it is the only thing whose definition has not been changed in the context of World War II.

M.L. Rosenthal, in an essay written after Lowell's death, argues that "Lepke, with his patriotic and religious symbols, his superior access to information, and his other possession and privileges, becomes an emblem of one aspect of modern America: her 'lost connections' to her own past despite her power" (150). Even though the United States is the most powerful nation in the world, to an extent, and we have access to any information we want, we often have very little knowledge. Here, Lepke has all the symbols and all the information, but he has lost sight
of its meaning; he has only "lost connections." At one time, then, Lepke too must have been able to make sense of the world and his place in it. The only thing he can still connect meaning to is the "oasis" of the electric chair. Since he is in prison, the identity that he has chosen for himself—he is "Murder Incorporated's Czar Lepke"—has been taken away and another identity imposed by the prison system. Consequently, not only has his professional power been taken away (it is not possible to be a "czar" in jail) but the ability to successfully interpret the world has been taken away as well.

Lowell, too, is experiencing a similar process. The poem begins with comparisons: even though he "hog[s] a whole house" it is the man in the back alley who appears to represent normality to him: "[E]ven the man/scavenging filth in the back alley trash cans/has two children, a beach-wagon, a helpmate,/and is a 'young Republican.'" In contrast, he has waited to become a father (his daughter, he says, is "young enough to be my granddaughter") and he is forty—no longer young. In prison, he aligns himself with the outcasts of society—the "Negro boy," the vegetarian pacifists, Abramowitz, the Jehovah's Witnesses, and ultimately (though reluctantly) Czar Lepke himself.

Lowell focuses in on unexpected aspects of the outsiders: the salient feature of the Negro is that he
has "curlicies of marijuana in his hair," not that he is black. By the same token, it is not Abramowitz's pacifism or vegetarianism that gets him beaten up; instead, it is his efforts to convert Bioff and Brown, "the Hollywood pimps." Lowell's point appears at least partially to be that, even in prison, as in nearly everywhere else in the United States at that time, there were clearly defined expectations for everyone. If you dared to question your role or to step outside your place, trouble started.

Remembering Lepke forces Lowell to acknowledge how close to being entirely cut off from meaning he has become within his contemporary circumstances. That he is writing this poem several years after the fact points to the apparent success of his own "reappraisal," through which he has retained his ability to impose meaning on his world. Lowell has saved himself from Lepke's "air of lost connections." The memory of Lepke's possessions, the "things forbidden to the common man," is the catalyst for this realization. The personal expression these things present illustrate the positive aspects of nonconformism, but on the other hand, the deviance of personal expression is allowed only because Lepke is going to die.

Criticism's neglect of Lowell's individual relationship to the very specific political and cultural
factors which are central to Life Studies points to a central limitation of confessionalism. While the terminology of confessionalism functions very well within clearly defined contexts as a means of discussing Lowell's search for an authentic personal identity within the political and cultural circumstances surrounding him, it cannot entirely account for Lowell's sometimes ambivalent relationship to them. Placing Life Studies in the wider political and cultural contexts of its time allows for a broader interpretation of the work as a whole and ensures that the work will not become dated in light of recent increasingly extreme confessional poetry.

1 Although this study may make it appear that the New Critics were the only critics writing during the late 40s and early 50s, there were in fact many others out there. Critics who wrote from other perspectives included, for example, the New York Intellectuals (to loosely group together a disparate band of critics largely publishing in more cosmopolitan journals like Partisan Review and Commentary), were comprised of such critics as Lionel and Diana Trilling, Alfred Kazin, Philip Rahv, and Norman Podhoretz, although these writers rarely reviewed poetry. The issues with which they were concerned were often more conventionally political and philosophical in scope. It might be more accurate to call them "cultural" critics rather than strictly literary critics.

2 F.O. Matthiessen's The American Renaissance (1941), Charles Fiedelson's Symbolism and American Literature (1953), R.W.B. Lewis' The American Adam (1955), Richard Chase's The American Novel and its Tradition (1957), and Leslie Fiedler's Love and Death in the American Novel (1960) were among the most important critical works heralding this shift.

3 M.L. Rosenthal in The Nation (19 September 1959), A. Alvarez in The Observer (12 April 1959), Donald Davie in
The Twentieth Century (August 1959), Stephen Spender in The New Republic (8 June 1959), and John Hollander in Poetry (October 1959) all share critical perspectives which are similar to Davison’s.

For an opposing view, see Frank Kermode’s comments in The Spectator (1 May 1959), Joseph Bennett’s “Two Americans, A Brahmin, and the Bourgeoisie,” (The Hudson Review, Autumn 1959), and Allen Tate’s 3 December 1957 letter (qtd. in Hamilton 237).

Both Ian Hamilton (244-49) and Paul Mariani (265-66) cite the changes that Lowell made to “Waking in the Blue” (1959) from the time he started working on it as a patient in McLean’s and its ultimately very different finished form. Also, Diane Middlebrook (231-32) discusses the way Sexton perceived the way that the psychiatric drug Thorazine affected her creativity.

For other critics like DeSales Standerwick (“Pieces Too Personal,” Renascence 60 [Winter/Spring 1960]), Allen Tate (in a letter of 3 December 1957 quoted in Hamilton 237) and Peter Davison (The Atlantic Monthly July 1959), meaning is still found in formal technique.

For further elaboration on this point, see Bruce Bawer’s The Middle Generation: The Lives and Poetry of Delmore Schwartz, Randall Jarrell, and Robert Lowell; see also the first chapter of Jeffrey Meyers’s Manic Power: Robert Lowell and His Circle; Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath do not appear on this list because they did not see a direct relationship between their illnesses and their work— at least not in the same ways that Lowell, Berryman, and Roethke did.

See Diane Wood Middlebrook’s Anne Sexton: A Biography and Anne Stevenson’s Bitter Fame: A Life of Sylvia Plath for discussions of Sexton and Plath’s attitudes towards their therapy.

See Allan Seager’s The Glass House for a discussion of Roethke and Paul Mariani’s Dream Song: A Life of John Berryman for a discussion of Berryman’s attitude towards illness. Significantly, Robert Lowell and Anne Sexton, the two poets probably most identified with mental illness, often avoided discussing their illnesses.

Clearly, the melodramatic aspects of this poem raise aesthetic issues, but I mention this poem in particular not for its literary merits as much as to illustrate how
easily this type of detail in a "confessional" poem can cross the line from the intimacy that the poet intends to a feeling of forced voyeurism on the part of the reader—a logical result of which is often discomfort.

10 See also DeSales Standerwick's "Pieces Too Personal" in Renascence and John Hollander's "Robert Lowell's New Book" in Poetry (October 1959), as well as Frank Kermode's "Talent and More" in the Spectator (1 May 1959), and Joseph Bennett's "Two Americans, A Brahmin, and the Bourgeoisie" in The Hudson Review (Autumn 1959). Also, Karl Malkoff argues this point as late as 1977 in Escape from the Self.

11 See Chapter One for a more extensive discussion of Cushman's argument.

12 For a more thorough discussion of these points, see Thomas Hill Schaub, "Introduction: The Liberal Narrative" in American Fiction in the Cold War (1991), and Alexander Bloom, Prodigal Sons: The New York Intellectuals and Their World (1986).

13 Ian Hamilton provides the entire text of the "Declaration of Personal Responsibility" in Robert Lowell: A Biography.
Chapter Three
Sylvia Plath’s Misinterpreted “Confession”

In 1965, Harper & Row commissioned Robert Lowell to write the introduction to the American edition of Sylvia Plath’s Ariel (Alexander 342). Although Sylvia Plath was never an official member of the class, Lowell comments in his foreword to Ariel that she did “drop in” on his poetry seminar at Boston University. Given Lowell’s perceived association at the time with confessional poetry and Plath’s relative obscurity,¹ Lowell’s introduction not only ensured Plath’s elevation to a position as one of the pre-eminent confessional poets of the 1960s, but it also provided confessional poetry with a much larger readership, particularly among non-academic readers who had not historically been part of the audience for formalist poetry.

Significantly, Lowell’s introduction coincided with the beginning of feminism, at least in the United States. Books like Simone De Beauvoir’s The Second Sex (1953) and Betty Friedan’s The Feminine Mystique (1963) were beginning to achieve wide circulation. All of these books encouraged women to explore their own minds and thoughts, to reassess the social and emotional roles they had been fulfilling for so long, and to make their own choices, while simultaneously questioning the historical lack of them. Consequently, the distinctly female anger and
violence of the Ariel poems may have appealed to readers who would have been unlikely to read poetry otherwise. Often, the speaker in the Ariel poems is confronting many of the same issues that women in 1965 were facing in their own lives: the conflict between the obligations and responsibilities of family life and the desire for a career outside the home, for example, or an intense love for a child weighed against feelings of resentment at the child's total dependence. Further, reviews in the popular press—Time and Newsweek both carried articles about the book—served to publicize the poems themselves as well as the circumstances surrounding their publication. In addition, Lowell's introduction—and his use of the word "confessional"—is the first example of the external control imposed on Plath's poetry by the critical industry which has grown up around her life.

Although in Ariel's introduction Lowell claims to have been relatively unaware of Plath's work during the seminar ("[Her work did not sink] very deep into my awareness. I sensed her abashment and distinction, and never guessed her later appalling and triumphant fulfillment" [xi]), near the beginning of the introduction he waxes rhapsodic: "Everything in these poems is personal, confessional, but the manner of feeling is controlled hallucination, the autobiography of a fever"
(vii, emphasis mine). Here, Lowell focuses not only on
the intimacy of the poems but on his own surprise. For
Lowell, these poems are poems of sickness; he cannot help
viewing them through the lens of his perceptions of
Plath's "illness." Lowell is certainly not alone in this
narrow reading of Plath's work; he sets the precedent for
nearly all her future critics to follow. However, in
light of Lowell's reputation as a confessional poet, it
may not have occurred to anyone to question his use of the
term in the same way that they might have questioned
another critic's. Further, since Lowell does not explain
why the poems are confessional, their "confessional"
status becomes a given, a donnée which has only rarely
been questioned in the thirty-five years since Ariel was
published.

During these years, much of the criticism of Plath's
work has focused either on its "confessional" aspect or on
the biographical circumstances under which her poems—
especially the Ariel poems—were written. Perhaps
inevitably, critics and readers want to know what
circumstances in Plath's life could have led to the
writing of the Ariel poems, in which Plath "becomes
herself, becomes something imaginary, newly, wildly, and
subtly created—hardly a person at all, or a woman,
certainly not another 'poetess,' but one of those super-
real, hypnotic, great classical heroines" (Lowell vii). Lowell’s comment here in Ariel’s foreword is especially representative of much of the criticism to follow because it anticipates the idea of a “true” self that only appeared in the Ariel poems, a self which was separate from the other roles Plath fulfilled, both intellectually and emotionally. This theme has become central to Plath criticism.

In Naked and Fiery Forms: Modern American Poetry by Women (1976), Suzanne Juhasz provides a useful distinction between “roles” and “selves”: “Roles are not really selves, although they may seem so to the person enacting them” (88). A “role” is artificial, in that it can be assumed and put off at will. In one sense, a “role” refers to the functions a person fulfills or to what she does: a woman might be a wife, or a mother, or a poet, for example. A self, on the other hand, refers to a more personal type of identity—her self-perceptions, for example. In a letter to the poet Richard Murphy, Plath herself differentiates between her “two selves.” In October 1962 (the month in which she finished 25 poems, 15 of which appeared in Ariel), she tells him that she is now writing as her “real self” (Stevenson 358). The “self” represented by the speaking voice in Ariel—strident, angry, and sometimes vindictive—is clearly diametrically
opposed to the roles of estranged wife and single mother that Plath herself was attempting to fulfill during these difficult months following her separation from Ted Hughes.²

In saying that Plath “became herself” in the Ariel poems, Lowell implies that it is most obviously in the Ariel poems that Plath was able to fulfill the role that he could most easily envision for her. Unfortunately, his phrasing implies that the only aspects of Plath’s work which are worth serious attention are the anger and the preoccupation with death addressed by the Ariel poet. When considering Plath’s work as a whole, it must be remembered that Lowell was referring only to the Ariel poems, not to the other books. Consequently, the various themes of The Colossus and the exploration of maternity in “Three Women,” for example, are not considered. It may appear at first that I am imparting too much responsibility for Plath’s critical reception to Lowell’s introduction, but I think it is important to remember how influential Lowell was at the time.

Further, Lowell’s comments foreshadow Ted Hughes’s comment in his introduction to The Journals of Sylvia Plath (1982):

Though I spent every day with her for six years, and was rarely separated from her for more than two or three hours at a time, I never saw her show
her real self to anybody—except, perhaps, in the last three months of her life. Her real self had showed itself in her writing, just for a moment, three years earlier, and when I heard it—the self I had married, after all, and lived with, and knew well—in that brief moment, three lines recited as she went out through a doorway, I knew that what I had always felt must happen had now begun to happen, that her real self, being the real poet, would now speak for itself, and would throw off all those lesser and artificial selves that had monopolized the words up to that point, it was as if a dumb person suddenly spoke. (Journals xiv, emphasis mine)

The implication in both Lowell’s and Hughes’s comments is that Plath had two very different and consciously created selves—one the competent, intelligent, yet ultimately conventional—and "feminine"—self that she presented to the world, and another more malevolent, almost inhuman (definitely "unfeminine") one that she reserved for the Ariel poems. Plath herself distinguishes between her two selves in the Journals as well: "the groaning inner voice: oh, you can’t teach, can’t do anything. Can’t write, can’t think. . .that voice was all my own, a part of me, and it must somehow conquer me and leave me with my worst visions. . .I cannot ignore this murderous self: it is there" (176).

While the "negative self" most often seems to manifest itself in a feeling of generalized inadequacy,
the more positive self is more specific. There are times in her letters and her journals—but the letters in particular—when Plath is very satisfied with what she feels she has accomplished. In March 1958, she was working on some poems for Art News magazine:

I was taken by a frenzy a week ago Thursday, my first real day of vacation, and the frenzy has continued ever since: writing and writing: I wrote eight poems in the last eight days, long poems, lyrical poems, and thunderous poems: poems breaking open my real experience of life in the last five years: life which has been shut up, untouchable, in a rococo crystal cage, not to be touched. I feel these are the best poems I have ever done. (Journals 209)

She is similarly excited in a March 11 letter to her mother:

Just a note to say that I have at last burst into a spell of writing. . . I had about seven or eight paintings and etchings I wanted to write on as poem-subjects and bang! . . . These are easily the best poems I’ve written and open up new material and a new voice. . . . overflowing with ideas and inspirations, as if I’ve been bottling up a geyser for a year. Once I start writing, it comes and comes. (Letters 336)

It is clear that Plath’s almost obsessive concern with her ability to meet her own near-impossible standards of performance appeared to be in direct conflict with her need to appear cheerful and competent before the rest of the world, but whether or not these different personality
traits can truly be considered as separate, discrete selves is much less clear.

The question of whether one “self” is more authentic than another feeds directly into Robert Lowell’s apparent concern with authenticity in the Ariel poems. For readers who were beginning to reassess their own roles as women, the suspicion that, by stating that the “manner of feeling” of the Ariel poems is one of “controlled hallucination,” Lowell seems to be questioning the validity of the emotions behind the poems may have seemed to encourage readers to distrust the intensity of Plath’s emotions. Simultaneously, however, their curiosity was piqued. If, in fact, Plath’s anger in the poems is perceived as the result of even a “controlled” hallucination--of seeing something that is not there--it is not surprising that so many of these women, especially in light of the encouragement that they were receiving from the burgeoning feminist movement, embraced Plath’s anger as a symbol of their own.

Their anger may also have been fueled—at least to an extent—by a patronizing attitude found not only in Lowell’s comments, but in those of other critics as well. For example, the tone of Marius Bewley’s remarks in The Hudson Review (Autumn 1966) is condescending; he states that in Ariel there is no
decisively shaping attitude towards experience. . .Miss Plath seems to have hardened into [the attitudes he does find]; they do not seem to have evolved out of her sensibility to become the living form of what she writes. There is occasionally a kind of female hardness that I find resistible. (491)

Later, referring to "Cut," he mentions a "vague unpleasantness of a kind I distrust" (492). The implication behind his final comment, in which he calls "Morning Song" "one of the better poems in the volume" because it "presents her sensibility at its most amiable and happiest" (493) is that only happy and serene poems should be written by women; there should certainly be no "female hardness" or "vague unpleasantness" in poetry by women. The fact that Bewley does not really discuss the poems he dislikes, but only refers to them as examples of qualities he dislikes seems to reflect his discomfort with their intensity. However, he does not discuss the "better" poem he includes either, preferring to let it speak for itself: "'Morning Song' is one of the better poems in the volume, and to quote it entire will give a fairer indication of Sylvia Plath's achievement than further discussion" (493). Unfortunately, since Bewley has said very little that is positive about Plath's poems, it is difficult to imagine what he thinks her achievement might have been.

102

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Writing in The New Statesman (30 April 1965), Francis Hope is equally uncomfortable, although not as outwardly hostile as Bewley is: "[J]ust how great a talent her premature death destroyed is still obscure. A unique one, certainly, obsessive about words and eloquent about obsessions, and with an energy which could be fairly called demonic" (688). Hope cannot fully attribute these poems to human composition; instead, Plath must be possessed, not fully grounded in reality. This comment parallels Lowell’s description of Plath in the introduction to Ariel, that she “becomes something imaginary, newly, wildly and subtly created—hardly a person at all, or a woman, certainly not another ‘poetess’” (vii). Even as late as 1981, in his review of Plath’s Collected Poems, Denis Donoghue comes to the same conclusion: “The poems she wrote in October 1961 are the work of a poet possessed by a demon if not by herself, and from then to February 5, 1963, every day, virtually, is a torrent and a torment till the end” (New York Times 22 November 1981). Anger and other intense emotions were apparently still the province of men only.

* * * *

In Women’s Stories of the Looking Glass (1996), Carmen Birkle draws a useful distinction between the terms “confessional” and “autobiographical.” Birkle argues
that all "contemporary women's poetry is consciously and deliberately autobiographical and that poetry is the ideal means for a quest for identity because each poem is a fragment of a whole series of poems and each can express ideas that can be different, to say the least, or even completely contradictory" (7). She applies this argument specifically to women poets, but Ralph Mills, Karl Malkoff, and Robert Phillips, among others, have applied a similar argument to male confessional poets as well.6

In Democracy and Poetry (1975), Robert Penn Warren describes a "self" as follows: "in individuation, the felt principle of significant unity. . .by felt I mean. . .what a more or less aware individual may experience as his own selfhood, and what he assumes about other individuals. By significant I mean. . .continuity—the self as a development in time, with a past and a future; and responsibility—the self as a moral identity, recognizing itself as capable of action worthy of praise or blame" (Democracy and Poetry xii-xiii). These two conceptions of self—the self as constituting one's own perception of himself and his reality and the self as a moral entity which can be held accountable for its actions—seem to me particularly germane to a discussion of confessional poetry. The act of confession itself—whether it is initiated by an actual person outside the context of a
poem or by the speaker of a “confessional” poem—is intended both to cement one’s self-perception and also to confront the guilt resulting from a moral or ethical lapse or, alternatively, a wrong that the confessant believes he has done to the confessor.

Similar conditions lie behind the existence of autobiography as well. In “The Conditions and Limits of Autobiography,” Georges Gusdorf argues that the idea of autobiography could not come about until human beings could perceive themselves as individuals: “It is obvious that autobiography is not possible in a cultural landscape where consciousness of self does not exist” (30). He also points out that autobiography can exist only under certain circumstances: First, human beings must enter “into the perilous domain of history” (30)—that is, a person must believe in his own uniqueness and that it is “a useful and valuable thing to fix his own image so that he can be certain that it will not disappear like all things in this world” (30). At this point, not only does the potential autobiographer believe in his own individuality, but he believes in his own value to society. I would suggest that the impulse behind autobiography is to an extent altruistic, in that the person who writes his autobiography writes his story because he believes it will help those who come after him; it may edify his readers.
In this sense, autobiography is similar to what I have earlier called a "Protestant" confessional tradition. However, it differs from this same tradition in that it does not require that the writer cede authorship of his identity to his audience.7

Stephen Greenblatt, in Renaissance Self-Fashioning (1980), points out that even though this awareness of one's own value to society had existed since Augustine's time among the more educated upper classes, the concern with a clearly defined "fashioning of human identity as a manipulative, artful process" did not become widespread until the sixteenth century. He continues, "[the term] fashioning may suggest the achievement of a less tangible shape: a distinctive personality, a characteristic address to the world, a consistent mode of perceiving and behaving" (2). The intentional construction of one's own persona that Greenblatt sees during the Renaissance would seem to provide a supremely hospitable context for the increasing ubiquity of autobiographical writings during these years. It was during these years that many of the Protestant religious autobiographies as well as Montaigne's Essais (1580) first appeared.

Intimately linked to this realization of individuality, then, is power, Gusdorf implies. As human beings realize that their individual destinies are part of
history, they also come to understand their own autonomy—
that they are responsible agents, and that “[they] alone
add consciousness to nature, leaving there the sign of
[their] presence” (31). With this realization,
ultimately, comes the potential for specifically
autobiographical writing. Since humans have now “entered
into history,” as Gusdorf calls it, biography can appear,
allowing people to document the lives of important
figures. As the logical result of the empowerment
provided by human beings’ new understanding of their own
individuality, autobiography shifts the writer’s focus
from the object to the subject. Instead of writing
publicly about someone in the distant past, conforming to
the “demands of propaganda and... the general sense of
the age” (31), the autobiographer is writing about
himself: “the artist and the model coincide, the
historian tackles himself as object” (31). Autobiography,
then, is a sort of reflexive biography.

Further, in an essay entitled “Where is the Real T.S.
Eliot? Or, The Life of the Poet,” James Olney
differentiates between what he calls reading a poet
“biographically, from the dates and events yielded to us
by history” and “autobiographically, from the poet’s own
imagining of what he will be and do and from his own
memory of what he has been and done, all as recorded in
the poems that are summary milestones on the way to being and doing" (6). This argument appears to be at least a partial reiteration of the old formalist/New Critical contention that a poem should be read simply as a text. In this approach, the reader consciously refuses to allow the political or cultural circumstances under which a poem was written (or under which he reads it) to affect his interpretation of it.

It may seem ironic at first to apply this argument to the work of Sylvia Plath when one considers how much critical attention and energy have been paid to the events of her life, but it is within the context of that attention that Olney’s approach seems so logical. Because the events of Plath’s life are often so overemphasized, her work is often read as if there were a direct cause-and-effect relationship between her life and her poetry. One example of how the documentary events in Plath’s life can potentially overshadow her poetry is "Edge" (1963). In light of its date (4 February, a week before her death), the poem appears to encourage such a blatantly documentary reading. I will quote the poem in full:

The woman is perfected.
Her dead

Body wears the smile of accomplishment,
The illusion of a Greek necessity

Flows in the scrolls of her toga,
Her bare
Feet seem to be saying:
We have come so far, it is over.

Each dead child coiled, a white serpent,
One at each little

Pitcher of milk, now empty.
She has folded

Them back into her body as petals
Of a rose close when the garden

Stiffens and odours bleed
From the sweet, deep throats of the night
flower.

The moon has nothing to be sad about,
Staring from her hood of bone.

She is used to this sort of thing.
Her blacks crackle and drag. (Ariel 84)

Plath includes details which might be interpreted by a biographically informed reader as referring to the circumstances of her own death: there are two children present in the poem, as Plath’s two children were in the flat when she killed herself. The woman in the poem leaves pitchers of milk out for her children; Plath left bread and milk next to her children’s beds so that they would have something to eat when they woke up. Since Plath died in the early morning, she, like the woman in the poem, might have been barefoot. The detail that frustrates this sort of strictly documentary reading is that the children in the poem die along with their mother. In actuality, Plath blocked the edges of the children’s door so that the gas would not reach them (Stevenson 296).
One reason that this type of juxtaposition of verifiable events from Plath's life with those described in the poem is ultimately unsatisfactory is that such an approach allows only one interpretation. The reader is limited to the context of actual, verifiable events. Because of the controversy surrounding the end of Plath's marriage and her death, the events of her life have become almost common knowledge for many readers, regardless of whether they have read her poetry or not. Not only are there five book-length biographies, but there are also personal memoirs written by people who knew Plath — those who knew her well and those who did not — and innumerable book- and article-length studies of her work which use the events of her life as justification for their arguments.

Because all this critical and biographical attention has encouraged Plath's readers to assume that they know the "truth," it requires a concentrated effort on the part of the reader to consider Plath's work strictly on its own formal and aesthetic merits, instead of through the lens of the controversy surrounding her life and death. In addition to the controversy itself, the intensity of the emotions that readers and critics often bring to their interpretations of Plath's work make it difficult for these same readers to believe that not only is it impossible to know what the "truth" of Plath's life might
be, but that the verifiable "truth" may not be something that we can ever know with any certainty.

Although the widespread critical controversy has made it difficult to approach Plath's poetry without preconceptions, understanding why this particular controversy continues to be so pervasive should help readers to put the debate into perspective. There have certainly been poets whose lives appeared to have been filled with more continuous upheaval than was Plath's (Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, Robert Lowell, and Elizabeth Bishop, for example) and who may have had more to "confess," yet none of them except for Lowell has been as inextricably associated with "confessional poetry" as has Sylvia Plath.

Readers' unquestioning belief in the "confessionalism" of Plath's poems can be at least partially attributed to confessionalism's continual association with psychoanalysis, an association which began with the very first "confessional" poetry published in the late 1950s. This perceived association with psychoanalysis may also be part of the reason that readers may have expected "confessional poetry" to provide a similar sort of "unvarnished truth." Both Robert Lowell, in *Life Studies* (1959) and W.D. Snodgrass, in *Heart's Needle* (1959), used the process of writing poetry as a way
to help them work through important psychological issues in their lives (Hamilton 253 ff.; Snodgrass, "A Liberal Education" 457). Parts of Life Studies were written during and after Lowell had been a patient in the locked psychiatric ward at McLean’s Hospital, and Snodgrass began writing Heart’s Needle while he was in therapy during a painful divorce.

A year after Life Studies’ publication, Anne Sexton published To Bedlam and Partway Back (1960) about her own experience of mental illness. Sexton, who may have had the largest readership among the group of “confessional” poets writing during the 1960s, was very clear about her original motivation to write. Her psychiatrist had suggested that she write about her therapy and she did, to gain his approval: "'I kept writing and writing and giving them all to him—just from transference; I kept writing because he was approving’" (qtd. in Middlebrook 42). People’s perceptions of a direct relationship between mental illness and poetry served to encourage the association of confessional poetry and psychosis.

In Sylvia Plath: A Biography (1987), Linda Wagner-Martin quotes Plath herself on this issue:

[Sylvia] spoke, too, about the supposed connection between writing and madness, and made clear that as far as she was concerned, there was no connection. Her writing, she said, came from her sanest self. As she repeated, “When
you are insane, you are busy being insane—
all the time. . .When I was crazy,
that's all I was.”

What Sylvia feared most was the
loss of self. When mad, she explained,
no person possessed a self. (111-112)

A. Alvarez's definition of "extremist" art also may
have inadvertently encouraged the connection between the
intense emotions of Plath's poetry and her history of
mental illness. In his capacity as poetry editor of The
Observer, Alvarez had actively supported the careers of
Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes, publishing both poets' work.
Alvarez occasionally saw Plath and Hughes socially as well
(Savage God 20-25). As one of the first people to see the
Ariel poems as they were completed, and as one of the
first critics to comment on Plath's suicide, Alvarez's
insights were extremely influential. Also, Alvarez had
been one of the most vocal and most influential supporters
of Robert Lowell's "confessional" turn when Life Studies
appeared in 1959. Consequently, when Alvarez
characterized Plath's work as "extremist," it is not
surprising that the term stuck.

Psychoanalysis, Alvarez argues in "Beyond all This
Fiddle" (1967), provides the context for extremist art.
Not only were artists in the twentieth century cognizant
of their emotions, but psychoanalysis had also forced them
to acknowledge the reasons behind these emotions. Thirdly
and most importantly, artists shared this clinical self-
awareness with their audiences. As a result, "the more ruthless [the artist] is with himself, the more unshockable the audience becomes" (Beyond All This Fiddle 13). The result, Alvarez continues, is extremism--a state in which "the artist pursues his insights to the edge and then beyond it, until mania, depression, paranoia and the hallucinations that come in psychosis or are induced by drugs become as urgent and as commonplace as Beauty, Truth, Nature, and the Soul were to the Romantics" (13). Ultimately, then, in light of the heightened intensity of contemporary life, extremism becomes almost a natural state. The manic ferocity of many of the Ariel poems seemed to fulfill Alvarez's central criterion for extremist poetry.

Earlier, in "Beyond the Gentility Principle" (1962), Alvarez had described the process differently. There, he argues that we as a society are victims of (or, in his words, "influenced profoundly" by) negative forces, and he differentiates the ways that we deal with these "forces of disintegration which destroy the old standards of civilization" (39) in two ways: first, we have realized that evil is no longer found only on an individual level, but also on the larger, more inclusive level of "mass evil"—i.e., world wars, in which civilians are equally as involved as the military—and in which whole groups of
people are killed, as in the Nazi death camps or genocide in Bosnia. Second, he says that "the forcible recognition of a mass evil outside us has developed precisely parallel with psychoanalysis; that is, with our recognition of the ways in which the same forces are at work within us" (39). In other words, we are particularly fascinated by mass evil because psychoanalysis has forced us to implicate ourselves in it; it has shown us how to recognize similar impulses and compulsions in ourselves. Our guilt directly implicates us in the evil itself, whether or not we actively participate in it.

Because of this guilt, the most important reason that we can recognize the evil outside ourselves—whether it be on an individual or a mass level—is that we can acknowledge the evil within ourselves. Robert Penn Warren makes a similar point in Democracy and Poetry when he states that

in Baudelaire's poem, the poet who sees the other passant as a spectre will declare himself, at the end, "Blessé par le mystère et par l'absurdité."

The mystery and the absurdity have wounded the poet—or Everyman—that, now sick, chilled to the bone, and disoriented, he locks his door against the street. The man who sees the "de-selfed men" recognizes them because he himself is "de-selfed." (64)

Further, in Confession: Sexuality, Sin, the Subject (1990), Jeremy Tambling quotes Mikhail Bakhtin's discussion of Fyodor Dostoyevsky's view of confession.
For Dostoyevsky, Bakhtin argues, confession illustrates the confessant’s dependence on human interaction in order to believe in his own existence:

(Confessions) are nothing other than an event of interaction amongst consciousnesses... I cannot manage without another, I cannot become myself without another; I must find myself in another by finding another in myself... I receive my name from others, and it exists for others (self-naming is imposture). (qtd. in Tambling 165)

Taken within the context of both Warren’s and Tambling’s remarks as well, Alvarez’s emphasis on guilt would seem to tie extremist art to confessionalism, but while extremist art may address this guilt, it is not necessarily motivated by it in the same way that confession is. Consequently, while confession may be by definition extremist, extremism is not necessarily always confessional.

Alvarez then proceeds to connect psychoanalysis with poetry in two ways: first, poets can no longer deny what they don’t want to face. Psychoanalysis has shown them that those desires and fears do exist. To deny these issues, then, is fruitless. In addition, acknowledging these fears also eliminates innocence. It is impossible to remain ignorant, even if we want to. Further, since poets, like the rest of us, can no longer deny the existence of these issues, they are obligated to make
"poetic sense" of what they might prefer to ignore.
Sylvia Plath's "A Life" (1960) provides an excellent example of both these processes.

The woman in "A Life" appears to have been lobotomized. In spite of her suffering, she manages to project a serene, untroubled appearance:

Touch it: it won't shrink like an eyeball,
This egg-shaped bailiwick, clear as a tear.

... The inhabitants are light as cork,
Every one of them permanently busy.

At their feet, the sea-waves bow in single file,
Never trespassing in bad temper:

. . . This family
Of valentine-faces might please a collector:
They ring true, like good china.

(1-2; 9-12; 17-19)

Electroshock treatments and lobotomies were often used during the 1950s and early 1960s to treat victims of depression; psychiatrists believed that if they could decrease the intensity of patients' emotions, then these people would once again be able to function without difficulty.9

In the poem, however, the treatment has not had the desired effect. The woman appears to be calm and serene, but in reality she is suffering just as much as she was before. The difference is that now her suffering is not out in public for the whole world to see; it is
“elsewhere, [where] the landscape is more frank” (20). In
private,

A woman is dragging her shadow in a circle
About a bald, hospital saucer.
It resembles the moon, or a sheet of blank paper
And appears to have suffered a sort of private
blitzkrieg. (21-24)

Rather than cure her illness, the treatment has only
hidden it so that it will not offend anyone else. The
woman cannot deny that she is still ill; privately, she is
still incapable of functioning normally. The dual life
this woman must live then becomes a form of Alvarez’s
extremism. This type of separation between apparent
health and hidden agony often results in situations in
which someone commits a crime very suddenly and violently.
However, what most psychotherapy tries to do is to
encourage the person to articulate the two separate selves
in hopes that this verbalization will prevent the
violence.

In light of this perceived connection between poetry
and psychiatry, it is not surprising that Ariel’s early
reviewers focused on Plath’s psychological difficulties.
In the review that confirmed Plath’s suicide, Time’s
anonymous reviewer does not ever make any sort of judgment
on the poems’ aesthetic value; rather, he calls “Daddy”
“strange and terrible” and “ferocious.” 10 The reviewer
also informs his readers that “[o]utwardly, Sylvia’s
psychosis has standard Freudian trimmings" and that under layers of "hatred" and "fear" (120) she also "found a sinister love of death" (120). The underlying implication of the review is not only that Plath was mentally ill, but also that her poetry was a direct result of—and dependent on—her illness.

Also, the fact that Time, which almost never reviewed poetry, had chosen to review Ariel gave its review an authority—the weight of public opinion—that it would not have possessed had the same review appeared in a more esoteric publication. The long term effect of this authority was twofold: first, it created a context in which thousands of readers would view Plath as psychotic, and second, the review ensured many new readers for Plath’s work. It seems likely that at least some of these people might not have read Plath’s work if they had not seen the review. Although the wider audience for Plath’s poetry was a positive development, the underlying implication of the review is unfortunate. Not only does the anonymous reviewer view Plath herself as sick, but he appears to view Plath’s situation as representative of writers in general: it is not that there are individual writers who are ill, but that writers as a group are sick.

Three years later, in the April 1969 issue of The Southern Review, Richard Tillinghast states his case...
outright: "[T]hese are poems of schizophrenia, or rather poems by a schizophrenic who had painstakingly, over a period of years, mastered the craft of poetry. Anyone who has heard schizophrenics talk or has read things they have written will be familiar with the crystal-clear shatterings of order that form Sylvia Plath’s style" (582-83).

Tillinghast’s use of the term “schizophrenia” seems to me questionable. According to Gail Wiscarz Stuart and Sandra J. Sundeen in Principles and Practice of Psychiatric Nursing (1987), the clinical definition of this term is “a manifestation of anxiety of psychotic proportions, primarily characterized by inability to trust other people and disordered thought process, resulting in disrupted interpersonal relationships” (1103). Although Tillinghast may have happened on a potentially appropriate adjective with which to describe some of the thought processes depicted in the Ariel poems, it is important to remember that he is not a clinician and is not qualified to diagnose Plath’s psychological condition.

Further, Tillinghast continues, not only did Plath accept her “madness,” but she embraced it as “the means to writing great poetry” (583). At no point in his page-long review does Tillinghast discuss the poems themselves (they are “presumably too well-known to need quoting”); instead,
his emphasis is almost entirely on Plath’s mental state as he perceives it. There is no separation between her poetry and his conception of her “illness.” Following his argument, the poetry exists because of the illness, as a result of it, begging the question of whether, for Tillinghast, it is possible for a poet who is not ill to write great poetry. The issues raised by this review are similar to those raised by Marius Bewley, except that while Bewley views Plath’s intensity through the lens of his discomfort with her rebellion against stereotypical “female” traits, Tillinghast’s views are colored by his untrained perceptions of her mental state. Although his perceptions may be correct, it is important to remember his lack of clinical training.

A few days after Time’s 10 June 1966 review, Newsweek’s unnamed reviewer was equally overwrought in a review which recorded the effect, but not the intention, of Plath’s style. He informs Newsweek’s readers that Plath “may well become a mythic martyr of poetry, a scapegoat who earned illumination only through the light cast by her own immolation” (110). This comment unconsciously predicts much of the controversy to follow, in that the reviewer appears to realize that much of the controversy surrounding Plath will be based on her suicide. In fact, in the opening sentence of Plath’s
Incarnations: Woman and the Creative Process (1983), Lynda Bundtzen states that "The single most important critical issue in dealing with Sylvia Plath's life and work is her suicide in February of 1963." She then continues, "To a degree unmet with in discussions of other contemporary writers who have taken their own lives, the perceived significance and value of Plath's art depends on the attitude of critics towards her death." Because "the rubric 'confessional poetry' [has] often [been] substituted for detailed examination of the poems," readers have been encouraged to assume that Ariel "is a straightforward self-revelation where the outlines of Plath's life are exposed with bold clarity" (1)—what I have earlier called a "documentary confession."

Immediately critics are given responsibility not only for judging Plath's poetry, but are also obligated to judge her life, a point which the reviews by Tillinghast, as well as those by Time and Newsweek's anonymous reviewers, illustrate clearly.

Newsweek's reviewer takes that responsibility very seriously, as he presumes to explain Plath's state of mind to his readers, telling them that Plath is almost inhuman; "it is almost as if Sylvia Plath feels too strongly for love or hate" (110). Her book is one in which "the general effect...is that of a symphony of death and
dissolution, scored in language so full of blood and brain
that it seems to burst on the page and spatter the reader
with the plasma of life" (110). In spite of the
melodramatic imagery, the reviewer makes an important
point: although the linguistic possibilities that Plath
explores in Ariel are significantly more complex than most
of the poetry being written at the time, nonetheless the
Ariel poems explore many of the same overarching themes
that poetry has always considered: love, hate,
separation, betrayal, and children, for example.

It is impossible to dismiss these reviews as simply
the work of confused critics operating against a deadline,
in spite of the overblown rhetoric. In the mid-1960s it
was rare for a book of poetry to be reviewed by the
popular press, and the fact that Time and Newsweek both
reviewed Ariel foreshadowed the book’s widespread
influence, both within and outside the academic community.
Paul Alexander reports that in the first twenty years
after its publication, Ariel had sold over half a million
copies, becoming one of the bestselling poetry collections
of the twentieth century (Rough Magic 344). Further
adding to the Plath myth, Ted Hughes’s Birthday Letters
(1998) sold nearly as many copies in its first year of
publication.
However, these astronomical sales figures did not result from reviews alone. These were the years in which feminism first became an important political force (Plath was adopted by feminists as a seminal poet), and these years also saw enrollments in creative writing courses increase. Further, as more and more women enrolled in colleges and universities, there was a wider interest in women writers; consequently, sales of Plath’s work increased. Academia supplied the publishers with a steady stream of readers—almost a guaranteed audience. This audience provided the context not only for Plath’s canonization as a confessional poet, but also for the critical conflation of confession and autobiography.

All confession is autobiographical, but not all autobiography is confessional, and in the same sense, all confessional poetry is autobiographical (to some extent, at least), but not all autobiographical poetry is confessional. Plath appears to fall under the second category, in that there is an autobiographical element to her poetry, but it is not often confessional. There is a power dimension in confession that is not there in autobiography, since, in a confession, the confessor’s reaction affects the confessant’s life in some way—often in such a way that the confessant’s identity or self-perception may be altered. This interpretation of the
audience’s role directly parallels Carmen Birkle’s argument that the term “confessional” does not apply to Plath for the following reasons: “1. The idea of guilt and shame does not apply, 2. Absolution through someone else is not sought, whereas a therapeutic value can be ascribed to the very act of writing... 4. The religious undertone in ‘confession’ is in no way applicable to [Plath], and 5. Autobiographical poetry is deeply rooted in all life experience and goes far beyond the restricted admission of guilt” (7-8).

Birkle’s requirements for “confessional” poetry center on the two characteristics that I find critical to a confessional transaction: first, confessional poetry depicts a hierarchical relationship between a confessant and a more powerful confessor who has the power to grant some sort of absolution to the confessant. Second, since the confessant is searching for forgiveness, she is motivated most importantly by guilt or remorse. Consequently, a sense of shame and self-judgment is crucial to a confessional transaction.

These qualities appear in Plath’s poetry very rarely, although Anne Sexton’s “The Abortion” (1962) provides an excellent example of how these traits function in a confessional poem. Sexton’s speaker in “The Abortion” keeps repeating the words, “Somebody who should have been
born is gone" as she describes her trip to Pennsylvania for an abortion: “up in Pennsylvania, I met a little man, /not Rumplestiltskin, at all, at all. . . /he took the fullness that love began” (17-19). Even though she portrays herself as the recipient of his action (“he took the fullness”), casting herself as the victim of the “little man,” she does acknowledge her own involvement in the situation: “Somebody who should have been born/is gone./Yes, woman, such logic will lead/to loss without death. Or say what you meant,/you coward. . .this baby that I bleed” (23-27, italics Sexton’s). Even though the speaker has made a conscious choice to go and have the abortion, she nonetheless judges herself; she is a “coward” to think she could possibly achieve “loss without death,” for all loss entails death on some level. She has sacrificed her child to this “logic” and now, realizing that she hasn’t been able to avoid the emotional implications of the abortion, she must confess her own involvement. The speaker’s acknowledgment of her own complicity encourages a confessional reading.

In spite of often being described as “confessional” poetry, there is, as Birkle argues, no real religious dimension to Plath’s work. Although Plath’s willingness to explore particular experiences and events in her own life ensures that her poetry is often autobiographical,
the poems themselves are rarely based on specifically verifiable events in the way that a traditionally documentary confession often is.

In Plath’s poetry, confession and autobiography are two separate verbal transactions. In each case—on one level, at least—the speaker’s (confessant’s) experience is the same: he relates an experience or incident to a clearly defined audience (confessor). However, the audience’s experience in each case is different because each time its role is different. In a confession, the confessor is expected to react to what the confessant has said. Theoretically, the confessor’s reaction will then help the confessant decide what to do next. Autobiography does not make this demand on its audience. Consequently, in an autobiographical transaction, both the reaction and any effect it might have on the speaker become a moot point.

In other words, one of the central differences between confession and autobiography is expectation. In confession, the audience is expected to actively participate directly with the confessant in the transaction. In autobiography, the audience is expected to take a much more passive role. Along these lines, then, in order for a poem to be confessional, it must be directed to a specific audience; it cannot be addressed to
a general audience. Using this criterion alone, it is possible that Sylvia Plath’s “The Colossus” might be read confessionally, while poems like “Lady Lazarus” (1962), “Medusa” (1962), and “Edge” (1963)—poems which are often called “confessional”—cannot.

However, the audience in a confessional poem must be clearly identifiable as someone who has power over the speaker. This criterion ultimately eliminates “The Colossus” (1959), in addition to “The Rival” (1961) and “Medusa” (1962)—both of which may or may not be addressed to the speaker’s mother. In both cases, however, the audience does not appear to have any power over the speaker in the sense necessary for a confessional poem. Similarly, “Morning Song” (1961) and “By Candlelight” (1962) appear to be addressed to the speaker’s children, but the hierarchical relationship between speaker and audience is absent in both poems. A specific power differential between the speaker and the addressee is central to a confessional poem, but the existence of this power dynamic does not by itself ensure that a poem is confessional.

“The Colossus” (1959) will provide an illustration of this point. Plath wrote the poem during March 1959, while she was living in Boston and seeing her psychiatrist Dr. Ruth Beuscher, who was encouraging her to confront her
feelings towards both her parents (Stevenson 146-47; Alexander 224-25; Wagner-Martin 155; Journals 278-82). In “The Colossus,” Plath is addressing her father, whom she envisions as a large statue that she is trying to assemble. Although it is easy to assume that her father is the more powerful one in their relationship because of his size, a closer reading of the poem reveals that, in fact, it is the speaker who has power over him. The tone of the poem alternates between a sort of awed respect and bitter resentment, finally ending with resignation and a qualified triumph.

At the beginning of the poem, the speaker is awed by the enormity of the task before her: “I shall never get you put together entirely,/Pieced, glued, and properly jointed” (1-2). However, as the poem continues she hides her awe behind a facade of sarcasm and bitterness, using her resentment as a means of distancing herself from the issues that the statue raises:

Mule-bray, pig-grunt and bawdy cackles
Proceed from your great lips.
It’s worse than a barnyard.

Perhaps you consider yourself an oracle,
Mouthpiece of the dead, or of some god or other. (3-7)

Plath’s flippancy in the second stanza may be an attempt to address the difficulty she had in dealing with her father’s death. Otto Plath died in 1940, when Plath
was eight years old. At that time, her mother, Aurelia, became the breadwinner of the family. In 1942, she moved her children away from Winthrop, Massachusetts, the small town near the ocean where Sylvia Plath had spent the first ten years of her life. The combination of her father's death and the move inland deeply affected her. In *Bitter Fame*, Anne Stevenson graphically describes her view of Sylvia Plath's reaction to the move:

\[\ldots\text{the family's move away from the sea dramatically sealed [Otto Plath] in a moonstruck, glassed in compartment of Sylvia’s imagination, where he evolved into his godlike/devillike manifestations, stripped of reality—a frightening ghost of a father she had scarcely known as a healthy man.}\ (12)\]

Plath also struggled with anger and betrayal, not only because of her father's premature death, but also because of her view of her husband, whom she sometimes perceived as having symbolically taken over her father's role in her life. For example, in her journal she analyzes a fight with Ted Hughes within the context of her father's death:

\[\text{I identify him with my father at certain times, and these times take on great importance. \ldots Isn't this an image of what my father did to me? \ldots It was an incident only that drew forth echoes, not the complete withdrawal of my father, who deserted me forever. \ldots Ted, insofar as he is a male presence, is a substitute for my father: but in no other way. (278-79)}\]
Significantly, by the end of "The Colossus," the speaker has maintained her power over her father; in a truly confessional poem, he would regain the more powerful position by virtue of her continuing need for his forgiveness. Even though she has devoted her life to resurrecting him, "mend[ing] the immense skull-plates and clear[ing]/The bald, white tumuli of your eyes" (14-15), nothing has changed. She is still in thrall to the image she has attempted to create of him—an image that, by the end of the poem, she realizes is false. Ultimately, then, she comes to terms with that image, but only insofar as it affects her, not in the context of any potential damage her idolization may have done to him: "No longer do I listen for the scrape of a keel/On the blank stones of the landing" (29-30). She has realized that he will not be back—she will, in actuality, "never get [him] put together entirely" (1), but there is no sense of guilt or self-judgment in this realization. She does not take responsibility for having done anything to him; rather, she is the victim of her own confusion. In a confessional poem, the speaker would be seeking absolution or forgiveness, and there is none of that sense of sin here.

In contrast to "The Colossus," "Electra on Azalea Path" (1959) fulfills many of the requirements of a confessional poem. Both poems address similar issues, but
the interpersonal dynamics in "Electra on Azalea Path" are much more hierarchical than those in "The Colossus." For example, the power relationships in "Electra on Azalea Path" are clear: Plath's speaker is the confessant, addressing her father, who fills the confessor role. The poem is addressed to her father, and in it the speaker explains the effect that his death has had on her life. His absence has allowed her to create her own image of him:

It was good for twenty years, that  
wintering—  
As if you had never existed...  
I lay dreaming your epic, image by image.  
Nobody died or withered on that stage. (5-6; 12-13)

Not only has she created her own image of him, but she has changed—in her own mind—his relationship to her. For twenty years she has felt "as if you had never existed, as if I came/God-fathered into the world from my mother's belly" (6-7). These lines can be read in two ways. First, the speaker has transformed her father into a god, but it is not clear whether he was God-like before he died, or if the "stain of divinity" (8) on her mother's bed was left with his death. If the speaker does believe herself to have been "god-fathered," such a reading would imply that she sees herself as unique, set apart for a purpose—a direct comparison to Jesus.
However, another reading of the lines would be more sarcastic: if she were "god-fathered," that would imply that she feels as if she literally did not have an earthly father at all. This second reading seems the more logical of the two, in light of extant biographical evidence. Such an argument would also seem to reflect her sense of betrayal and neglect. This evidence is further supported by the later poems focusing on her relationship with her father ("The Beekeeper's Daughter" and "Daddy," for example). If she does not acknowledge her biological father, she is free to dream him up, to create him to her own specifications, as she wishes he had been.

Visiting his grave forces her to admit the truth, to "make her confession." Not only has she consciously made her father into something he was not, but she feels responsible for his death: "I brought my love to bear, and then you died/. . . /It was my love that did us both to death" ("Electra on Azalea Path" 38; 46). Here, she admits to her involvement in his death and she asks her father for pardon: "O pardon the one who knocks for pardon at/Your gate, father—your hound-bitch, daughter, friend./It was my love that did us both to death" (44-46). In this sense, "Electra on Azalea Path" seems to function almost as a "sequel" to "The Colossus." In the earlier poem, the speaker could acknowledge the mental and
emotional processes by which she attempted to come to
terms with her father's death, but she was not yet able to
acknowledge her belief in her responsibility for it.
Here, in addition to acknowledgment, guilt and the
subsequent search for forgiveness make "Electra on Azalea
Path" a confessional poem.

Both the acknowledgment of a perceived misdeed or
wrongdoing and the seeking of forgiveness found here are
crucial to a successful confessional poem. A second
important reason that "Electra on Azalea Path" is a
successful confessional poem is that it does transcend
Plath's own situation. No knowledge of the facts of
Plath's life is necessary to understand this poem,
although there are circumstantial parallels with Plath's
life in it: her father is in fact buried on Azalea Path,
he did die from a gangrenous foot (exacerbated by
diabetes), and Plath did feel that he "deserted me
forever" (Journals 278).

A further exacerbation of her guilt might lie in her
enjoyment of her freedom to create—a freedom that was
given to her only with his death: "I had nothing to do
with guilt or anything/When I wormed back under my
mother's heart" (9-10). Since there is no guilt from her
father's death at this point, she is free to consciously
create her own identity along with deliberately creating an image of him.

She starts creating this image from nothing; after his death she retreats from the world to start over. The first four lines of the poem admit:

The day you died I went into the dirt,
Into the lightless hibernaculum
Where bees, striped black and gold, sleep out the blizzard
Like hieratic stones, and the ground is hard. (1-4)

The implication here is that, through her father’s death, she has been given the freedom to find some sort of a “true” self, to create an image of herself which will only be valid if she can come to terms with her father’s death. In order to reconcile herself to it, however, the speaker must acknowledge her father’s existence in the first place. It is possible, she realizes, to situate these two things—her “true self” and her need to reconcile herself to her father’s death—in one moment, but that specificity comes at the price of the peace of mind she believes she has felt for the past twenty years: “The day I woke, I woke on Churchyard Hill/. . . .The stony actors poise and pause for breath./I brought my love to bear, and then you died” (15; 37-38). She cannot let go of her feeling of responsibility and so cannot accept her mother’s concrete medical explanation of her father’s death: “It was the gangrene ate you to the bone/My mother said; you died like
any man./How shall I age into that state of mind?” (39-41). Since anticipation of a confessor’s reaction is central for the speaker in a confessional poem, “Electra on Azalea Path” fulfills another requirement of confession—that in order to go forward with her life, the confessant must believe she has attempted to gain the confessor’s approval—or forgiveness, in this case.

Although her feelings about her father were complicated, alternating between bitter resentment and unconditional love, Plath’s feelings toward her mother were equally complex. Plath resented her father because she felt he had “deserted me forever” (Journals 278), but her mother, on the other hand, was an almost constant and often overwhelming presence, even when she wasn’t physically there. Plath addresses this difficulty in their relationship often in her poetry and in her journals. On the one hand, Plath appears to thrive on the close relationship with her mother, writing nearly seven hundred letters to her family (most of which were to her mother) between 1950 and 1963.

However, there are also many journal entries in which Plath is resentful towards her mother and she often explores similar themes in her poetry.11 Aurelia Plath interprets their relationship in her introduction to Letters Home (1975): “Between Sylvia and me there
existed—as between my own mother and me—a sort of psychic osmosis which, at times, was very wonderful and comforting; at other times an unwelcome invasion of privacy” (32). The sheer number of letters would seem to support Mrs. Plath’s interpretation, and in fact, there are only two or three instances in the published letters where Plath herself appears to be anything but loving to her mother.12

However, in contrast to the happy, almost manic persona of the letters, in private Plath analyzes her relationship with her mother quite differently:

An almost exact description of my feelings and reasons for suicide: a transferred murderous impulse from my mother onto myself: the “vampire” metaphor Freud uses, “draining the ego”: that is exactly the feeling I have getting in the way of my writing: Mother’s clutch. I mask my self-abasement (a transferred hate of her) and weave it with my own dissatisfactions in myself until it becomes very difficult to distinguish what is really bogus criticism from what is really a dangerous liability . . . My rejection-fear is bound up with the fear that this will mean my rejection by her, for not succeeding: perhaps that is why they are so terrible. (Journals 278-79)

In light of the emotional implications of Plath’s complex relationship with her mother, it is not surprising that there is no clearly defined addressee, nor is there an obvious power dynamic in “The Rival” (1961), even
though it can easily be interpreted as addressing Aurelia Plath. To clearly define her addressee would imply a willingness on the part of the speaker to actively claim her feelings that Plath’s conflicting emotions towards her mother may not have permitted her. In “The Rival,” the speaker accuses the addressee of intruding on her life, much as Plath often felt that her mother, whether she was physically present or not, intruded on hers:

You leave the same impression
Of something beautiful, but annihilating
.. .your first gift is making stone out of everything
. . .you are here,
. . .dying to say something unanswerable.
(2-3; 6-7; 10)

In spite of the addressee’s offenses, however, the speaker never implicates herself in the difficulties of the relationship. An admission of guilt or complicity, as in “Electra on Azalea Path,” is absolutely central to a confessional poem, and there is no sense of either one here.

“Medusa” (1962) presents a similar situation to “The Rival” in that the speaker is addressing an unidentified authority figure whom she clearly resents and who does not inspire shame, self-judgment, or admissions of guilt from the speaker. This poem would be difficult to read confessionally without having some knowledge of Plath’s biography, but even with that knowledge, it is too
confrontational and resentful to be truly confessional. In spite of the hierarchical relationship between the speaker and addressee, the sense of shame and/or self-judgment necessary to a confessional transaction is not present here.

Plath finished “Medusa” on 16 October 1962, the same day that she said in a letter to her mother, “I am a genius of a writer; I have it in me. I am writing the best poems of my life; they will make my name” (Letters 468). The significance of this date is threefold: not only did she finish the poem and the letter, but she separated from Ted Hughes at about this same time. It is certainly possible to attribute the vengeful tone of the poem to her feelings about the separation, but it seems to me to more clearly reflect her conflicted feelings towards her mother. The confidence and self-assurance of the letter is in stark contrast with the anger and resentment that pervades the poem.

The relationship between speaker and addressee in this poem, like that same relationship in “The Rival,” is clearly difficult. The speaker not only feels smothered by the addressee, but also responsible for her. The poem is permeated with images of both smothering and responsibility: the speaker calls her addressee an “Old barnacled umbilicus” (14) and says to her,
I didn’t call you.
I didn’t call you at all.
Nevertheless, nevertheless
You steamed to me over the sea,
Fat and red, a placenta

Paralyzing the kicking lovers.

... I could draw no breath,
Dead and moneyless,

Overexposed, like an X-ray. (21-26; 30-31)

Not only does the speaker feel smothered by her relationship with the addressee, but she feels—at least to an extent—responsible for the addressee’s welfare, while at the same time resentful of her addressee’s dependence on her. The speaker says in the fourth stanza:

In any case, you are always there.
Tremulous breath at the end of my line,
Curve of water upleaping
To my water rod, dazzling and grateful,
Touching and sucking. (16-20)

Although the conflict between the addressee’s overwhelming need and the responsibility for her that the speaker feels does create a power struggle, the power dynamics here are not confessional. First, the power that the addressee wields does not come from having been wronged by the speaker, as it would in a confessional poem. Rather, it results from the addressee’s ability to force the speaker to confront the control issues of their relationship. The speaker resents what she interprets as the addressee’s inflated conception of her role in the speaker’s life:

140
Who do you think you are?
A Communion wafer? Blubbery Mary?
I shall take no bite of your body,
Bottle in which I live,

Ghastly Vatican. (32-36)

In addition, although the speaker appears to be less powerful than the addressee, she is not seeking forgiveness, as she would in a confessional poem. Instead, she is making a conscious effort to break away from the addressee. Since the speaker does not believe that she has wronged the addressee, she is neither seeking forgiveness nor is she seeking to be reinstated into the addressee's community. In fact, the speaker consciously pushes the addressee away from her—"Off, off, eely tentacle!//There is nothing between us" (40-41)—an attempt at separation that directly opposes the desire for reconciliation which is a central motivation behind confession. In order for reconciliation to occur, the speaker herself must not only recognize the distance between herself and her addressee, but she must actively admit her own part in creating the difficult circumstances. Again, as in "The Rival," the speaker refuses to implicate herself. Instead, almost all the activity is attributed to the addressee; it is the addressee who inflicts her presence on the speaker, and this presence creates the speaker's anger. The speaker's
unwillingness to implicate herself in the problems of this relationship keeps “Medusa” from being truly confessional.

In light of this need for complicity, one of the most important reasons that Plath’s poems are not often confessional is her refusal to implicate herself. Rather, she often presents herself as what I would call a “recovering victim”—someone who believes that she has been victimized by circumstances, but is now (and this persona is especially dominant in the Ariel poems) going to act, to take revenge on her tormentors. Instead of remaining a passive victim, she will become an active agent/initiator. In this sense, Plath’s speakers are often defensive in the same way that Margaret Dickie Uroff characterizes them. They are not confessing their experience; they are “venting” it (Uroff 105). As in “Medusa,” in “The Rival,” the focus of the speaker’s attention is continually on her addressee—never on herself. She depicts herself as the object of the addressee’s wrath; in a confessional poem, she would have a sense of involvement, of complicity in her own unhappiness that is absent here.

Margaret Dickie Uroff, in an article entitled “Sylvia Plath and Confessional Poetry: A Reconsideration,” presents two central reasons that Plath’s work is not confessional. First, in comparison to Robert Lowell’s “literal. . .fairly consistently developed” self, which he
places in very detailed particular places with clearly identifiable people, Plath’s characters are “generalized figures not real-life people, types that Plath manipulates dramatically in order to reveal their limitations” (105). Further, unlike the “self” present in Lowell’s confessional poems, the “self” of Plath’s work is not nearly as unified. As Uroff points out, “The literal self in Lowell’s poetry is to be sure a literary self, but fairly consistently developed as a self-deprecating, modest, comic figure with identifiable parents, summer homes, experiences at particular addresses” (105). Plath does not situate her speakers within any sort of consistent physical or geographical context as Lowell does. Instead, Plath’s context is much less tangible, defined by the speakers’ emotional experiences and not influenced by where those experiences take place. Again, “The Rival” provides a good example of this lack of specificity because there is no way to tell exactly who the addressee is or what that person’s relationship to the speaker might be.

In Lowell’s Life Studies, Uroff continues, “the suffering and victimizing speaker searches through his own pain in order to perceive some truth about the nature of his experience” (106). In contrast, Plath’s central purpose is to “[demonstrate] the way in which the mind
deals with extreme circumstances or circumstances to which it responds with excessive sensitivity. ...heighten[ing] or exaggerat[ing] ordinary experience” (107). Using Plath’s early poem “Miss Drake Proceeds to Supper” (1956) and her later “The Applicant” (1962), “Lady Lazarus” (1962), “Tulips” (1961), and “Daddy” (1962) as important examples, Uroff guides her readers through the ways in which Plath’s speakers use parody and distance as a method by which Plath herself can come to grips with these same fears.

In Plath’s “The Disquieting Muses” (1957), the speaker also achieves a certain self-knowledge at the end. Speaking directly to her mother, the speaker willfully shatters her mother’s illusions: as hard as her mother tried to protect the speaker from any sort of negativity from the world, giving her dancing lessons, music lessons, and exposing her solely to the “Flowers and bluebirds that never were/Never, never found anywhere./But the little planet bobbed away/Like a soap-bubble as you called: Come here!/And I faced my traveling companions” (44-48), she cannot achieve that optimism herself.

Not only has the speaker realized that her mother’s obsession with the bright side of life is not ultimately viable for her, but she also realizes that in spite of her mother’s beliefs to the contrary, the world knows that the
speaker is not perfect. Her “traveling companions” will not be her mother’s flowers and bluebirds, but the disquieting muses that have followed her all her life. Further, the speaker realizes that she is doomed to repeat her mother’s mistake of continual optimism to the point of denial. At the end of the poem, she says, “[T]his is the kingdom you bore me to./Mother, mother. But no frown of mine/Will betray the company I keep” (54-56). She is fully conscious of the irony of what she is doing, and it is this self-knowledge which allows “The Disquieting Muses” to be read as a confessional poem.

In “The Rival,” however, the speaker is not influenced by thoughts of the addressee’s reaction, as would be the case in a confessional poem. Even though one of the central themes of the poem is the addressee’s reaction to the speaker, she is writing the poem as if those reactions do not influence her at all. In fact, the speaker does not believe that the “rival” herself can be moved by anything, but rather that she can only be the initiating force: “[The moon’s] O-mouth grieves at the world; yours is unaffected,//And your first gift is making stone out of everything” (5-6). To the speaker’s eyes, the addressee then becomes even more malevolent because she appears to have no emotions at all.
The speaker is not in a passive or subordinate position, seeking a reaction from the more active addressee, as she might be if she were still a victim. At the end of the poem, the speaker tells her addressee that “No day is safe from news of you,/Walking in Africa, maybe, but thinking of me” (16-17). The speaker leaves no room for the addressee’s reaction, for the speaker has had the last word. Consequently, she appears to be the more powerful one in the relationship. In a confession, the confessant is never the more powerful one—at least not from her point of view. The confessant must believe that the confessor is the more powerful in order for the confession to be successful.

Ultimately, confessional poetry is motivated by two impulses: a search for forgiveness from a person the confessant believes he has wronged and a strong sense of shame and self-judgment. By placing himself at the mercy of the confessor, the confessant hopes to find the strength to go on with his life. By the time she wrote the Ariel poems, Plath’s speakers had already found that strength. Although these speakers were often angry and vindictive, they were rarely suppliants and they almost never asked for forgiveness.

1 At the time of her death in 1963, Plath had published only one book—The Colossus (1960). Some of the Ariel poems had appeared in publications including The New

2 Although Plath and Hughes were estranged, it is unclear whether or not a reconciliation was under consideration. Regardless, Plath was still attempting to fulfill the domestic roles she had during her marriage, in addition to meeting her new professional responsibilities,

3 According to the notes in The Collected Poems of Sylvia Plath, these poems included “Virgin in a Tree,” “Perseus,” “Battle-Scene,” “The Ghosts’ Leavetaking,” and “Yadwigha, On a Red Couch, Among Water Lilies” (all 1958).

4 Even allowing for Bewley’s age (he is a product of a time in which relations between men and women were very different), the condescension and patronizing attitude of this review seems to me insupportable.

5 Birkle also discusses the term “autogynography,” in reference to which she quotes Domna Stanton: “autogynography. . .dramatized the fundamental alterity and non-presence of the subject, even as it asserts itself discursively and strives toward an always impossible self-possession” (Birkle’s italics), but she decides that the term is too limited for her use. The term itself is gendered, and it seems to me that to apply it to Plath’s work would be to attribute a self-awareness to her that appears to have been impossible for her during her lifetime.

6 In Phillips’s The Confessional Poets (1973), Mills’s “Cry of the Human” (1975), Robert Penn Warren’s Democracy and Poetry (1975), and Malkoff’s Escape From the Self (1977), all three specifically discuss poets’ conceptions of the Self and how those ideas inform contemporary American poetry as a whole. Like Birkle, each of these critics is concerned with the centrality of identity and its formation.

7 See Chapter One for a full explanation of this process.

In "The Stigma of Electroconvulsive Therapy," Donald P. Hay points out that through the 1940s and into the 1950s, "ECT was the major treatment, if not frequently the only biological treatment for mental illness" (190), and in fact, the incidence of its use ran as high as 31 per 100,000 in one New York county (Shorter 281-82). Further, the performance of lobotomies, in which surgeons destroy part of the brain's frontal lobe, hit its peak in 1949, when 5,074 operations were performed (Shorter 228). By the end of the 1950s, however, new antipsychotic drugs rendered lobotomies virtually obsolete.

"Daddy" and "Lady Lazarus" are the only poems the reviewer names, although he does quote "Morning Song," "Elm," and "A Birthday Present" without their titles.


Lynda Bundtzen (Sylvia Plath's Incarnations), Paula Bennett (My Life, A Loaded Gun), Carmen Birkle (Women's Stories of the Looking Glass), and all of Plath's biographers, among others, extensively address Plath's relationship with her mother. The central focus of Maureen Howard's review of Letters Home (in the New York Times, 14 December 1975) is on the different ways Plath and her mother interpreted their relationship.

It is difficult not to read this poem as if it were addressed to Aurelia Plath, but poetry, although it may use autobiographical information and experiences, is not, in fact, autobiography and should not be read as such. However, this poem does underscore the issues surrounding the relationship between confession, autobiography, and poetry—in particular how easy it can be to confuse the three.
Chapter Four
Ted Hughes's Uneasy Progress Towards Confession

Unlike Sylvia Plath, Ted Hughes has not been commonly viewed as a confessional poet. However, while a very personal, almost autobiographical element is central to Plath's work, it is much less obvious in Hughes's poetry, and the form it does take changes throughout his career. His willingness to acknowledge the relationship between his own life and his poetry becomes stronger and more direct as his career progresses. By the end of his last book—*Birthday Letters* (1998), he has almost completely reversed the confessional process, acting as a confessor figure to his readers' role as confessant.

* * * * *

When Ted Hughes died in October 1998, only nine months after publishing *Birthday Letters*, it was hard not to think of his 1957 poem "Famous Poet" (*Hawk in the Rain* 17). In this poem from *Hawk in the Rain*, Hughes explores his fear that, should the public respond favorably to his work, he might find himself writing the same type of poem over and over simply because it pleases his audience. His fear is difficult to describe, partly because it appears so innocuous: "Stare at the monster: remark/How difficult it is to define just what/Amounts to monstrosity in that/Very ordinary appearance" (1-3). However, the
potential effects of his fear are themselves all too obvious:

. . . he is not dead
But in this truth surely half-buried
Once, the humiliation

Of youth and obscurity,
The autoclave of heady ambition trapped,
The fermenting of the yeasty heart stopped—
Burst with such pyrotechnics the dull world gaped
And “repeat that” still they cry. (23-30)

Hughes’s emphasis both on the role of the audience as watcher and the role of the poet as the one being watched is significant for two reasons. First, at the time he wrote this poem he had not yet published his first book, so any potential audience reaction to his work as a whole appears to be a moot point. In addition to the possibility that positive critical reaction might preclude further artistic growth, Hughes is also laughing at the possibility that he could become jaded by money and critical acclaim:

But all his efforts to concoct
The old heroic bang from their money and praise,
From the parent’s pointing and the child’s amaze,
Even from the burning of his wreathed bays,
Have left him wrecked: wrecked,

And monstrous, so,
As a Stegosaurus, a lumbering obsolete
Arsenal of gigantic horn and plate
From a time when half the world still burned, set
To blink behind bars at the zoo. (31-40)
Since poets rarely realize large amounts of money from the sale of their poetry alone, part of what Hughes is satirizing here may be his own youthful expectations for himself, especially since those expectations were based on only one book.²

At this point in his personal life Hughes did not have much money either: he and Sylvia Plath were recently married, living in a small inexpensive flat in London, while she was finishing her M.A. exams at Cambridge and he was teaching in a boys’ school (Stevenson 103-04). Consequently, he may also have been poking fun at his own hope that he might actually be able to make money by writing. The possibility of ever being jaded by royalties and critical acclaim must have seemed almost unimaginable to Hughes in 1956 as he was writing the poems for *Hawk in the Rain*.

While Hughes may consciously have hoped for royalties and critics’ respect (even if he did not expect them), it is doubtful that he could possibly have imagined the controversy which was to follow him after Plath’s death. When this early poem is viewed through the lens of Hughes’s later life, his apparent hostility towards the reading public is both ironic and prescient. It is a hostility to which he will return in *Birthday Letters*. 

151
Yet another reason for Hughes’s choice of subject matter in this poem is that he is satirizing his own fear of submitting his work to the scrutiny of others. Throughout *Hawk in the Rain*, as Leonard Scigaj argues, “[s]atire always works to ridicule refusals of concrete experience” (Scigaj 40), and “Famous Poet” seems to bear out the argument that Hughes’s speaker is poking fun at his fear not only of what his still nonexistent audience will think, but also his fear of his own ability to satisfy those readers.

Hughes’s concern with audience also seems ironic in light of the fact that, with the exception of a few poems, his conscious relationship with his readers appears at first to be largely nonexistent throughout much of his early career. However, on a closer reading, it becomes obvious that Hughes does, in fact, sustain a very changeable relationship with his readers, one that often inverts the power dynamics of the purgative confessional process. Instead of placing himself in the more submissive role of the confessant, Hughes often embraces the more powerful role of the confessor, acting in turn as a teacher, (*Hawk in the Rain*), a performer (*Crow*), a guide or convert (*Remains of Elmet*), and, ultimately, a confessor (*Birthday Letters*).
In "Egg-head" (Hawk in the Rain 35), Hughes's didactic role is prominent. This construction of the speaking voice can be tied directly to the Protestant confessional tradition, in which the impetus behind the confessant's words is often a pedagogical one. In this 1957 poem, it is very clear not only which side Hughes favors in the life-or-death conflict between theory and experience, but also what he wants his readers to do when confronted with similar situations. The poem is permeated with images not only of rejection of experience, but also of the willed effort that such refusals cost the egg-head. To the egg-head, it appears that experience is not simply dangerous, but it is also deadly. Not only the obviously alien, but the apparently innocuous and commonplace have caused death for other intellects:

A leaf's otherness,
The whaled monstered sea bottom, eagled peaks
And stars that hang over hurtling endlessness,
With manslaughtering shocks

Are let in on his sense:
So many a one has dared to be struck dead
Peeping through his fingers at the world's ends,
Or at an ant's head. (1-8)

However, in Hughes's point of view, it is infinitely more damaging to refuse life, as the egg-head does. By guiding his readers through the process by which the intellect ultimately closes itself off from any experience outside its own limited brain, Hughes ridicules our fears
of concrete experience. Leonard Scigaj suggests that this satire is directed at those who refuse the "human liberating capacity for self-development" (38). In rejecting concrete experience, then, we are not only severely limiting our potential, but we are also repudiating the central motive behind a non-purgative confession—in this case, the opportunity to improve ourselves by transcending the narrow constraints of purely intellectual activity. If we as readers refuse to heed what we've been told, we then doom ourselves to a purely egg-head existence. In such an existence, instead of living our lives as fully as possible—physically, intellectually, and emotionally—we hide ourselves behind our own fears and insecurities. Instead of exploring what we could learn, what we already know becomes a prison, exactly what the egg-head embraces in the poem.

   Even worse, the effort we expend rejecting experience is much more exhausting than simply accepting it, along with whatever other implications might come with it, according to Hughes. In "Egg-head," refusing experience is active work. The brain,

   In deft opacities,
   Walled in translucencies, shuts out the world's knocking

   Long the eggshell head's
   Fragility rounds and resists receiving the flash
   Of the sun, the bolt of the earth: and feeds
   On the yolk's dark and hush
Of a helplessness coming
By feats of torpor, by circumventing sleights
Of stupefaction, juggleries of benumbing,
By lucid sophistries of sight

To a staturing “I am”
The upthrust of an affirmative head of a man.
(13-14; 17-24)

The egg-head’s “torpor” reflects an unnatural opposition between unrealistic detachment and the “fragility” and implied vulnerability of the egg-head’s emotions. The intellect has so overexerted itself in refusing concrete experience that it can do nothing else. Not having achieved the balance which is the goal of embracing concrete experience, the “egg-head” is still one-dimensional. Hughes implies that, should we refuse to heed the “confession” of this poem, we as readers will remain similarly unimproved and unedified.

Hughes sets up a similar confrontation in “Meeting” (Hawk in the Rain 39). Here, a man, rather than embrace the power of nature and concrete experience, chooses instead to bury himself in an assumed identity. Like the intellectual in “Egg-head,” the man in this poem refuses to confront experience on its own terms, preferring instead the artificial identity and false power he finds in a mirror’s reflection, “a role//In which he can fling a cape,/And outloom life like Faustus” (3-5). The poem’s protagonist has taken refuge in the artificial power of
the Faustus role rather than admit—even to himself—that he is vulnerable and nearly powerless in the face of the elemental world. Unlike “Egg-head,” which describes the actual process by which an intellect closes itself off from world, “Meeting” illustrates the aftermath of that process. It will be useful to quote the poem in full:

He smiles in a mirror, shrinking the whole Sun-swung zodiac of light to a trinket shape On the rise of his eye: it is a role

In which he can fling a cape, And outloom life like Faustus. But once when On an empty mountain slope

A black goat clattered and ran Toward him, and set forefeet firm on a rock Above and looked down

A square-pupilled yellow-eyed look, The black devil head against the blue air, What gigantic fingers took

Him up and on a bare palm turned him close under an eye That was like a living hanging hemisphere

And watched his blood’s gleam with a ray Slow and cold and ferocious as a start Till the goat clattered away.

Reality, whose force is illustrated by the goat, is an overwhelming and powerful thing; it picks the man up with its “gigantic fingers” and detachedly inspects him. Since the man is unwilling to engage himself with the concrete experience represented by the goat, the goat “clatter[s] away,” leaving the man to take refuge in his mirror. Unfortunately, the mirror only reflects reality;
it does not allow the man to experience it. His reflection becomes something he can carry around with him like a talisman, allowing him to embrace the ultimately delusional power of his Faustus-like role.

In “The Man Seeking Experience Enquires His Way of a Drop of Water” (Hawk in the Rain 37), Hughes approaches the conflict between theory and experience from the opposite angle. Instead of hiding from experience, the protagonist in this poem actively searches for it. As a result, he is potentially empowered by his interaction with the water droplet. What he discovers, however, is that, in spite of its wide experience and long life, the drop of water nonetheless does have its imperfections. If, in fact, the water droplet is the detached and dispassionate “without heart-head-nerve” lens, then what is to be gained from it? Even the man himself is unsure of what he is looking for; he asks:

Venerable elder! Let us learn of you. Read us a lesson, a plain lesson how Experience has worn or made you anew, That on this humble kitchen wall hang now, O dew that condensed the breath of the Word On the mirror of the syllable of the Word. (19-25)

Experience on its own—or at least as it is represented here by the drop of water—has no emotions, no ability to process what it has seen. The water droplet is all experience and no analysis. It has not actually
assimilated anything it has experienced—at least not in such a way that it can communicate it to the man—and it appears to lack the man’s ability for self-creation. Like the intellectual in "Egg-head" who has cut himself off from the possibility of a balanced existence by refusing experience, the drop of water is cut off too, although in its case from the intellectual world of theory. As a result, the water droplet is equally incomplete.

However, there is an important difference between the water droplet and the intellectual: the egghead consciously and actively refuses the opportunity to integrate himself, but the drop of water does not have that choice. As the precipitation left over when the air is saturated, the drop, the "charity of the air," results also from the list of things in the poem’s first stanza—the cloud, the cup of tea, the corpse of a bird, for example. The water has absorbed diverse processes and events without changing. Is it the water droplet’s knowledge or the man’s inability to assimilate the information which leads to their ultimate impasse?

Not only do theory and experience conflict in the abstract, but two people find it impossible to strike a balance either between themselves or between intellect and sensuality. A direct parallel can be drawn here to the "head-knowledge" and "heart-knowledge" of Protestant
confession, as many of the poems in *Hawk in the Rain* illustrate this search for balance and integration.
Hughes continues to address this issue in *Crow* and *Birthday Letters*, although an early appearance is in "Incompatibilities" (*Hawk in the Rain* 26). Instead of beginning as two separate beings who are brought together by love for each other, the couple's desire tears them apart:

Desire's a vicious separator in spite
Of its twisting women around men:
Cold-chisels two selfs single as it welds hot
Iron of their separates to one.

Old Eden commonplace: something magnets
And furnaces and with fierce
Hammer-blows the one body on the other knits
Till the division disappears.

But desire outstrips those hands that a nothing fills,
It dives into the opposite eyes,
Plummets through blackouts of impassables
For the star that lights the face,

Each body still straining to follow down
The maelstrom of the other, their limbs flail
Flesh and beat upon
The inane everywhere of its obstacle,

Each, each second, lonelier and further
Falling alone through the endless
Without-world of the other, though both here
Twist so close they choke their cries.

Hughes's language cannot contain his ideas here; perhaps the idea of a healthy balance between head- and heart-knowledge is so foreign to the speaker that he cannot express it. Nouns become verbs ("magnets,"
and although the two people's violent separation paradoxically appears to bring them closer together, in fact it does not bring them any relief from their inherent loneliness. Rather, their togetherness has silenced their individual voices altogether. What they are crying together is not happiness, but suffocation. Hughes will explore this theme again in "Lovesong" and "Lovepet" (in Crow), and still later in "Suttee" (in Birthday Letters).

Hughes presents two extremes in this poem, neither of which provides any room for individual identity or free will. In the first instance, desire physically separates the two people even as it twists them together emotionally, while in the second instance the two people are physically together and emotionally apart. Desire is represented as an overpowering external force that human beings are incapable of controlling. In both cases, the people are dependent on the will of desire, the "something" that forces them together against their will. They cannot come together without the violence of the "hammer-blows" that "knit" them together. The implication is that they would not remain together by choice; there must be something to bind them.

This sort of conflict is nothing new—it has existed since the Garden of Eden—but in spite of human beings'
efforts, there is still no way to fix it. Hughes himself does not call for a solution; he remains detached, preferring that his poems reflect the intractability of the question. Like the man and the drop of water, the people in this poem have reached an impasse. However, both the man and the drop of water, as well as the two people in this poem, ultimately appear to be better off than those in “Egg-head” and “Meeting.” Even though they were unable to find a balance between intellect and emotion, the couple, the man, and the water droplet embraced the chance to try. Experience is not always a pleasurable thing—it can be hurtful, as we have seen in “Incompatibilites”—but any sort of attempt to transcend the duality of heart- and head-knowledge appears to be better than retreating behind the intellect to the exclusion of anything else.

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In Crow (1970), however, it is not always clear what Hughes feels about Crow’s attempts to integrate these types of knowledge. Crow is entirely dependent on his perceptions, on what is obvious to him. However, like the drop of water, he has no way to assimilate his observations. Since he cannot analyze, Crow can only act on what he sees, and he often misinterprets his perceptions. In “Crow Alights” (Crow 9), Crow views Earth
from a distance. What he sees is not what is really there; the "hallucination of horror" does not show him anything that he can use. At the end of the poem, in an effort to rid himself of the horror he sees, Crow blinks, but the "horror" is still there. Crow's understanding of the reality of the horror implied in the last three lines of the poem points to a human dimension in his character because the ability to distinguish between good and evil—the moral sense—is uniquely human. However, the fact that Crow cannot analyze the distinction keeps him firmly in the animal realm. The creation that Crow sees is entirely stagnant, without motion of any kind:

There was this coat, in the dark cupboard
In the silent room, in the silent house
There was this face, smoking its cigarette
between the dusk
Window and the fire's embers.
Near the face, this hand, motionless.
Near the hand, this cup. (12-17)

None of the things Crow sees seem connected to each other, and Crow cannot find any way to make them fit together. Detached from creation, he appears to be—at least on a superficial level—as powerful as God, but he is unlike the Judeo-Christian conception of God because he has no power to effect change. He can watch, but he cannot control anything: "He stared at the evidence.//Nothing escaped him. (Nothing could escape.)" (17-18). Even the form of the last five stanzas appears disconnected. By using five
single-line stanzas, Hughes seems to be underlining the ultimate discontinuity of the universe in front of Crow. The part of Crow that aspires to be human cannot accept the disunity he finds; he is continually trying to make sense of what he perceives, to use his perceptions to control his experience. Unfortunately, he fails each time he tries to achieve this balance. This search for integration seems roughly equivalent to the quest that the Protestant confessant undertakes to find McConnell’s heart-knowledge and head-knowledge. Even though Crow is not human, his lack of humanity does not preclude his undertaking a confessional quest. It does preclude his successfully completing it, however.

One especially strong illustration of Crow’s search occurs in “Crow Tyrannosaurus” (Crow 12), when Crow is faced with the sheer evil of creation. The animals reject what they have eaten because they have eaten anguish and sorrow instead of actual food. However, since the animals cannot analyze, their rejection is only a physical reaction. Even human beings are not immune to this evil: “Even man he was a walking/Abattoir/Of innocents/His brain incinerating their outcry” (17-20). However, whereas all of the animals regurgitate the evil they have consumed, man “incinerates” it, actually embraces it, taking it into his body. Crow cannot make successful moral judgements,
but Hughes can, and human beings lose all credibility in the process.

Even though Crow can’t understand or carry it through, the fact that he can acknowledge the need for some sort of response to what he sees would seem to imply that Hughes is illustrating Crow’s first steps towards an attempt to integrate the physical and intellectual aspects of his self. Crow does weigh the possibility for a concerted effort to be good against sheer physical gratification, but sensuality ultimately wins out: “Crow thought ‘Alas/Alas ought I/To stop eating/And try to become the light?’” (20-24). He would like to envision himself as a messiah figure, but his moral impulses are overruled by sheer physical habit:

But his eye saw a grub. And his head, trapsprung, stabbed.

And he listened
And he heard
Weeping

Grubs grubs He stabbed he stabbed
Weeping
Weeping

Weeping he walked and stabbed

Thus came the eye’s roundness
the ear’s deafness. (25-33)

Although throughout his career Hughes did not often write poems which could be read as strictly documentary illustrations of specific events, it does seem plausible
to argue that Crow is responding both to social and political issues of the time, as well as personal difficulties in Hughes's own life. Not only had Hughes's marriage to Sylvia Plath ended with her suicide in 1963, but in 1969 his companion Assia Wevill had gassed herself along with their two-year-old daughter Shura. Crow is dedicated to the memory of the two of them. In light of the personal alienation and isolation that Hughes must have felt at the time, it does not seem illogical to argue that Crow's quest follows the practice of Protestant confession. What Crow is really searching for is a community to belong to—a kingdom of the elect, as it were, which could accept him for who he is, instead of who they think he should be.

In The Art of Ted Hughes (1978), Keith Sagar closely explicates the poems within the context of the Trickster myth. Nick Bishop, in Re-Making Poetry: Ted Hughes and a New Critical Aesthetic (1991), also finds Crow's origins in the world of myth, tracing them back to Celtic mythology, North American Indian myths, and Carl Jung's description of the trickster figure. None of these arguments, however, takes into account the unique dynamics that exist between Crow, the narrator, and the reader. Most often in these poems, the speaking voice or Crow's perception is the controlling force, facilitating not only
his own but the reader’s exploration of how to achieve an integrated identity in this world of chaos and loosed moorings.

Within the entire Crow sequence, Hughes himself as speaking voice sometimes seems unsure of his own role in the tale, alternating between narrative involvement and the distance that exists when the narrative illustrates Crow’s viewpoint. When Crow’s perspective governs the poems, the speaking voice is unified, but any sort of analytic component is missing. Crow can act, but he cannot understand his own motives for acting, and he certainly cannot vocalize them, even to himself. For example, in “Crow’s First Lesson” (Crow 8), Crow tries to do what God asks, but he doesn’t understand how to connect what God is asking him to say to his place in the world. When God tells him to say “love,” all Crow can do is gape; because he cannot visualize any of the positive things human beings would associate with that word, he cannot experience agape either. All Crow can do is gawk, confusing love and lust. Instead of perfect, unquestioning agape, Crow visualizes love as a devouring, all-consuming state which exists purely on a physical level, with the woman holding the man hostage.

Crow tries to do what God wants him to, but he cannot understand anything beyond the physical, and God is
powerless to explain. Consequently, there is no hierarchy between Crow and God; they are of equal strength, and neither one of them appears able to control creation. At this point in the sequence, Crow has not been asked to think at all; he has only experienced the world on a physical level.

Hughes had explored this theme as far back as "Incompatibilities" (1957) and he returns to it in "Lovesong" (Crow 76), in which the two people involved meld into each other, subsuming any individual identity in their togetherness:

He loved her and she loved him
His kisses sucked out her whole past or future or tried to
He had no other appetite
She bit him she gnawed him she sucked
She wanted him complete inside her (1-5)

In their search for community, the couple appears to be following the process of non-purgative confession, in that they think they are trying to achieve this balance. However, in allowing the sensual to so completely dictate the terms of their relationship, they can have no intellectual existence. They have not achieved the balance which is the object of a non-purgative confession. Unlike the stability found in non-purgative confession, love in this poem is all-consuming and destructive; it sucks out all individuality and all volition, leaving no room for anything else:
Their heads fell apart into sleep like the two halves
Of a lopped melon, but love is hard to stop
In their entwined sleep they exchanged arms and legs
In their dreams their brains took each other hostage

In the morning they wore each other’s faces

(40-44)

Although there is no obviously direct biographical connection to Hughes’s personal life in any of these poems, it does not seem unreasonable to speculate that this poem in particular reflects his own emotional angst of this time. His marriage had ended only eight years before and Assia and Shura had died just a year before Crow’s publication. Even though this poem has none of the obvious signs of a purgative confessional poem, it is nonetheless very personal poetry. This theme of devouring love will reassert itself twenty-seven years later in “Suttee” (Birthday Letters 147-48).

Crow has no independent life of his own; rather, he is the function of our perceptions of him. In “The Door” (Crow 6) he is born through our eyes: “Only there is a doorway in the wall--/A black doorway:/The eye’s pupil./Through that doorway came Crow//Flying from sun to sun, he found this home” (10-14). Like our view of Crow, the confessant’s perception of his own identity in both purgative and non-purgative confessions is dictated by the

168

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confessor’s reaction. This reaction then becomes the basis on which the confessant formulates his identity, at least within the confessional transaction. In forcing the reader to take responsibility for his perception of Crow, Hughes not only involves the reader in the performance of the poem, but he almost coerces the reader into taking on the role of the confessor in a non-purgative confession, foreshadowing what he will do over twenty-five years later in Birthday Letters.

Significantly, "Crow’s First Lesson" is placed right after "A Childish Prank" (Crow 7), in which Crow has attempted to provide souls for human beings. Since Crow is incapable of transcending the physical, he implants sexual attraction into human beings. Human beings are doubly victimized here: first by God’s inability to act and then by the pain caused by Crow’s incompetence. Not only must humans assume the fallout from their own sexuality, but they are also held responsible for Crow’s inability to plan for the future. He has acted to bring man and woman together sexually, but he cannot visualize the resulting chaos. Consequently, since he cannot balance the intellectual and the physical, any hope that Crow has of achieving the balance of a non-purgative confession is lost.
Although there is violence in the *Crow* sequence, many of *Crow*’s early critics often focused on it to the exclusion of nearly everything else. In *The New York Times Book Review* of 18 April 1971, Daniel Hoffman states: “Hughes’s style is plain and violent, a plain style for an Apocalypse”; further, he weighs in with this caveat: “Hughes’s violent images are often in danger of centripetal dissolution, a danger not always avoided in *Crow*. When objects are used with insufficient identity as themselves, there results an indulgent, arbitrary violence which obscures rather than dramatizes the theme’ (35).

Christopher Porterfield takes up this same theme in *Time* (5 April 1971): “In [Hughes’s] taut, compulsive poems, both the error and its redress are usually violent, sometimes disgusting, occasionally awesome” (91). On the other hand, Roy Fuller attempts to place Hughes’s use of violence in perspective in the 11 March 1971 issue of *The Listener*:

The proper assessment of creative art doesn’t necessarily depend, of course, on applying moral standards. However, I do find it strange that with a work like Ted Hughes’s *Crow*...so few critics would think it right to deal with the pathological violence of its language, its anti-human ideas, its sadistic imagery. No doubt it can be shown by purely literary judgments to fall far short of Hughes’s best previous work... but I would have thought the moral judgment paramount here. (qtd. in Newton 376)
Even if Fuller’s readers agree with him that judging the “morality” of Crow is potentially more important than a careful consideration of the book’s aesthetics, it is important to remember that much of Crow’s violence is either unintentional or motivated by a wish to do good. For example, in “Crow Blacker Than Ever” (Crow 57) Crow refuses to give up on creation, even though God has turned away from it and Adam and Eve are finding refuge in each other instead of in God. Trying to be helpful, Crow creates Christianity (“Crow.../Nail[ed] heaven and earth together--//So man cried, but with God’s voice./And God bled, but with man’s blood.”). Unfortunately, Christianity fails because Crow does not understand that man and God are inherently incompatible—not only with each other but also within themselves (“Man could not be man nor God God”). Crow’s world cannot support this melding of man and God. Crow cannot answer when man cries and God bleeds because he does not know what to say. If, as Ekbert Faas, Keith Sagar, and Nick Bishop argue, the Judeo-Christian view of a benevolent universe has failed, it is not surprising that Crow cannot find his place in it.

To illustrate further, even in the beginning—before Crow appeared—intent and result were fundamentally irreconcilable:
Black was the without eye
Black the within tongue
Black was the heart

Black the nerves, black the brain
With its tombed visions
Black also the soul, the huge stammer
Of the cry that, swelling, could not
Pronounce its sun. (“Two Legends” 1-3; 10-14)

There is no one who is able to take action; this nameless deity is unable to set creation as we know it in motion. Instead, he has created a world that he cannot control, with inhabitants over which he has no power. Even Crow himself results from an organic, not a religious, process:

the sun and moon

Alternate their weathers

To hatch a crow, a black rainbow
Bent in emptiness
over emptiness

But flying (“Two Legends” 20-24)

Hughes—or Crow?—appears to view God deistically; in “Lineage” (Crow 2) God begets Nothing. The verb “to beget” can also mean “to cause;” consequently if God caused Nothing, He becomes an incompetent deistic version of the Judeo-Christian conception of God. Once God has created the world, he attempts to leave it to its own devices. Into the breach, then, steps Crow.

In “Crow Hears Fate Knock on the Door” (Crow 11), Crow stares at the world and a prophecy comes to him:

. . .I WILL MEASURE IT ALL AND OWN IT ALL
AND I WILL BE INSIDE IT
If Crow is inside something he owns, not staring at it, then Crow becomes inseparable from the world; Crow becomes everything at once in a process of malevolent transcendentalism. Like human beings, Crow is constantly trying to make sense of himself and his place in the world. However, because of God’s incompetence, he is forced to create his own role, without any external guidance. Crow is torn between the intellectual desire to do good (although he does not understand exactly what good is or the implications of it) and sensual pleasure.

Ekbert Faas comments that

[in]stead of developing a parallel between present and past, the poem evokes a supratemporal world of global religious dimensions in which Western myths figure side by side with the Tibetan Buddhist Womb Door or an Eskimo Genesis. And far from giving order to the chaos of modern life, classical and Biblical myths for the most part appear as the very roots of this chaos. (99)

Crow’s inversion of the Judeo-Christian worldview implies that, as Faas points out, classical and Biblical myths have failed; they have not been able to provide human beings with the answers we need, with an explanation of who we are and why we exist. If these narratives have failed, then what else is there? Certainly the world of Crow provides one alternative. Eight years later, in
1979, with the publication of *Remains of Elmet*, Hughes explores another.

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*Remains of Elmet* (in which Hughes collaborated with the photographer Fay Godwin) is an exploration of the Calder Valley in Yorkshire, where Hughes spent the first seven years of his life. Although his personal ties to the area ensure that there is an autobiographical element in *Remains of Elmet*, those same ties do not necessarily ensure that the poetry will be confessional. Although *Remains of Elmet* is clearly a very personal book, its intimacy comes from a feeling of being immersed in Hughes’s physical environment, rather than from a knowledge of his mental and emotional state, as would be the case in purgative confessional poems.

This approach is not new for Hughes; he used it as far back as *Hawk in the Rain*. In “Wind” (*Hawk in the Rain* 40), Hughes’s speaker describes the destruction wreaked by a storm and the uncertainty that he and a companion feel as they sit in a house while the storm rages outside. The action of the poem centers on the power of the storm; the only human action in the poem takes place in the third stanza when the speaker goes outside and “scale[s] along the house-side as far as/the coal-house door” (9-10) to see what the storm has done. The wind is so strong that
it "dent[s his] eyeballs" and the next seven lines are devoted to a description of the landscape before Hughes takes his readers back inside the house where he and a companion sit "deep/In chairs, in front of the great fire, we grip/Our hearts and cannot entertain book, thought,//Or each other" (18-21). Although the speaker may be fearful in the storm, the tone of the poem seems more detached than it would in a confessional poem.

Instead of the pedagogical quality of many of the other poems in Hawk in the Rain, the speaker’s detachment here foreshadows the guide role he will embrace in Remains of Elmet. There is very little sense in this poem of the intellectual or emotional state of the speaker; the readers are not asked to participate in the poem. Rather, they function merely as adjuncts to the real purpose of the poem—to describe human beings’ alienation from nature.

The poems in Remains of Elmet are poems of alienation from nature too, but, in contrast to the destruction in "Wind," Hughes finds a redemptive quality in the Calder Valley’s collapse. In an essay entitled "Historical Landscape in Ted Hughes’s Remains of Elmet," Patricia Boyle Haberstroh points out that Hughes espouses "a cyclical view of history" (139), and she provides the following summary of the Calder Valley’s history:

Since it divided northern and southern Britain, [the kingdom of] Elmet [part of which was
located in the Calder Valley] blocked the unification of the invading Angles. Eventually, however, Edwin, exiled brother-in-law of the Northumbrian leader Aethelfrith, seized power after Aethelfrith’s death and began to bring together the confederation of lands which eventually became Anglo-Saxon England. Elmet, having long withstood the Northumbrian pressure, finally yielded when Edwin expelled the Celtic king Certic. Baptized at York in 627, Edwin became the first Christian king of Northumbria. (138)

Now that the modern day economy of the Calder Valley (the result of the “rationality” prized by the Christian mind [Haberstroh 140]) has collapsed, the valley is rediscovering its natural healthy state—a state in which the cyclical rhythms of the earth are prized, instead of the artificially imposed cycles of Christian culture and commerce. Again, Haberstroh explains:

The nature spirits, pre-eminent in the Celtic culture finally wiped out at Elmet, still lie deep in the English psyche and are beginning to reveal themselves as the valley wrestles free from the domination of the Christian mind. If the fall of Elmet cleared the way for the creation of Anglo-Saxon England and marked the end of Celtic influence, then the present collapse of the valley signals the end of that Christian culture that rose upon the ashes of Elmet. (138)

In his prose memoir “The Rock” (1964), Hughes describes the feeling of oppression he lived with throughout his childhood. He attributes this oppression to Scout’s Rock, the enormous rock which loomed over the valley where he grew up. While it is difficult to find in the poems an obvious event-based or documentary connection
to particular events in Hughes’s own life during these years, *Remains of Elmet* does seem to reflect a sense of calmness and reconciliation which was often absent in his earlier work.⁴

Fifteen years after “The Rock,” even though the land in *Remains of Elmet* is the same landscape, governed by the same rock, the land itself does not appear to affect Hughes in the same way. Instead of the land being the oppressing force, in *Remains of Elmet* the people who live on the land near Scout’s Rock are the oppressors. More accurately, it is the “Christian” rationality of the people which has oppressed the land. In light of this reversal, *Remains of Elmet* appears to take on an important characteristic of Protestant confession: it documents a new point of view—a conversion—on the part of the speaker. What Hughes illustrates in these poems is the result of his conversion.

In “Where the Mothers” (*Remains of Elmet* 10), Hughes draws the parameters of his conversion, setting the land resolutely against human emotion:

*Where the Mothers*

Gallop their souls

Where the howlings of heaven
Pour down onto earth
Looking for bodies
Of birds, animals, people

A happiness starts up, secret and wild,
Like a lark-song just out of hearing
Hidden in the wind

A silent and evil joy
Like a star-broken stone
Who knows nothing more can happen to it
In its cradle-grave.

Ultimately, the land will regenerate itself; its joy
must be "silent" and "secret" in the face of human
distress, but for Hughes, this happiness is only "evil"
according to the more "rational" Christian tradition which
supplanted the more instinctual earth-centered culture of
the Celts. The deaths implied in the first two stanzas
may be unfortunate, but they are the price which must be
paid for the greater good represented by the land’s
rebirth.

Hughes dedicates the book to his mother: “Poems in
Memory of Edith Farrar.” “Farrar” was her maiden name,
and it seems significant that he chose to use this name
instead of “Hughes.” Although it is unlikely that the
majority of readers would have known Edith Hughes’s maiden
name, “Farrar” does have historical significance with
which they might be familiar and which Hughes had
addressed earlier, in a poem from Hawk in the Rain. In
“The Martyrdom of Bishop Farrar” (Hawk in the Rain 58),
Hughes describes the Bishop’s being burned at the stake by
Bloody Mary’s troops at Carmarthen on 30 March 1555
(Foxe’s Book of Martyrs, online). As he was chained to
the stake, the Bishop told the watching populace: "If I flinch from the pain of the burning, believe not the doctrine I have preached" (qtd. in Hawk in the Rain 58).

The fact that Farrar, a Protestant, did not cry out in pain played a symbolic role in England’s ultimate decision to become a Protestant nation instead of a Catholic one, as Mary (a Roman Catholic) wanted it to be.

In addition, Edith Hughes’s maiden name seems to draw the reader back further into Ted Hughes’s personal history, to the time when the region was a vital and prosperous part of the British economy. The very first poem in the book sets the scene for what Hughes is about to do: set six years after his mother’s death, the poem describes his uncle’s memory of his sister Edith Farrar. These memories are not only the means by which Hughes’s uncle tries to reinvigorate himself, but they connect Hughes to a past he did not experience, yet one which he has nonetheless assimilated:

[His uncle] renews his prime exercising what happened,
As his body tries to renew its cells—

Air trapped in the larynx
To fly a dream, populated by glimpses—

He has brought me my last inheritance,
Archaeology of the mouth,
Treasures that crumble to the touch of day—

Any moment now, a last kick
And the river will fold it away.
(10-13; 18-20; 24-25)
This “last inheritance” becomes tangible only when he writes about it, and the poems he passes on here represent the means by which he can finally “own” his own past. The justification (in McConnell’s sense of the word) that Hughes is able to articulate here then becomes the means by which he “confesses” his own “conversion” to his readers.

Hughes’s uncle provides him with a mandate—to convert the intangible “archaeology of the mouth” into some sort of concrete entity that can then be passed on. In responding to his uncle’s mandate, Hughes will also be speaking for all the inhabitants of the valley. One dictionary defines “archaeology” as “the remains of a culture of a people” (Merriam Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary). The poems in Remains of Elmet represent two sets of “remains”: on the most obvious level these “remains” illustrate what is left after the collapse of the culture spawned by the Industrial Revolution. In a more abstract sense, they also illustrate how the land—all that remains of the kingdom of Elmet—is regenerating itself in the face of apparent destruction.

In some ways, this first (and untitled) poem is one of the most obviously personal and intimate poems in the book. Whereas almost all of the other poems focus on external change, this one illustrates the direct familial
and geographic connection that Hughes has with this region. Placed between the dedication and Hughes’s prose note on the economic history of the region—even before the Table of Contents—this poem functions for Hughes’s readers in the same way that his uncle’s conversation did for Hughes himself: a gateway into his personal experience of this place.

This first poem is the only one that focuses on Hughes’s inner psyche in this direct way. The others nearly all focus most directly on the physical landscape of the valley itself, not on Hughes’s individual emotional landscape. For example, “When Men Got To The Summit” (Remains of Elmet 56) describes a land that appears never to have been meant to permanently support human life—at least not in the way we perceive it in the late twentieth century. Even at the beginning of the poem, there is a premonition of what is to come. Instead of celebrating their arrival at the summit, men are quiet, waiting. Here as in nearly all of the rest of the poems in this book, humans are acted upon, rather than initiating action themselves: “Houses [come] to support them” (3) and “streets [bend] to the task/Of holding it all up” (7). The land is anthropomorphized until its infrastructure breaks down, the implication being that people expected the land to do what it was fundamentally incapable of
doing. Granted, the human power over the land nearly wins out, but even that flicker of power is illusory:

“Nevertheless, for some giddy moments/A television/Blinked from the wolf’s lookout” (13-14).

Not surprisingly for Hughes at least, the land reasserts itself. An obvious illustration is found in “First Mills” (Remains of Elmet 34), which is worth quoting in full for its physical description of the process by which the region is dying:

First, Mills

And steep wet cobbles
Then cenotaphs

First, football pitches crown greens
Then the bottomless wound of the railway station
That bled this valley to death.

A single, fatal wound. And the faces at windows
Whitened. Even the hair whitened.

Everything became very quiet.

The hills were commandeered
For graveyards.

The towns and villages were sacked.

Everything fell wetly to bits
In the memory
And along the sides of the streets.

Over this trench
A sky like an empty helmet
With a hole.

And now—two minutes’ silence in the childhood of earth.
Here again, the conflict is a more abstract one than would be found in purgative confessional poetry. The people who live in the region are most obviously in conflict with the land itself, and they have been outwardly defeated. On a more figurative level, however, Hughes presents his readers with the struggle between an industrial society and the demands of a more modern, information-based one. Hughes places the blame for the valley’s economic collapse directly on the trains “that bled this valley to death”; in the Calder Valley, as in any other place in a similar situation, people have left to pursue other opportunities and have not come back. Hughes himself is an example of this phenomenon. After joining the Royal Air Force at seventeen, he was educated at Cambridge. He never permanently returned to the area.

"Hill Walls" (Remains of Elmet 30) provides a further illustration of the process by which the region flowered and then died. Even though the poem emphasizes the apparent suddenness of the region’s demise, it also creates the context for its ultimate rebirth:

The great adventure had begun—
Even the grass agreed and came with them,
And crops and cattle—

No survivors.
Here is the hulk, every rib shattered.

A few crazed sheep
Pulling its weeds
On a shore of cloud. (9-17)
In the first three stanzas of the poem, the humans are passive; things happen to them, not because of them: "Splendours burst against its brow/Broke over its shoulders" (1-2). Significantly, the men are "exhilarated," yet they do not know why. The "adventure had begun," but it does not appear to have been begun by the people involved. Consequently, it is not surprising that the land wins out, destroying the men altogether.

Within the context of this poem (and of Remains of Elmet as a whole), those who respect the land's essential rhythms will survive. The culture—and the lives—of those who do not will be destroyed, as illustrated in "First, Mills" and again in "Hill Walls."

The implication in many of these poems is that because human beings were immoral in the conquest of the land (their "dream-fort" being "at the dead-end of a wrong direction" ["Top Withens"]), they were punished for their arrogance. In trying to force the land to conform to a human agenda instead of allowing it to conform to a natural one, human beings have incurred the wrath of nature. Consequently, it could be argued that what Hughes is "confessing" here—and in many other poems in Remains of Elmet—is the depravity which encouraged human beings to so overstep their limits in their relationship with the land in this place. This argument assumes Hughes's own

184
complicity (simply by virtue of being human) in the conquest of the land and remorse for that involvement would account for the zeal with which he celebrates the land's regeneration after its economic collapse.

This complicity, then, differentiates this account from autobiography. Even though the self-incrimination that Hughes implies here is in one sense in the abstract—Hughes is involved because he is a human being, not because he has made any sort of conscious decision to be involved—this type of involvement does not preclude the poems from being confessional. Confession is motivated by the confessant's need to rid himself of guilt or remorse for a wrong he has committed, as Hughes is motivated here. Autobiography, on the other hand, is not required to acknowledge those feelings.

Even though Hughes's personal involvement in the wrong he is confessing implies that his confession is a purgative one, there is no clearly defined audience, as a purgative confession requires. However, I would suggest that what Hughes is really doing in these poems is using the lessons he has learned from human beings' misguidedness as a means of edifying and converting his reader/confessor; he is following the process of Protestant (non-purgative) confession.
For Hughes, the land's rebirth, instead of oppressing human beings further, is tantamount to eventual freedom. In "The Trance of Light" (Remains of Elmet 20), he is nearly ecstatic in his illustration of what he sees as the human potential hidden in the "collapse" of the land:

   The upturned face of this land
   The mad singing in the hills
   The prophetic mouth of the rain

That fell asleep

Under migraine of headscarves and clatter

Of clog-irons and looms
And gutter-water and biblical texts

Stretches awake, out of Revelations
And returns to itself.

Chapels, chimneys vanish in the brightening

And the hills walk out on the hills
The rain talks to its gods
The light, opening younger, fresher wings
Holds this land up like an offering

Heavy with the dreams of a people.

Significantly, what is revealed in Hughes's "revelation" is not the death, destruction, and judgment described in the Christian Book of Revelation. In order for Christians to experience the renewal and rebirth that Revelation promises, they must subscribe to and live out a strictly Christian version of reality. Instead, according to Hughes, economic collapse has allowed the Calder Valley to experience renewal and rebirth. Consequently, the region can now rediscover its true self—the self which had been
hidden for so long under the “migraine” of economics and religion. As a result, human potential is now virtually limitless.

The individual hierarchies of power which are central to purgative confessional poetry do not exist in this book, but power issues do exist on an economic level. The entire region has been subservient to industry for so long that now that the industry is gone, the economic validity of the valley is withering away. In a wider context, however, what is happening to the region now is simply another version of what happened to the kingdom of Elmet when the Angles conquered it. Stripped of their culture by the invaders, the people of Elmet were left to manage as well as they could until they had all died or were assimilated into the Christian culture of Anglo-Saxon England. The difference this time, according to Hughes, is that this process is a natural one, entirely in keeping with the cycles of nature and history.

Here and in Remains of Elmet as a whole, even though Hughes appears to recognize his indirect complicity in the region’s demise, this concern is not addressed directly enough to make Remains of Elmet a truly “confessional” book in a purgative sense, yet his exultation in describing the land’s rebirth does imply that Remains of Elmet is, in fact, a conversion. In following Hughes
through his conversion process, we as readers share his integration of McConnell’s heart- and head-knowledge.

* * * * *

Nine months before his death in October 1998, Ted Hughes published *Birthday Letters*, a group of 88 poems addressed to his late wife Sylvia Plath. Almost immediately—in the United States at least—critics reviewed the book within the context of the controversy surrounding the end of Hughes’s marriage to Plath and her eventual suicide. Reviewing the book for the *New York Times* only days after its release, Katha Pollitt states:

What is undeniably true is that *Birthday Letters* presents itself as an unambiguous rebuke to those who saw Sylvia Plath as Ted Hughes’s victim. Here, we are to believe, is The Truth About Sylvia, which can be summarized as: she was beautiful, brilliant, violent, crazy, doomed; I loved her, I did my best to make her happy, but she was obsessed with her dead father, and it killed her.

Pollitt’s comment raises several important issues about the book as a whole: first, what is its relationship to the actual events it purports to describe? Does it—and should it—as Sarah Lyall asks in the *New York Times*—provide answers to critics’ curiosity about Hughes’s early life? Is he in fact obligated to “tell his story”? While one can argue that “telling one’s story” is exactly what any potentially “confessional” poet is doing, the issue here is further reaching than that. Does the poet
owe it to his readers to satisfy their lust—whether real or imagined—for the gory details of exactly, literally, what he thought and felt at any given time?

"I hope each of us owns the facts of her or his own life," Ted Hughes commented in a particularly vitriolic exchange in the editorial pages of both the Guardian and The Independent newspapers. His comment was in response to criticism of his editorial and personal control of the Plath estate, and implicit in that criticism was a challenge to the way he negotiated the line between his editorial relationship to Plath’s work and the potential effect of their marriage on his ability to edit her work. Since Plath had died without a will, control over her work automatically passed to Hughes, as her husband and next-of-kin. Even though the two were separated at the time of her death, it is not unreasonable to assume that their relationship may have influenced his decisions.

The conflict between the professional and the personal creates the context for much of the controversy that still surrounds Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes even now, thirty-seven years after her death. It also forms the backdrop for a potentially “confessional” reading of Birthday Letters. That Ted Hughes, after refusing for thirty-five years to speak publicly on his life with Sylvia Plath, should have chosen to publish these poems
has widely been interpreted as his response to the controversy which has followed him throughout his life. While that argument undoubtedly carries some validity, it also raises some fundamental questions about confession.\(^5\) Hughes’s wish to “own” the facts of his life echoes McConnell’s view of confession as a justification, of coming to own one’s past, and it does provide a convenient framework within which to read Birthday Letters, as well as from which to ask what may be the most important question: are these poems ultimately confessional?

Often, Birthday Letters does come close to being confessional in a purgative sense, but it is not for two reasons: apart from the fact that guilt is not foregrounded, there is no clearly defined power relationship in the conventional sense. Since Plath—the poems’ addressee—is dead, she is no longer in a position to judge Hughes’s revelations. However, because of the controversy surrounding her life and work, it is to be expected that Hughes’s responses to the conflict will be judged by her readers and—to a lesser extent—his own. Consequently, a power dynamic does exist most importantly between Hughes and the reader, in contrast to the relationship between Hughes and his addressee that would be central to a purgative confessional poem. In Birthday Letters, the reader often functions as an internal
listener whose presence matters to the speaker because his/her response could affect the speaker in some way. In short, the reader acts as a sort of silent confessor, and, when the reader assumes that position, these poems appear to be potentially more confessional than anything that Plath (often regarded as a confessional poet) wrote.

Hughes’s relationship with his readers is complex and complicated throughout Birthday Letters. Here, the reader is forced to become an active participant in the poems themselves—not merely reading them, but also being forced to admit complicity in the circumstances which created them. Although Hughes is not often a confessional poet in the purgative sense, he sometimes inverts the confessional process, subtly coercing his readers to acknowledge their own complicity in the situations he explores.

Crucial to a purgative confessional poem is a sense of responsibility on the part of the speaking voice—the idea that the confessant bears the blame for the unhappiness he has caused. Although many of Hughes’s poems in Birthday Letters do focus on unhappiness—a situation that Hughes accepts—he very rarely takes responsibility for having consciously caused it.

The most common way that Hughes negotiates this conflict between acceptance and responsibility is illustrated in “The Shot” (Birthday Letters 16). Here,
Hughes relates a potentially incriminating story, but there is no shame or self-judgment, as there would be in a purgative confessional poem. In "The Shot" Hughes explores Plath’s need to worship something or someone, as well as the implications of his own inability to understand that need. As Hughes sees it, Plath’s need resulted from her attempts to please her father, even after his death: “Your Daddy had been aiming you at God/When his death touched the trigger” (7-8), and was further twisted by Plath’s unconscious insistence on confusing Hughes with Otto Plath. Hughes describes his own role this way:

. . . For a long time
Vague as mist, I did not even know
I had been hit.
Or that you had gone clean through me—
To bury yourself in the heart of the god.

In my position, the right witch doctor
Might have caught you in flight with his bare hands,
Tossed you, cooling, one hand to the other,
Godless, happy, quieted.
I managed
A wisp of your hair, your ring, your watch, your nightgown. (“The Shot” 34-43)

It is possible to read the end of this poem confessionally in the sense that Hughes clearly feels that he did not fulfill his responsibility to “save” Plath, yet he did not understand the true implications of her inability to cope successfully with the death of her father, Otto Plath. The truth was that Hughes was not
ignoring danger signs; he may have misinterpreted the situation, but he does not appear to believe that he willfully contributed to Plath's distress. If this poem were wholly confessional in the purgative sense, guilt would be the most important motivation behind it. Also, there would be a much stronger sense that he had not done enough—that there was more he could have done and didn't.

He does question—briefly—whether or not he was the most helpful person for Plath at that time ("In my position, the right witchdoctor/might have caught you in flight with his bare hands"), but it seems to me that he is realizing, in retrospect, that a psychiatrist would have been more able to help Plath than he was. He does not appear to be questioning the state of their marriage. Even now, years later, he realizes that he does not fully understand what was happening. The solidity of his tangible mementos of Plath's life mocks his inability to provide the intellectual and emotional intangibles which Plath needed to survive.

Here, as in the majority of the poems in Birthday Letters, Hughes appears to accept the circumstances in which he finds himself. However, an important distinction between this poem and a purgative confessional poem is that, in Hughes's situation, instead of having created these circumstances, he has been forced to react to them.
In a purgative confessional poem, the speaking voice is active and focused on the effects his actions have on others. Here, Hughes focuses instead on how circumstances affect him. It seems to me that in a truly purgative confessional poem, there would be a much clearer implication on Hughes's part that he should have seen that Plath was conflating him with her father. Instead of the simple acceptance found here, a purgative confessional poem might contain a sense of Hughes's anger at his own obtuseness or guilt over his misinterpretation. There is a clear sense throughout the book that, had Hughes known at the time what he knows now, things might have been different. Even though *Birthday Letters* is not a purgative book, hindsight does contribute to its more purgative confessional aspects because it allows time for the self-analysis which is necessary for confessional poetry.

"The Blue Flannel Suit" (*Birthday Letters* 67-68) is a good example of this analytic process. Again looking at one instance in the past from the vantage point of the present, he continually underscores the understanding he has gained since that time:

I saw what gripped you, as you sipped,  
Were terrors that had killed you once already.  
Now, I see, I saw, the lonely  
Girl who was going to die.  
That blue suit,  
A mad, execution uniform,
Survived your sentence. But then, I sat,
stilled,
Unable to fathom what stilled you
As I looked at you, as I am stilled
Permanently now, permanently
Bending so briefly at your open coffin. (29-37)

Again, it might be possible to read the end of this poem confessionally, in that it does follow certain tenets of confessionalism: it is clearly addressed to a specific audience—Plath, in this case; it is intimate and personal, bringing its readers inside the psyche of the narrator at one specific moment, and the speaking voice in the poem is Hughes himself, not a persona. However, this poem, like nearly all the others in Birthday Letters, is kept from being a truly purgative confessional poem by its lack of any sort of confessional hierarchy between the speaker and the addressee, as well as by an absence of guilt on Hughes’s part. I think he does feel remorse—and perhaps even some guilt about his misperception, but he does not appear to believe that he caused Plath’s terror and self-doubt. Consequently, the remorse he feels is directed at circumstances, not at a belief in his conscious involvement.

Even though Hughes is addressing Plath, he does not expect her to react to what he says. The poems are more often characterized by a need to come to terms not only with Plath’s death, but the effect on himself of her struggle with the memory of her father. This conflict is
echoed in “Suttee” (Birthday Letters 147-49), in which Hughes explores his own contribution to the process by which Plath reformulated her identity after her 1953 suicide attempt: “In the myth of your first death our deity/Was yourself resurrected./Yourself reborn. The holy one” (1-3). Not only does he participate fully in her attempts to forge this new identity, but once it is formed he shares possession of it.

Acting as “midwife,” Hughes calms her fears, hypnotizing her to sleep, but ultimately, he too is effaced by their co-production. He refers to nearly everything in the poem as “ours”: “our deity,” “our hope,” “our unborn,” and, ultimately, “our newborn,” even though it is not until later that he realizes that both their individual selves were subsumed by the force behind Plath’s “new self.” This “new self” was something they could not control, and it governed their lives to such an extent that it—not Hughes and Plath--appeared to decide what roles they were destined to play. The power of their achievement, their “new birth” changes Hughes’s role from that of co-author to victim; the “birth” is described through images of absorption and drowning:

Night after night, weeks, months, years I bowed there, as if over a page, Coaxing it to happen, Laying my ear to our unborn and its heartbeat, Assuaging your fears. Massaging Your cramps into sleep with hypnosis
And whispering to the start
That would soon fall into our straw—
Till suddenly the waters
Broke and I was dissolved.
Much as I protested and resisted
I was engulfed
In a flood, a dam burst thunder
Of new myth. (32-45)

Here, as in "Incompatibilities" (1957), "Lovesong," and "The Lovepet" (both 1970), the intensity of the couple’s emotions allows their "love" to become an all-consuming jealous entity which malevolently takes over their entire lives, annihilating their individual identities. This shift from co-author to victim is a central reason that "Suttee," in spite of Hughes’s apparent belief in his own complicity, cannot be a purgative confessional poem. The necessary guilt does not exist. Certainly a victim might feel guilt, but Hughes’s guilt in this poem does not carry with it any sense of shame or self-judgment. Acknowledging one’s complicity does not by itself ensure that he feels guilt or remorse, and both are necessary to a purgative confessional poem. Rather, there is a sense of resentment at being duped, that he, along with Plath, was forced to play a role that he had no conscious intention or desire to assume:

Our newborn
Was your own self in flames.

...I could not escape the torching gusher.
You were a child bride
On a pyre.

...
And I was your husband
Performing the part of your father
In our new myth— (59-60; 68-70; 74-76)

In light of Plath’s death and the publication of the Ariel poems, it seems logical to argue that this “newborn” represents the “self” which Hughes believed allowed Plath to write the Ariel poems in the last few months of her life. Interestingly, when one reads this poem through the lens of biographical facts, Hughes himself becomes as much a victim of Plath’s “rebirth” as she was herself—perhaps even more so, for he had to negotiate the after-effects of it after her physical death. Now, much later, he realizes that their personal relationship had been engulfed by this new “self”—a self which was inextricably bound up in her poetry. Even more draining for Hughes, however, has been his ultimate role as a sort of critical gatekeeper: after Plath’s death, not only did her physical death fundamentally change Hughes’s personal life, but as her next-of-kin, he was thrust into the professional role of literary executor and editor as well, an all-consuming process:

Both of us consumed
By the old child in the new myth—
Not the new babe of light but the old
Babe of dark flames and screams
That sucked the oxygen out of both of us.
(79-83)

The end of this poem addresses a central issue which became important to Plath’s posthumous critical reception.
In spite of the fact that her poetry allowed her to be "reborn" in a professional sense, the emotional implications of her new identity overwhelmed Hughes, as he attempted to fulfill his role in the process. In spite of the emotional energy that Hughes has devoted to the maintenance of Plath's "new myth," he cannot change the fact that he was unable to help her solve her emotional problems. More importantly for Hughes even now, thirty-five years later, Hughes himself is still struggling with the fallout from those issues, both in the poems and in his public relationship with Plath's readers. Finally, it is those same issues which create the context for Plath's work ("the old child in the new myth")—as opposed to the poems themselves—overwhelmed them both. Her newly discovered confidence as a poet was ultimately engulfed by her outward identity as "sick person." Because she died by her own hand, these two identities—poet and patient—are irrevocably linked, and the resentment Hughes appears to feel in this poem foreshadows an important theme of other poems in *Birthday Letters.*

"The Dogs Are Eating Your Mother" (*Birthday Letters* 195) is an interesting example of a poem which does not specifically ask its audience to react to it, but that desire is strongly implied. Instead of being asked to react to Hughes's confession of a wrong in which he was
involved himself, here the readers are being asked to defend themselves against Hughes’s feelings of victimization. Instead of acting as the confessor for Hughes’s speaking voice in the poem, they are forced to make an involuntary confession to him—or at least acknowledge the need for one. In essence, Hughes has inverted the confessional process by having himself as the victim (confessor) initiate the confessional process. In this sense, the poem is comparable to a legal confession, in that the confessant must respond to charges made against him by someone else. Hughes further confuses the confessional process by not addressing his readers directly.

Like a purgative confessional poem, “The Dogs Are Eating Your Mother” has a clearly defined audience. The nominal audience consists of Plath’s children, to whom the poem is addressed and to whom Birthday Letters is dedicated, while the specific readers Hughes wants to target are the Plath scholars and critics that he feels have victimized not only him and his children, but Plath as well.

The poem itself is a sort of diatribe against the critical and scholarly furor that has grown up around Plath’s life and work, and it is permeated with images of
bloodthirsty, vindictive animals, waiting to destroy
whatever Hughes has managed to salvage:

Now see who
Will drop on all fours at the end of the street
And come romping toward your mother,
Pulling her remains with their lips
Lifted like dogs' lips
Into new positions. (8-13)

Then, unwilling to stop at destroying Plath alone, the
"dogs" reach for her family as well:

Protect her,
And they will tear you down
As if you were more her.
They will find you every bit
As succulent as she is. Too late
To salvage what she was. (13-18)

In light of the vicious rhetoric employed by many of
Hughes's critics, not only with regard to his marriage to
Sylvia Plath, but also concerning his handling of her
estate, it is perhaps understandable that he should feel
victimized. However, the fact that Hughes has cast
himself as a victim in this poem precludes it being read
as a purgative confessional poem. He appears to see
himself as a wronged person, one to whom a confession must
be directed. Further, the power inherent in his role as
"confessor" in the confessional transaction effectively
eliminates guilt or shame as a motivation behind his
words. Instead, Hughes appears to be seeking retribution
through his role as confessor.
1 Prior to its inclusion in *Hawk in the Rain*, this poem had appeared in *London Magazine*.

2 His hopes—for critical acclaim, in any case—were at least partially realized when *Hawk in the Rain* won the First Publication Award from the Poetry Center of the Young Men’s and Young Women’s Hebrew Association in conjunction with Harper Brothers Publishers in 1957.

3 See Chapter One for a thorough discussion of this term.

4 Admittedly, Reverend Lumb is ultimately redeemed in *Gaudete* (1977), but not before he is thrust into the underworld. While the “real” Reverend Lumb is in the underworld, his double is wreaking havoc on earth, copulating with all the women in town, hoping to produce a Savior. Much like the water droplet in “A Man Seeking Experience Enquires His Way of a Drop of Water,” Lumb’s double embraces the physical experience, but in his case it is at the cost of all moral and emotional balance. Leonard Scigaj summarizes Lumb’s redemption:

Through significant suffering Lumb transforms the libidinal energy that his Double released into an expansive “great theatre” of the imaginative life— for future guidance, self-realization, and personality growth. Lumb’s central narrative was therapeutic in the Jungian sense: it healed him as he interpreted its significance, and the act of interpretation raised his self-knowledge. (204)

5 For purposes of this project, I want to clearly establish as the writer that I have no stake in—nor do I have any opinion about—who may have done what to whom. Jacqueline Rose refers to the “logic of blame which seems to attach itself so relentlessly to the story of Sylvia Plath” (68), and it seems to me that it is this “logic of blame” which also encourages that *Birthday Letters* be read within the context of confession.

6 See Chapter Three for a discussion of Hughes’s description of this process in his introduction to Plath’s published journals.

7 See Chapter Three for a thorough discussion of the way that these two identities were conflated and of how the conflation affected critical response to Plath’s work.
It has been argued, most prominently by Marjorie Perloff ("The Two Ariels: The (Re-)making of the Sylvia Plath Canon") and Jacqueline Rose, in *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath* (1991) that Hughes's editorial decisions about the publication of Plath's work have contributed to this perception. Janet Malcolm, in *The Silent Woman: Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes* (1993) addresses these issues within the context of biography. However, analysis of Hughes's decisions is outside the scope of this project.
Chapter Five

Shedding New Light on the "central meanings": Confession, Transformative Remembering, and the Poetry of Sharon Olds

In light of conflicting interpretations of confessional poetry, Sharon Olds’s work seems a particularly appropriate choice with which to end this study. Olds herself rejects the "confessional" label, preferring to call her work "[a]pparently personal because how do we really know? We don’t" (Blossom 30). Her refusal to call herself a confessional poet once again raises the specters of definition and terminology. Have critics come any closer to reaching a definition of confessional poetry, even now, forty-one years after the publication of Life Studies (1959)? And is such a definition even necessary any longer?

In Midcentury Quartet: Bishop, Lowell, Jarrell, Berryman, and the Making of a Postmodern Aesthetic (2000), Thomas Travisano argues that one crucial reason that the terms of confession were so readily adopted by academic readers and critics was that such terminology offered a cogent set of criteria by which to define and discuss poetry, that “it offered a humanly compelling and rather clear-cut way of evaluating poetry” (31). Following this line of thought, then, it is possible to make the case that the terminology of confession did for the poetry of the 1960s until the present what books like William Empson’s
Seven Types of Ambiguity (1930), Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren’s Understanding Poetry (1938), John Crowe Ransom’s The New Criticism (1941), and Cleanth Brooks’s The Well-Wrought Urn (1947) did for analyzing poetry in general. As we have seen in this study, by providing a schema with which to assess the work of poets such as Lowell, Plath, Sexton, Snodgrass, and Hughes, the terminology of confession may have unintentionally encouraged critics to embrace a false sense of security resulting from a misplaced faith in the permanence of concrete criteria. One of the central themes that Travisano’s book addresses is the implications of this faith in categorization.

Less directly, but equally relevant to confessional poetry—and to the work of Sharon Olds in particular—psychologist Janice Haaken’s “transformative remembering” illustrates the ease with which it is still possible to be seduced by the lure of seemingly clear-cut terminology. Since “transformative remembering” can be applied to Olds’s work almost as easily as can the terminology of confession, the equal applicability of these terms once again underscores the potential elusiveness of any sort of critical terminology.

In one of the central stories told through all six of Olds’s books, the speaker is looking back not only on
sexual and emotional abuse inflicted by her alcoholic father and grandfather, but on abuse committed sometimes by her mother and sister as well. This abuse takes many forms, from a sort of benign neglect as described in some of the poems from *The Dead and the Living* (1983)\(^1\), to outright violence\(^2\), but most often Olds focuses on the ways that her father’s alcoholism and abuse affected the rest of the family. Most commonly, the speaker’s mother is either powerless to stop the abuse, or alternatively, she refuses to stop it. For example, “The Forms” (*The Dead and the Living* 35) is one of several poems in which Olds explores the effect that her father’s abuse had on her mother and, consequently, on her own relationship with her mother. Here, the speaker attempts to justify her mother’s abuse by blaming it on her father as well:

> In disaster, an animal mother, she would have died for us,

> but in life as it was she had to put herself first. She had to do whatever he told her to do to the children, she had to protect herself. (13-20)

Ultimately, in “The Meal” (*Gold Cell* 27), the speaker’s mother finds an opportunity to make a sacrifice for her children by denying her desire to commit suicide. “An orphan forty years old staring at the breast,/a freshly divorced woman down to 82 pounds” (14-15), the speaker’s
mother forces herself to eat—presumably so that she will
not die and leave her children in their father’s hands.
Most significant for the speaker, however, is the almost
physical pleasure with which her mother embraces her
martyrdom:

yet what I remember is your
spoon moving like the cock moving in the
body of the girl waking to the power of her
pleasure,
your spoon rising in courage, bite after bite, you
tilted rigid over that plate until you
polished it for my life. (25-30)

While the issues surrounding the abuse do not change
substantially throughout the six books, the speaker’s
relationship to them does. Over the course of Olds’s
career, it is possible to chart the speaker’s progress
towards a revised form of self-knowledge. In the early
work, she often sees herself as a victim, allowing her
self-perception to be determined by external factors, a
process which parallels the Protestant confessional
practice of ceding authorship of one’s identity to God.
However, in Olds’s later work the speaker has learned to
internalize the factors which determine her view of
herself.

Like Ted Hughes, the speaker moves from fulfilling the
confessant role almost exclusively to assuming the role of
her own confessor as well. The process by which the
speaker achieves this shift—Janice Haaken’s “transformative
remembering"—allows us to see exactly how Olds's speaker transforms herself from the more traditionally "confessional" voice of the early work to the more knowledgeable and more forgiving voice which predominates in the later work. Such a process is analogous to the one by which a confessant moves from being dependent on his confessor's perception of his identity to formulating his own view of himself.1

To interpret the stories told by survivors of childhood abuse, Haaken focuses on one particular type of curative remembering process that she calls "transformative remembering." She defines transformative remembering as follows: "the recollection of an event which serves as a marker from an earlier to a later form of self-knowledge. Transformative remembering refers to event schema that have superordinate explanatory power, serving as phenomenological anchors in autobiographical recall" (14). Like confession, transformative remembering allows the person who is doing the remembering to formulate a means of responding to events which will allow her to explain (more satisfactorily than with other methods of remembering) the autobiographical significance of the events in question.

In this sense, transformative remembering parallels the confessional process in that it serves as a means by which the person remembering will formulate a new ability
to use this knowledge as empowerment. In the case of Olds’s speaker, even if she is not ultimately able to forgive her abusers, she will learn to revise the way that she relates to the past, and she may reassess her own part in it.

While the quest for self-knowledge inherent in transformative remembering may make transformative remembering appear similar to confession, the ways that the two processes help speakers achieve self-knowledge are very different. In a confessional transaction, the confessant’s self-perception is validated externally by the confessor; the central goal of transformative remembering, on the other hand, is for the person doing the remembering to internalize this validation, to do it on his/her own. The auto-validation inherent in transformative remembering will allow the speaker to independently confirm and accept the validity of her own self-perception.

In Olds’s case, one way that her speaker attempts to reconsider the past and validate her own knowledge is through solidarity with other victims. However, this solidarity does not come immediately. The very first lines of “The Victims” (The Dead and the Living 34) proclaim the speaker’s joy at her father’s downfall:

When Mother divorced you, we were glad. She took it and took it, in silence, all those years and then kicked you out, suddenly, and her

209
kids loved it. (1-4)

Her joy is tempered, however, by the realization later in the poem that her father too was a victim, albeit a pawn of different forces than she was:

Now I
pass the bums in the doorways, the white slugs of their bodies gleaming through the slits in their suits of compressed silt, the stained flippers of their hands, the underwater fire of their eyes, and I wonder who took it and took it from them in silence until they had given it all away and had nothing left but this. (17-26)

The speaker doesn’t feel powerless now; instead she feels empathetic—at least to an extent—because her father is now almost as powerless as he made his children feel. Power, empathy, and—significantly—sympathy are intertwined here, I think, although I would suggest that the confidence she feels does not come from her revenge on her father. Her power is not a vindictive one; rather, it comes from the solidarity she feels with the victims of the other “bums”—people who had been made to feel as powerless as she had been, but by different oppressors. Their oppressors are those who are now in the same position as her father is.

Ultimately, her child-like joy at her father’s downfall is subsumed by not only her newfound solidarity with the other victims, but by sympathy for her father. By the end of the poem, her father is a diminished figure, although he has not gone down willingly—he is a “[ship]
with the [lantern] lit”—and the speaker appears to feel almost sorry for him, since he had “given it all away and had nothing left but this.” It seems to me that the distance she has achieved through adulthood allows her to realize that perhaps her father believed that abuse and anger were all he had to give to his family.

The progression that the speaker follows towards empowerment is an example of transformative remembering. The first step is her childish joy when the overt symbols of her father’s power are taken away from him: his status as head of household (the speaker emphasizes almost gleefully that it was her mother, the less powerful of the two, who initiated the divorce), his job, and his office—complete with secretaries, office supplies, and liquid lunches (“your lunches with three double bourbons” [10]).

Next, the speaker becomes reflective, wondering what her father will lose next. However, she is uncomfortable consciously claiming her feelings as her own; she is careful to emphasize that she had been taught by her mother to hate her father. Placing the blame for her feelings on her mother allows her to own her feelings and justify her anger at her father, but what it does not do is allow her to take responsibility for directing her anger in a constructive way, nor does it empower her to move beyond it. By the end of the poem, however, she feels sorry for
her father as she compares him to the bums on the street. The sense of her own superiority contained in this power—and consequently, her ability to sympathize with him—comes from the knowledge that it was her father’s own choices which led to his reduced circumstances.

It is important to note, Haaken points out, that the use of the verb “remembering” instead of the noun “memory” foregrounds the action of actually recalling, rather than the results of the process, as the noun would. This distinction is important to a discussion of confessional poetry for two reasons: first, it provides a context within which to discuss motivation—i.e., why remember? Why “confess”? Second and more importantly, using the verb shifts the emphasis away from a documentary or event-based “truth” of the memory or the poem, focusing instead on the speaker’s perceived experience of the events being recalled, regardless of whether the memories occur in a poem or in a therapist’s office.

On the first page of Pillar of Salt: Gender, Memory, and the Perils of Looking Back (1998), the psychologist Janice Haaken makes two statements which seem to me directly applicable to “confessional poetry”—and in particular to confessional poetry written by women. First, Haaken states that “[f]or women, the act of remembering—of looking back—can feel transgressive, even sinful” (1).
Having situated her book within the context of the controversy surrounding the truth of "recovered memories" of childhood sexual abuse, Haaken states that she is more deeply concerned with the "ambiguities in meaning . . . how the story is being told, and . . . who is doing the telling" (7) rather than with whether or not the stories told by survivors are "true" in a literal sense. She explains the specific workings of transformative remembering as follows:

New understanding is attached to a previously remembered experience in such a way that it may feel like a new memory. Other forms of transformative remembering take on the character of a conversion experience, with the subjective sense of a radical disjuncture between prior and present knowledge of one's personal history. Phenomenologically, this new memory feels like the forceful return of prior knowledge—like a bolt of lightning. It is as though the "truth" were there all along, hidden behind a screen or disguise, breaking through into consciousness with the forcefulness of its immanent power. (15)

For survivors of sexual abuse, this newly discovered truth or "bolt of lightning" most often takes the form of previously unrealized memories of childhood abuse—a past which they have either wanted to deny or ignore. In contrast, for Olds's speaker, transformative remembering often encourages her to discover a more positive truth—i.e., that it is possible to reach a more realistic understanding of the motivations behind her father's abuse.
even if it is still impossible to put her past completely behind her and to forgive him entirely.

For example, in "The Present Moment" (The Father 20), the speaker details the way her perception of her father changes in light of his approaching death. As his illness becomes more and more pervasive, her perception of him changes. No longer governed by what her father did—either for himself or to her—she blocks out the concrete traits which determined her perception of his identity in favor of a more nebulous, less easily described interpretation:

now that he just lies there
looking at the wall, I forget the one
who sat up and put on his reading glasses
.
.
Once he entered the hospital
I forgot the man who lay full length
on the couch, with the blanket folded around him,
.
.
and I have
long forgotten the man who ate food—
.
.
It's as if I abandoned that ruddy man
with the swollen puckered mouth of a sweet-eater
.
.
I have
left behind forever that young man my father
.
.
and my father long before I knew him (2-4; 6-8; 9-10; 14-15; 17-18)

She no longer allows herself to remember his actions; instead, by the end of the poem she perceives him only as a distant body, strictly on a physical plane:

I stay beside him, like someone in a rowboat
staying abreast of a Channel swimmer,
you are not allowed to touch them, their limbs
glow, faintly, in the night water. (27-30)
Because the verifiable, documentary "truth" of the poem (if, in fact, it can be determined at all) is irrelevant in comparison to the way in which such "truth" is communicated, Haaken's interpretive process seems directly parallel to that of reading a confessional poem. Transformative remembering seems especially relevant to the poetry of Sharon Olds because its emphasis on internal change is directly parallel to the way that Olds's emphasis shifts throughout her work from the speaker's anger being directed at her father to exploring the impact of forgiveness on her own self-perception. In the process, the speaker does not forget the past, and she does not absolve her father of his part in it, but she does begin to justify and to find a way to explain his actions.

In some of the later poems, Olds's speaker is emotionally able to move past her father's abuse and begin to see him as a severely flawed man rather than a monster. What she realizes is that her father, in spite of his abusive actions, is nonetheless a man who is motivated by distinctly human desires: love for his children, a desire to assert his own uniqueness, and a love for power. In "Waste Sonata" (The Father 76), the speaker says, "My father was not a shit. He was a man/failing at life" (39-40). With this new knowledge of her father's motivations, then, comes a broader view of herself: instead of seeing
herself merely as her father’s victim, she begins to understand the broader and more impersonal, almost tangential role that she played in the story of her own abuse.

The abuse of her childhood was not, she ultimately realizes, a personal vendetta against her; rather, as her father’s daughter she was a ready-made victim for his frustration and his need to assert his power over someone weaker than himself, regardless of who that person might have been. The speaker cannot truly understand that fact until after her father has died, but she does attempt to understand her father’s actions in “San Francisco” (The Gold Cell 29). Here, the speaker describes the terror she felt when her father would force the car to climb hills that were too steep for it; she isn’t sure why he does something that scares everyone so much, but she speculates that he may have wanted to assert power over his wife: “I do not/remember my mother, but she was there,/this may have been for her” (21-23). It is Olds’s speaker, however, who is so terrified that she cannot control herself:

in that silence between gears
I would break, weeping and peeing, the fluids
of my
body bursting out like people from the
windows of a burning high-rise. (26-29)

The lack of control she feels is ultimately a metaphor for the way she justifies her father’s action at the end of

216
the poem: realizing that both she and her father were victims of forces they could not control, she consciously chooses to take control of her experience by accepting what she perceives as a solidarity, a sort of shared victimhood with her father:

We’d climb out, my knees shaking and I stank, to look at the world spread out at our feet as if we owned it, as if we had power over our lives, as if my father had control over himself or I of my fate-- (36-41)

While this sense of victimhood allows her to take steps towards coming to terms with her father’s actions, it does not yet allow her to formulate a truly viable perception of her own role. Even in light of her new understanding of her father’s lack of control, she cannot yet believe that the abuse she suffered was not her fault.

Although her position as the victim would seem to imply that the speaker should assume the more powerful role of the confessor, the social, cultural, and emotional implications of making her experience public ensure that she is placed in the more submissive position of the confessant. In sharing her experience with her readers, Olds’s speaker runs a dual risk, risking not only her readers’ judgment, but also the possibility that they might reject her. Haaken points out that: “[a]s both a treacherous and a liberatory activity, confronting the personal past involves reconciling competing allegiances
and conflicting desires. To do so often invokes the violation of familial and cultural taboos” (1).

In the poems, Olds's speaker often flaunts two very important cultural and familial taboos: the taboo which prevents discussion of family problems outside the family, for example, and the even more firmly entrenched cultural injunction against speaking (or writing) against the dead. Haaken's comment seems directly relevant to the poetry of Sharon Olds because a central tension in Olds's work appears to be this dual sense of transgression as well as liberation. As she discovers ways first to articulate her past and then, through that articulation, ways to free herself from it, the speaker becomes cognizant that the abuses and violations of the past no longer need govern her relationship to it.

Remembering—and articulating—in any sense of the word begs the question of truth: is there, in fact, one "objective" truth or correct interpretation of a given event? Dr. Donald Spence, writing from the context of specifically Freudian analysis, posits two different types of truth—"narrative truth" and "historical truth." He defines narrative truth as "the criteria [psychoanalysts] use to decide when a certain experience has been captured to our satisfaction; it depends on continuity and closure and the extent to which the fit of the pieces takes on
aesthetic finality” (31). In this view, narrative truth appears to be roughly comparable to the idea of event-based or documentary confession in its focus on the ultimate result of the process of articulating one’s experience. It can also be compared to a literary plot, with the caveat that a plot does not necessarily carry with it any expectation of “truth.” Narrative truth also privileges the psychoanalyst’s interpretation of events. He is automatically the more powerful party in the transaction, as it is he who decides when “narrative truth” has been achieved. In this situation, the analyst fulfills his role in a similar way to that of a medieval Catholic confessor; he questions and probes until he is satisfied that the truth has been reached.5

Historical truth, on the other hand, focuses on the process by which this “truth” is formulated or discovered: “The focus is on the act of remembering, which, when properly carried out, will give [psychoanalysts] an accurate transcription of ‘things past.’ In his attempt to perform this task, the narrator functions like a historian” (Spence 31). Both narrative and historical truth assume the existence of some sort of “objective” truth, the idea that one correct interpretation of events does exist and can be discovered if the correct process is followed. In contrast, transformative remembering focuses almost
entirely not only on the process of remembering, but also on the contexts and background assumptions which produce that particular remembering process in that particular person. This distinction is especially important to a discussion of confessional poetry because neither the poet nor the reader approaches the poem with the same expectation of a single, concrete interpretation of events that the client and therapist might expect to find in a clinical encounter.

While the quest for self-knowledge inherent in transformative remembering may make it appear similar to confession, the ways that the two processes help the speakers achieve self-knowledge are very different. In a confessional transaction, the confessant's self-perception is validated externally by the confessor; the central goal of transformative remembering, on the other hand, is for the person doing the remembering to internalize this validation, to do it herself. The auto-validation inherent in transformative remembering will allow her to independently confirm and accept the validity of her own self-perception.

In *Confession: Sexuality, Sin, the Subject* (1990), Jeremy Tambling quotes Mikhail Bakhtin's discussion of Fyodor Dostoyevsky's view of confession. For Dostoyevsky, Bakhtin argues, confession illustrates the confessant's
dependence on human interaction in order to believe in his own existence:

((C)onfessions) are nothing other than an event of interaction amongst consciousnesses . . . I cannot manage without another, I cannot become myself without another; I must find myself in another by finding another in myself . . . I receive my name from others, and it exists for others (self-naming is imposture). (qtd. in Tambling 165)

Here, confession is interpreted as an illustration of the confessant's search for identity—a quest which can only be concluded by the more powerful confessor's reaction to the confessant's revelations. While a negative reaction from the confessor will lower the confessant's self-esteem or, alternatively, not release him from his guilt or shame, a positive reaction (or one that is not obviously negative) will often have the opposite effect. In that case, the confessant's self-esteem increases and he leaves the confession with a more positive view of himself. The source of the confessor's power over the confessant lies in the ability to control the confessant's view of himself, even if the power behind such control is only applicable to the issues addressed in the confession.

In a confession—and consequently, in a confessional poem—the confessant always perceives the confessor as the more powerful of the two. In order for the confession to take place, the confessant must be willing to risk the confessor's displeasure, even though a central motivation
behind confession is often a search for acceptance, solidarity, or validation. Instead of finding this affirmation externally, as in a confessional transaction, transformative remembering ensures that the speaker is able to satisfactorily formulate her own acceptable identity. In order to gain the necessary objectivity, Olds’s speaker must, again, not merely acknowledge her anger at her father, but she must gain mastery over it. Finding a way to integrate that anger into her own life will allow her to move beyond it, and in order to move beyond it, Olds’s speaker must first confront the question of her father’s power over her, both physically and emotionally.

In The Dead and the Living (1983), as in Satan Says (1980), the speaker returns to the scenes of the her childhood abuses, largely—but not exclusively—at the hands of her father. At the time that The Dead and the Living appeared, it seems that the speaker’s father was still alive, but by the time of the poems in The Father (1992) the speaker’s father had died and could no longer exert any physical power over her, although his psychological power appears undiminished. Significantly, however, by the time the later book was published, the speaker has broadened her self-knowledge enough that she can take steps towards an attempt at forgiveness.
The potential for emotional retaliation from her abusers may be one reason for the sense of complicity or self-judgment found in *The Dead and the Living*. Since the speaker is not sure how to respond to the anticipated retaliation, she attempts to prevent it by focusing instead on the potential for evil that she finds in herself. In doing so, she achieves a sort of tenuous solidarity with her abusers—a solidarity which, while not ideal, does allow her to defend herself in advance against any potential retaliation. "The Eye" (*The Dead and the Living* 19) is a clear example of this approach:

My bad grandfather wouldn't feed us.

. . .
He died when I was seven, and Grandma had never once taken anyone's side against him, the firelight on his red cold face reflecting extra on his glass eye. (1; 4-8)

Her feelings towards her grandfather are conflicted, in spite of the abuse she suffered. Instead of focusing on the injustice of her grandfather's actions, she attempts to understand them on the basis of their shared genetics. The underlying assumption of the poem is the speaker's belief that, because she carries her grandparents' genes, the abuse was a logical result of a sort of biological imperative. What really frightens her, however, is her perception that a similar potential for emotional brutality might exist in herself:
I am
one-fourth him, a brutal man with a
hole for an eye, and one-fourth her,
a woman who protected no one. I am their
sex, too, their son, their bed, and
under their bed the trap door to the
cellar, with its barrels of fresh apples, and
somewhere in me too is the path
down to the creek gleaming in the dark,
a way out of there. (13-22)

In spite of the terrifying potential of this genetic
legacy, the speaker is also aware of her ability to reject
it. She does not have to succumb to the evil implied by
her genetics. Significantly, however, although she
understands that it is possible to resolve her dilemma, she
does not yet have the objectivity to do it.

Later, in "Fate" (The Dead and the Living 40) the
speaker actually succumbs to her inheritance as one way of
solving the problem. In doing so, not only is she allowing
herself to be seduced by the power of the alcohol, but she
is allowing the way that she perceives her father to
control the way that she perceives herself. In the poem,
she becomes an alcoholic like her father, giving up all
pretense of being herself, of asserting her own identity.
The speaker does not even see herself as his daughter any
longer, but instead allows herself to assume her father's
identity completely, willfully ignoring her separate self:

Finally I just gave up and became my father.
I gave in
to my true self, I faced the world
through his sour mash, his stained acrid

224
vision, I floated out on his tears. (1; 10-13)

However, instead of allowing the alcoholism to defeat her as it defeated her father, she believes that it permits her to see herself more clearly:

I saw the whole world shining with the ecstasy of his grief, and I myself, he, I, shined my oiled cheeks glaucous as tulips, the rich smear of the petal, the bulb hidden in the dark soil, stuck, impacted, sure of its rightful place. (14-20)

To imply that alcoholism is empowering on any level whatsoever is both untrue and misleading, but in this case it is not the alcoholism itself that clarifies the speaker’s vision. Instead, her new identity is the result of what she perceives as a new understanding of her place in the universe, which she gains by assuming her father’s identity, by succumbing to what she believes is her genetic legacy. Whether or not that self-perception is accurate or permanent is irrelevant here; what is important is that she has been able to formulate an identity—even a temporary one—with which to respond to her situation.

The process in “Poem to My Husband From My Father’s Daughter” (The Dead and the Living 56) is not dissimilar; again, the speaker is able to take her knowledge of her genetic legacy and use it to empower herself, this time to provide her husband with sexual fulfillment:

As I see you

225

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embracing me, in the mirror, I see I am
my father as a woman, I see you bravely
embrace him in me, putting your life in his
hands as mine

... as you enter
ecstasy, the hairs lifting
all over your body, I have never seen a
happier man. (1-5; 23-26)

It is unclear whether her husband’s bliss results from or
whether it exists in spite of his understanding of the
speaker’s biological inheritance; yet, again, the reasons
behind his ecstasy are not important. The fact that, even
temporarily, the speaker has found a way to transform what
she believes is a capacity to inflict pain into a means of
imparting pleasure reiterates that she has once again
empowered herself in the face of adversity. Although the
ability to formulate a new identity is a crucial first step
in the process of transformative remembering, at this point
she has not yet found a way to use her new knowledge to
truly benefit herself. Whether her self-knowledge results
from the cathartic experience of actually confessing a
wrong to someone else, or, as in this case, from finding a
way to impart a positive spin on a potentially negative
experience, the speaker has formulated a constructive
response to her own experience.

In “Satan Says” (Satan Says 3), Satan promises the
speaker that he will release her from the box her past has
locked her in if she will repudiate both her parents, but
most especially her father. She does so and the box opens, but when she guiltily confesses that the situation is not as clear-cut as Satan would like her to believe it is—that, in fact, she loves her parents too—Satan closes the box back up, sealing her inside once again. She is left, at that point, in a sort of emotional limbo, stuck between the horror and anger of the past and the love for it that she has acknowledged:

Satan sucks himself out the keyhole.
I'm left locked in the box, he seals the heart-shaped lock with the wax of his tongue.
"It's your coffin now," Satan says.
I hardly hear,
I am warming my cold hands at the dancer's ruby eye—
the fire, the suddenly discovered knowledge of love. (60-68)

Haaken describes the conflict that survivors of childhood sexual abuse often experience: "Part of what is at stake is the potential loss of idealized notions of the past, including idealized conceptions of parental authority . . . Overt rebellion, however, also has its costs. The devaluation of past objects of dependence can give rise to guilt and fear" (7).

Olds's speaker must continually negotiate this line between rebellion and fear. Sometimes, as in "Of All the Dead That Have Come to Me, This Once" (The Dead and the Living 21), she is defensive about her desire to articulate the past, searching for a means to justify her need to talk
about it. In this poem, she attempts to rationalize her desire to write “against the dead” by recalling the abuses her grandfather inflicted on her siblings and herself, as well as the violence that his son (the speaker’s father) learned from him. In addition, this violence played itself out in the abusive relationships that Olds’s speaker had with both her father and her grandfather. Ultimately, though, she still can’t bring herself to talk about it:

No. I said let this one be dead.
Let the fall he made through the great glass roof,
splintering, turning, the great shanks and slices of glass in the air, be his last appearance here. (17-21)

The implication here is that to talk about the abuse would be too painful. Even though the speaker’s abuser is dead, her refusal to discuss it implies both a fear of retribution and an inability to believe in the legitimacy of what she has to communicate.

In contrast, by the end of “What if God” (Gold Cell 25), Olds’s speaker has articulated her anger at God for allowing her mother to abuse her, and she can assert her own desire to avenge herself on her abuser:

Is there a God in the house?
Is there a God in the house? Then reach down and take that woman off that child’s body, and lift her up, and deliver her over to me. (25-29)

In asserting her desire for revenge, the speaker’s implied threat does not deny the past, and the speaker is not
ashamed of her past, but she is resentful and angry about it. The fact that she can articulate it implies that she no longer has doubts about her relationship to the past; in asserting her right to be heard, Olds's speaker has found her voice, even though she may not yet know the most successful way to use it.

In "Miscarriage" (The Dead and the Living 25), Olds's speaker explores her reactions not only to a miscarriage, but also to her belief that she and her husband could somehow have prevented it: "I never went back/to mourn the one who came as far as the/sill with its information: that we could botch something, you and I" (11-14). In making this confession, the speaker is risking her own self-esteem by opening up her emotions to her husband (the poem's apparent addressee)'s judgment.

Even more central to the poem, however, is her belief in her own complicity in the miscarriage. Acknowledging her own part in the miscarriage ultimately allows her to more fully appreciate their son, conceived in the wake of the failed pregnancy. In this sense, articulating her own perception of the event functions as an example of transformative remembering. Even though the miscarriage has placed her in the position of being acted upon, as functioning in the object position, her self-perception in
this experience is much more empowering than the identity of victim that she often assumes when writing about abuse. Because she is writing this poem after their son was born, the speaker knows that she and her husband have been able to (at least physically) move beyond the miscarriage and conceive another child. That knowledge makes it less risky to look back on the miscarriage and gives her the power—after the fact—to mourn. The final lines of the poem read: “All wrapped in plastic it floated away, like a messenger/put to death for bearing bad news” (14-16). Although there is no pronoun in these lines which might imply a conscious decision to get rid of this embryo, nonetheless since the blood she finds in the toilet did appear out of her own body, the fact that she has no choice but to admit secreting this blood seems to imply that the speaker is questioning her own involvement in the end of the baby’s life. These lines encourage a confessional reading in that they appear to be an admission of guilt, the implication being that she believes that she has somehow killed the child or otherwise colluded in its death. Transformative remembering allows her not only to acknowledge the effects of the miscarriage, but it also allows her to embrace the fact that she is the parent of the miscarried child as well as the mother of her son.
Transformative remembering allows the speaker's adult self to mediate between the adult and the child's perspectives as she relates her experiences. The adult self in this way assumes the role of judge that is fulfilled by the audience or addressee in a confessional poem. Although often Olds's poems are written from an adult perspective, the events the speaker discusses are childhood issues, when she was physically and emotionally in her father's power. To an extent, even as an adult she remains emotionally under the influence of these issues, yet she also has the ability to distance herself from her experiences. This distance allows her not only to analyze the experiences themselves, but also to reassess her own identity in relation to the events. Independently, like Ted Hughes in *Birthday Letters* she internalizes both the submission of the confessant and the confessor's power to judge.

In "Saturn" (*Gold Cell 24*), Olds's adult speaker is looking back on the way that her father's problems slowly took over his children's lives. The myth of Saturn (or Cronus, in the Greek version) relates how Saturn, seeking to avoid being dethroned, ate his children as they were born, thus prolonging his own reign and denying his children any lives of their own (Graves 29; Reis 42-43). In retaliation, after bearing Zeus—their third son—Saturn's...
wife tricks him in order to save the baby. Instead of the baby, she wraps a stone in swaddling clothes. Saturn swallows it but cannot digest it, so he vomits the stone back up, freeing his other children as well.

Within the context of this myth, transformative remembering allows the speaker, from her adult perspective, to justify—or at least explain—her father’s actions in a way which would have been impossible while she was a child, directly affected by them. Looking back on her childhood the speaker says, "no one knew/my father was eating his children" (3-4). From her child’s point of view it did not appear that her father had any motivation for his actions; the way her father victimized his children appears almost arbitrary:

What could be more passive than a man passed out every night—and yet as he lay on his back, snoring, our lives slowly disappeared down the hole of his life. (9-12)

Her father appears to act almost entirely on instinct, without any conscious motivation—"a large, handsome man/heavily asleep, unconscious" (17-18). Later, however, the speaker’s adult self steps in to provide a new interpretation of the experience:

In the nerves of his gums and bowels he knew what he was doing and he could not stop himself, like orgasm . . .

. . .

This is what he wanted, to take that life into his mouth and show what a man could do—show his son
what a man's life was. (24-26; 28-31)

Having voiced her resentment, the speaker reverts to the role of dutiful daughter, trying to explain his actions by saying that they were motivated by his desire to be a good role model for his son. In one sense, this poem stands at a crossroads between the anger of the early work and the forgiveness found in the later books. Transformative remembering allows Olds's speaker to acknowledge the pain resulting from what her father did, but it also allows her to believe in his ultimate goodness. Even though her father's misguidedness resulted in pain and suffering for her, that pain is mitigated by what the speaker perceives as her father's desire to be a good father.

In one sense, the poem can be read as a continuation of the speaker's search for her ideal father, the father she dreams about in "The Ideal Father" (The Dead and the Living 38). This ideal father is not only physically perfect, but he is emotionally accessible as well--she addresses him as "Dad," one of only two times in all six books that the speaker addresses her father by name.6 Significantly, however, this ideal father is only present in her dream. The reality is very different:

Where is the one who threw up?
The one who passed out the one who would not speak for a week, slapped the glasses off a small girl's face, bloodied his head and sank through the water? (24-28)
Unlike the real father, the fantasized father is conquering and protective of his family. The speaker fantasizes that after killing off the real father, the ideal father would take the actual father’s place in the speaker’s life:

I think the ideal father would hardly let such a man live. After all, he has daughters to protect, laying his perfect body over their sleep all night long. (29-32)

Although from her childlike perspective, the speaker feels safe and protected in her dream, in reality she has neither found the ideal father nor come to terms with the knowledge that she won’t find him because he doesn’t exist. Unlike in the later “Saturn,” the speaker’s adult self does not mediate her perspective here. Instead, she finds refuge in sarcasm.

Transformative remembering functions, however, in “Looking at My Father” (Gold Cell 31), which is spoken by the speaker’s adult self. Consequently, she is able to maintain some distance from her desire for her father, placing it on the more emotionally distant physical level:

I do not think I am deceived about him. I know about the drinking, I know he’s a tease, obsessive, rigid, selfish, sentimental, but I could look at my father all day and not get enough . . .

I know he’s not perfect, but my body thinks his body is perfect . . . .

what I know I know, what my body knows it knows, it likes to go and slip the leash of my mind and go and look at him, like an animal
looking at water, then going to it and drinking until it has had its fill and can lie down and sleep. (1-5; 28-29; 34-40)

The speaker is able to achieve some distance from the emotional implications of her child-like Oedipal desire for her father by placing it on the less perilous physical level. Although Freud describes the Oedipus complex largely in terms of physical desire, it is the emotional implications of the Oedipus complex that make it so dangerous, for to gratify the desire inherent in it would be to commit incest—a violation of the oldest and most ingrained social taboo in the world.

The self-revelation inherent in transformative remembering is similar to that which takes place in the confessional process, in that one definition of the verb "confess" is "to make oneself known, to acknowledge one's identity" (Oxford English Dictionary, cited in Hymer 4). Further, Sharon Hymer points out that after confessing in a therapeutic context, patients can then begin to discover how what they have confessed will affect their lives, both in relation to themselves as well as how they relate to others. In therapy, "the patient is faced with the possibilities for constructively dealing with the consequences of the confession (redemption) and thereby experiencing a transformation of the self in the process (renewal)" (Hymer 5). Transformative remembering appears
to take the confessional process a step further, in that it encourages the patient (or speaker of the poem) to actively explore the avenues of redemption, instead of simply acknowledging their existence.

Again Sharon Olds’s work is important here in light of the perceived association between confessional poetry and psychoanalysis. The speaker’s erotic fixation on her father, her ambivalent relationships with her mother and her siblings, as well as her overt fascination with her children’s sexuality, seem to encourage a psychoanalytic reading before almost anything else. Significantly, what differentiates a psychoanalytic reading from a confessional one is the perceived role of the “truth.”

Since we cannot know whether the speaking voice in the poem truly belongs to Olds herself, it is impossible to state unequivocally that her poems are confessional in a documentary sense. Although Olds’s reluctance to confirm or deny the truth of specific events makes it nearly impossible to tell which—if any—of the events detailed in the poems are based on autobiographical experience, ultimately it makes no difference. In Dwight Garner’s interview for Salon, Olds comments on this specific point:

[Garner]: . . . do you wonder about what insight [your children] will have into their mother’s life through your work?

[Olds]: It’s a wonderful question, and it’s not one I can answer, really. Ten years ago I made a
vow not to talk about my life. Obviously, the apparently very personal nature of my writing made this seem to me like maybe a good idea, for both sides of the equation—both for the muses and for the writer. But it's a wonderful and important question. I think the thing that's most important to me about it is this idea that every writer has to decide these things for themselves, and we learn by making mistakes. (11) This question and Olds's response to it parallel that point addressed by Robert Lowell in his Paris Review interview with Frederick Seidel (1961). In this interview, Lowell points out that although the specific details included in "confessional" poems may lead their readers to believe that the speaking in voice in the poem is the poet himself relating those events exactly as they happened to him, the voice is in fact a conscious creation on the part of the poet.

These questions once again encourage readers to consider the question not only of whether it is possible for "truth" to exist on any sort of objective or tangible level in poetry. If, in fact, one of the "central meanings" inherent in reading Olds's work is the need to distinguish between autobiographical fact and fiction, we are confusing the motivation behind documentary film-making with the impetus behind poetry and thus doing a disservice to both.

Ultimately, the central reason in favor of the value of Sharon Olds's work to this study and to the discussion
on confessional poetry as a whole is that Olds's poetry illustrates a logical fulfillment of A. Alvarez's "extremist art." In extremist art, both the author and the reader share an awareness of the existence of particular emotions behind a given text, but they are also often cognizant of the psychological reasons for those emotions, thanks to the increasingly pervasive influence of psychoanalysis.\

Because reading Olds's work in light of the perceived association between "confessional poetry" and the psychological appears to be almost inevitable, reading her work raises similar issues to those raised by reading Sylvia Plath. The graphic details of not only the physical and emotional abuse suffered by Olds's speaker, as well as her obviously unresolved Oedipus complex make it very easy to read Olds's poetry as if it were the record of a psychiatric case history. Further, readers' tendency to identify the speaking voice of a poem as that of the poet herself directly encourages readers to assume that the speaker of the poems is Olds herself, even though there appears to be little evidence to justify such an interpretation.

In light of the enormous amount of information currently available on Plath's mental illness as well as on her death, it is nearly impossible to discount it when
considering her work—the Ariel poems in particular. The rapidly mounting undertone of desperation found in those poems does create a context which encourages readers to interpret her work as a case study of a mentally ill person's progression towards suicide.

Similar issues are raised in reading the work of Robert Lowell and Ted Hughes as well, although the circumstances surrounding their work are quite different. Critical interpretation of Lowell's Life Studies as "confessional" poetry seems largely circumstantial, a case in which an apparently appropriate critical term was applied at the time of Life Studies' publication and its accuracy never seriously questioned again. In the case of Ted Hughes, although there are confessional elements in his work—most especially in Remains of Elmet and Birthday Letters—the confessional label seems to have resulted from his inextricable association with Sylvia Plath rather than from any sort of careful consideration of his own poetic practices.

Although all four of these poets force us as readers to consider similar issues, the common thread that has most heavily influenced the critical reception and interpretation of their work appears to be the question of the extent and directness of the connection between their lives and their work—the answer to which question I believe
ultimately detracts from the potential for a full and satisfying reading of their poetry.

While I am not advocating a full-scale and/or total return to the potentially prescriptive ways of analyzing a poem as mandated by the New Critics and other formalistic critics, it does seem to me that discontinuing the use of the term "confessional poetry" would encourage us, both as readers and as literary critics, to reconsider not only the ways in which we choose to interpret poetry, but also our motivations for reading it and our expectations of it. It is all too easy, in this age of documentary with its emphasis on authenticity, to assume that poetry will function as just another means of reaching some sort of verifiable truth.

By using a term other than "confessional poetry" to describe the work of Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath, Ted Hughes, and Sharon Olds—as well as the work of many others not discussed here—the questions which currently surround the role of "truth" in poetry would be significantly diminished.

1Among others, see especially "The Eye" (DL 19) and "Of All the Dead That Have Come to Me, This Once" (DL 21).

2See "The Lisp" (Wellspring 11) and "The Chute" (GC 36); see also "That Year" (SS 6), among others.

3See Chapter One, "Definitions and Confessional Traditions," for a thorough discussion of this process.
During the 1980s, as more and more women in particular began to "recover" memories of childhood sexual abuse, the alleged perpetrators vehemently denied their involvement. Many of the alleged abusers claimed (with witnesses to back them up) to have enjoyed particularly close and healthy relationships with their daughters, and their disbelief in their daughters' suddenly remembered stories of abuse cast doubt on the therapists involved. In particular, the credibility of Cornelia Wilbur, widely acknowledged as the founder of the recovered memory movement, was cast in doubt.

See Mary Flowers Braswell, The Medieval Sinner (1983), Michel Foucault's The History of Sexuality (1978), and Jeremy Tambling's Confession: Sexuality, Sin, the Subject (1990) for a thorough discussion of the role of the Catholic confessor.

There are numerous poems addressed to "you," in which the "you" is clearly the speaker's father, but he is not addressed by name.

Freud summarizes the Oedipus complex as follows: when a boy is little, he identifies with his father, in that they both love the mother. Later, the boy's feelings towards the father become hostile, as he wishes to be rid of his father so that the boy can take his father's sexual place with the mother. As the boy grows older and resolves the Oedipus complex, he once again begins to identify more strongly with his father, while at the same time retaining affection for his mother. According to Freud, this outcome is "more normal" than if the boy were to identify with his mother (Gay 640).

For girls, however, the process does not appear as complicated: "[I]t seldom goes beyond the taking of her mother's place and the adopting of a feminine attitude towards her father. Her Oedipus complex culminates in a desire, which is long retained, to receive a baby from her father as a gift—to bear him a child" (Gay 665).

See Freud's Totem and Taboo for a thorough discussion of the incest taboo.

See Chapter One for a thorough discussion of this point.

For a thorough discussion of extremist art, see Chapter Three.
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Date of Examination:

4/24/00