The Strains of Confessional Poetry: The Burdens, Blunders, and Blights of Self-Disclosure

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THE STRAINS OF CONFESSIONAL POETRY: 
THE BURDENS, BLUNDERS, AND BLIGHTS OF SELF-DISCLOSURE

by

LARA ROSSANA RODRIGUEZ

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in English in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

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THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK
ABSTRACT

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Adviser: Professor Wayne Koestenbaum

When a provocative style of autobiographical verse had emerged in postwar America, literary critics christened the new genre “confessional poetry.” Confessional poets of the 1960s and ’70s are often characterized by scholars of contemporary poetry as a cohort of writers who, unlike previous generations before them, dared to explore in their work the personal and inherited traumas of mental illness, family suicides, failed marriages, and crushing addictions. As a result, the body of work these writers produced is often experienced as a collection of stylized, literary self-portraits. What can these self-portraits reveal to us about the connection between confessional poetry and other autobiographical acts? This project examines how two poets within the confessional canon, John Berryman (1914-1972) and Anne Sexton (1928-1974), performed in various guises the part of the confessional poet. In addition, this project introduces to the canon a third unconsidered Black prison poet, Etheridge Knight (1931-1991), who was also writing at the same time as Sexton and Berryman. By considering Knight’s work as one of the strains (or divergent branches) of confessional poetics, this project confronts some of the critical blunders that constitute the curiously white-washed canon known as confessionalism.
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Introduction

Following World War II, literary critics observed in the late 1950s that a new style of autobiographical verse in America had emerged. In 1959, in his review of Robert Lowell’s “magnificently stated but unpleasantly egocentric” book, Life Studies, the literary critic M. L. Rosenthal officially christened this swerve toward the personal as “confessional poetry.”¹ As a form of verse, confessionalism, “a mode that . . . has, over time, come to be regarded as a regrettable, aberrant, and momentary spasm in the development of that nation’s literature,” has typically been characterized as a postwar poetics that chronicles the white, middle-class, American poet’s often tragic and personal struggles with addiction, mania, marital infidelity, and/or family trauma.² In addition to being a genre typified by its thematic preoccupations (rather than any one particular poetic form), confessional poetry is also a poetics of self-writing, one that has compelled contemporary poets and their critics to since reconsider the poetic and performative uses of the multivalent, first-person singular pronoun, “I.”

How did confessional poets writing in the 1960s and ’70s “use their lives for poetry,” and what kind of never-before-seen literary personas did these poets adopt in order to legitimate the authenticity of their confessions?³ In Robert Phillips’s The Confessional Poets, published in 1973 at the tail end of the movement’s popularity, the author writes: “While a confessional poem is one which mythologizes the poet’s personal life, it has its basic elements of fancy like any other. It does not constitute, certainly, a

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mere recitation of fact for fact’s sake, nor should the ‘facts’ recited be mistaken for literal truth.”

I confess to having become engrossed in the zigzagging process by which facts, mythologies, and “basic elements of fancy” get mistaken for truth. How do these contradictory aspects of the confessional work serve to muddle the distinction between the literary and the literal? This dissertation narrates how two canonical American poets, John Berryman and Anne Sexton, bore the strains and burdens of writing within and against the confessional genre as they endeavored to “contemplate and expose the complexity of identity.”

In addition, this dissertation introduces to the confessional canon the previously unconsidered Black prison poet, Etheridge Knight, in order to address and redress some of the critical oversights that constitute the provocative canon known as confessionalism.

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According to the poet David Yezzi, “What distinguishes confessional poetry’s management of autobiography from that of, say, the New York school, and from the lyric in general, is the rawness of its address and the incorporation of guilty personal detail for emotional effect.” The word raw, in some form or another, appears time and time again in the literature on confessional poetry; nevertheless, it remains a provocative adjective in the sense that it calls to mind: meat, both fresh and potentially contaminated (raw oysters on the half-shell: “sweet blue babies”); raw flesh, someone’s overly irritated, flayed, or tender skin (“We are using our own skins for wallpaper and we cannot win.”); crude, unrefined, unprocessed matter; the (unsightly) exposed edge of an unfinished or torn

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piece of fabric. The various connotations of the word suggest an anxiety on the part of literary critics about purity, Truth, the transformation of essence, and as-is-ness. For example, the belief that the confessional poet appears in his poems “as he is” (which I take it to mean as the poet is in “real” life, “outside” of the poem, with his heart “laid bare”) overwhelms A. Alvarez’s critical interpretation of Lowell’s work:

the poems since Life Studies have gained a kind of transparency: you look through them to see the man as he is, a man of great contradictions, tenderness and violence, a man obsessed equally by his own crack-ups and by the symptoms of crack-up in the society around him. The skill, intelligence and discipline never falter, but they are all in the service of an insistent directness. The raw material of the poems is, precisely, raw and the poet refuses all aesthetic subterfuges to disguise the fact.

The raw material of the poems is, precisely, raw . . . as opposed to: possibly overdone? Old? Out of style? Too polished? It is difficult to discern when critics understand confessional poetics to be recognized by its “rawness” whether this quality is encountered as a surface finishing, a poem’s patina (the result of a technique and a process), and when it is experienced as part of the poet’s courage, authenticity, or worse, her narcissism (as often is the case with Lowell’s female students, Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton). After all, what could any poet hope to gain by being so abhorrently open and forthcoming about the extent of his personal failures? Only an amateur, lesser poet would commit such an obvious faux pas, unless, of course, he could afford to take such a risk because he had already won some success and possibly even a Pulitzer Prize, as Lowell had, for having excelled in the formalist academic mode that we now associate with the New

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10. A. Alvarez, Beyond All This Fiddle (New York: Random House, 1968), 14.

11. For example, see Yezzi in “Confessional Poetry,” where he writes, “Sexton’s woeful inability to see beyond herself isn’t moving, it’s depressing.”
Criticism, a school of Modernism that insisted: “there is danger of confusing personal and poetic studies; and there is the fault of writing the personal as if it were poetic.” In having aligned themselves with the idea that an impersonal poetics was a pure, objective, and superior poetics, scholars of the New Critical era had good reason to be made anxious by the emergence of a raw, impure, and autobiographical poetics. Once confessional poetry, the New York School, and the Black Arts Movement became associated with that which felt new in contemporary American poetry, by the mid-1960s, the aesthetic conservativism that maintained that poems were to be experienced as self-contained, ahistorical objects no longer appealed to the average reader, and the age of New Criticism had come to an end.

Raw or not, the manner in which confessional poets approached the task of writing themselves into their work stylistically departs from the impersonal mode favored by poets writing in the ’40s and ’50s. Still, the particularly self-derisive, crestfallen, guilt-ridden tone that dominates much confessional poetry is not without its literary precedent. If, as the critic Charles Molesworth has suggested, “the confessional poet [is] a failed sage, his wisdom gotten at the price of a debilitating pain,” then we might consider Verlaine, Rimbaud, and Baudelaire, otherwise known as les poètes maudits, as some of the confessional poet’s distant European literary relatives in the tradition of rebellious lyric poetry.

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Despite confession’s endurance as a mode for contemporary poetics, to be deemed a confessional poet during the ’60s and ’70s was to don a tainted crown; literary scholar Deborah Nelson points out: “Compared to other poetic or artistic movements of this period – the Black Mountain or Beat poets, for instance – no confessional poet imagined himself or herself to be part of a movement. . . . they almost universally disliked the term as it applied to their own work.”¹⁴ Poets like Berryman and Sexton, for example, may have rejected the confessional label when it was applied to their work because not only did it monopolize the critical discourse, but it also failed to imagine how the new literary personas constructed by these writers were exercises in artifice, not honesty; Nelson explains, “Critics mistook the informal address and the private content for a kind of transparency and artlessness, which made the poems appear to be mere outpourings of feeling and information unmediated by craft.”¹⁵ Jo Gill similarly observes that since “confessional poetry, unlike other postmodern poetry, persists in being read as an expressive/realist mode,” it is mistakenly presumed to offer readers “privileged and reliable insight” into the author’s personal experiences.¹⁶ In other words, confessionalism, a literary term of classification as it was applied by critics, ironically rendered a poet’s work as less literary because it prioritized the personal, autobiographical, and verifiable aspects of the work over the formal and performative ones.

For instance, of the poems in Lowell’s Life Studies, Rosenthal, who set the critical standard for others interested in theorizing confessional poetics, claims “[Lowell’s]

¹⁵. Ibid., 35.
speaker is unequivocally himself.”17 It’s not that I disagree with Rosenthal exactly, but perhaps it’s his use of the word \textit{unequivocally} (which is not unlike Alvarez’s use of the qualifier \textit{precisely} in a similar context) that rouses my suspicion and causes me to doubt the critic’s certainty. What compelled Rosenthal to read Lowell autobiographically in the first place, and what biographical knowledge of the poet did the critic need to possess in order to claim “unequivocally” that the poet was writing with “uncompromising honesty” during a time when a poetics of self-disclosure was not yet in vogue?18

Most of the critical reception and commentary published in the ’60s and ’70s on the subject of confessional poetry is a genre unto itself (is this the fault of it being pre-post-structuralism?), if not a lesson in how \textit{not} to do criticism. Among all the blunders in confessional poetry, perhaps I am most fond of the fact that these poets caught their critics off-guard. In other words, academics who learned how to read poetry in the era of New Criticism and fancied themselves as part of a scholarly elite seemed ill-suited to discern what was going on behind the poetic and public personas confessional poets were brazenly beginning to put forward in the early 1960s. Also, given that poets like John Berryman, Anne Sexton, and Etheridge Knight were often willing and able to publicly comment on their poems and their poems’ autobiographical origins (which contradicted Wimsatt and Beardsley’s assertion that “Critical inquiries are not settled by consulting the oracle.”19) this new eagerness on the part of readers to engage the author certainly caused many critics to reconsider their role in exposing the meaning of a poet’s work. If any poetry novice could confirm some of the back-story, truth, or meaning of a confessional poem by merely contacting and interviewing the author, then confessional

18. Ibid.
poetry threatened to render the schooled literary critic and all his tools of analysis and methods of interpretation redundant and therefore inessential. Could this outsourcing of interpretive labor have contributed to the amount of critical vitriol leveled against the genre?

Since confessional poetry takes as its primary subject the psychically wounded authorial self, the genre has been consistently maligned as an excessively narcissistic, pathological, and shallow endeavor. A.R. Jones claims that the mode is the product of an “intolerable compulsion,” whereas Donald Davie announces his disdain for the way “in which the public life of the author as author, and his private life, are messily compounded” in the confessional mode. Charles Molesworth has even gone as far as to declare that “confessional poetry can be seen as one degraded branch of Romanticism, placing the sensitivity of the poet at the center of concern.” Pretty harsh stuff—so what does the critical scorn leveled at the genre reveal to us today about former generations of literary critics’ reservations with respect to taking emerging forms of self-writing more seriously?

To answer this question, I must return to the words of the critic Donald Davie, who observed as early as 1966:

the confessional poet is his own biographer, and his poems are his autobiography. Like any other autobiographer, he selects what he will reveal and suppresses much more. And insofar as the confessional poet thus presents only a trimmed and slanted image of himself, he may still be thought to be revealing to us not a personality but a persona.
When Davie gripes about the “messily compounded” autobiographical account we receive of a poet’s life via her confessional poem, he is claiming that neither the poet nor the poem is to be trusted. Unlike Alvarez, “whose acceptance of the authenticity of the ‘confessional’ attributes of the poetry left him to speculate at length on the potentially pathological suicide among the poets involved,” Davie seems irritated by the confessional persona and its slippery relation to Truth because of the way the persona, or mask, masquerades and passes for fact.25 What’s more fascinating, however, is that if one were to follow Davie’s argument to its logical conclusion, then we would have to consider the possibility that confessional poets were not so different from those deemed “nonconfessional poets such as Eliot and Pound, writers who valued privacy and sought expression through the adoption of personae (Eliot’s Prufrock, Pound’s Mauberly), or through the use of an objective correlative.”26 It is important to state here that even though the confessional personas of poets like Robert Lowell, John Berryman, Anne Sexton, and Sylvia Plath, (“always stylish in their misery”27) were, by and large, the result of the “Freudian Fifties,” a period marked by the resurgence of talk therapy and psychoanalysis in American popular culture, that these personas gave voice not only to these poets’ own psychological dramas, but the psychosocial dysfunction inherent in white, postwar, American domestic life. So even as I would concede that the use of a persona (a textual self that an author may insist is not one and the same as herself) is a literary convention that the confessional poets inherited from Eliot and Pound (both of whom were important influences for Berryman), I would also emphasize that the

27. Molesworth, “‘With Your Own Face On,’” 168.
 personas of confessional poets differed from their predecessors insofar as they perpetuated the illusion that readers and fans of the genre had “glimpsed the paradox of a publicly legitimate but authentically private self,” one that fans could often identify with. The American public’s fascination with confessional poets is not beneath my project’s ambitions; I, too, am intrigued (which is not to say won over) by the aura of the writer in pursuit of what Susan Sontag called a “trashy life, rosy mythologies.”

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One of Phillips’s key criteria for what constitutes a confessional poem is that “it uses the self as a poetic symbol around which is woven a personal mythology.” Can any self be fashioned into a poetic symbol, or are some writers’ lives more primed to be of literary interest than others? Again, Davie’s perspective on the matter reveals a generalized anxiety about the confessional poet’s impact on the role of the critic; he writes, “woe betide the poet whose life, when the gossip-columnist-reviewer goes to work on it, does not reveal fornications and adulteries, drug addictions, alcoholism, and spells in mental homes.” It’s true: once the term “confessional” became associated with not just the kind of poetry certain writers produced, but also with the style in which these writers lived, it has since become increasingly difficult to determine if it is at all possible or even desirable to speak of the poetry of Lowell, Berryman, Sexton, or Plath without taking into account the fact of their tumultuous interior and domestic lives. A comment made by Plath’s widower, the poet Ted Hughes, may provide some additional insight.

here: “Maybe if you don’t have that secret confession, you don’t have a poem—don’t even have a story. Don’t have a writer.” In other words, not only does one need to have an interesting life to be a writer, but you also need to have an interior life, a private life, one whose truths were, at some point, worth protecting. What prompted poets in the late ’50s and early ’60s to begin to consider their secrets (and unavoidably those of their intimates) as one of the vital and necessary ingredients for a new poetics?

While Lowell’s *Life Studies* is often recognized as one of the foundational texts of the confessional genre, it is actually the poem “Heart’s Needle,” which was partially published in the anthology *New Poets of England and America* in September of 1957, and written by Lowell’s former student, W. D. Snodgrass, that set the precedent for Lowell’s decision to embrace a more personal poetics. Though we might bestow Snodgrass, rather than Lowell, with the honor of having published the first confessional poem, as an early example of the genre, “Heart’s Needle,” lacks the refinement and fine-tuning of later confessional works written by poets like Berryman, Sexton, and Plath; as “a formalized musing aloud . . . a rumination too self-consciously protective of the speaker’s emotional weakness to be totally private, and too engaged with a barely warded off self-pity to be instructively public,” “Heart’s Needle” is kind of a flop as far as poems go. For even as critics acknowledge the extent to which Snodgrass’s ten-part sentimental poem written to his daughter, Cynthia, influenced his former professor’s

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34. On the subject of Snodgrass and his influence, Lowell, somewhat evasively, acknowledged, “[Snodgrass] did these things before I did, though he’s younger than I am and had been my student. He may have influenced me, though people have suggested the opposite,” in Frederick Seidel, “Robert Lowell, The Art of Poetry, No. 3.” *The Paris Review*, no. 25 (Winter-Spring 1961), http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/4664/the-art-of-poetry-no-3-robert-lowell.
35. Molesworth, “‘With Your Own Face On,’” 165.
change in style, “Heart’s Needle” is seldom regarded today with the same esteem and reverence as Lowell’s “Skunk Hour,” for example.

Although Diane Wood Middlebrook, a literary biographer and scholar of the post-war era claims, “It was Lowell’s pedigree that gave rank and station to confessional poetry as a genre,” there are many reasons why Snodgrass and, in particular, “Heart’s Needle,” may have been forgotten (despite the fact that the poem contains many of the defining features critics have come to associate with the confessional mode): the directness of address, the poet’s insistence and maudlin use of the word “you” throughout the poem, the transparency of the poem’s subject, the fact that the poem’s subject is the poet’s failure to be a good enough father, “the hydrocephalic goat,” (a sturdy poetic image-object that I can imagine Anne Sexton, who was also once student of Snodgrass’s, must have coveted), the terrible title, or, the fact that “Heart’s Needle” is so obnoxiously long. Here is just one of the poem’s eighty stanzas; it appears toward the poem’s end:

The window’s turning white.
The world moves like a diseased heart packed with ice and snow.
Three months now we have been apart less than a mile. I cannot fight or let you go.37

*The world moves like a diseased heart / packed with ice and snow.* When I encounter lines like these, I experience them as a cluster of banality, which is to say, it’s like reading magnet poetry: bad. So when Elizabeth Bishop admits, “I hate confessional poetry,” I get it, especially after reading “Heart’s Needle”: the sentimentality, the self-pity, the snow/go rhyme— it’s too much. In a later letter to Lowell, Bishop confides, “In

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general I deplore the ‘confessional’—however, when you wrote LIFE STUDIES perhaps it was a necessary movement, and it helped make poetry more real, fresh and immediate. But now—ye gods—anything goes.\textsuperscript{39} Bishop, a poet who notoriously preferred privacy over the trendy exhibitionism practiced by many of her peers, was exasperated by “The School of Anguish,” as she dubbed the confessionals, and who could blame her?\textsuperscript{40} The tear-jerker aspect of “Heart’s Needle,” like the worst (which is perhaps also to say the quintessential) kind of confessional poems “not only makes use of private anguish and psychological disturbance but actually exploits them through putting them forward nakedly, and to some degree exhibitionistically, as the poet’s predominant theme.”\textsuperscript{41} That being said, “To assume that the poetic voice is the ‘naked ego’ of the poet himself rather than a carefully constructed aesthetic entity . . . is surely to underestimate the considerable artistic talent represented by the confessionals and the degree to which pure invention dominates their work.”\textsuperscript{42} As much as I may shrink from the shabbily constructed self in “Heart’s Needle,” I am still intellectually stimulated by the fact of its constructedness as well as the work that goes into performing that self both in print and in public.


\textsuperscript{40} Brett C. Miller, \textit{Elizabeth Bishop: Life and the Memory of It} (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1993), 361. Bishop writes, “If I were a critic and had a good brain I think I’d like to write a study of ‘The School of Anguish’—Lowell (by far the best), Roethke, and Berryman and their descendents like Anne Sexton and Seidel, more and more anguished and less and less poetry. Surely never in all the ages has poetry been so personal and confessional—and I don’t think it is what I like, really—although I certainly admire Lowell’s.”


\textsuperscript{42} Hoffman, “Impersonal Personalism,” 694.
In an interview published in *The Paris Review*, Snodgrass claimed to have “never cared for the term *confessional.*” He also acknowledged: “My poems were called confessional because I wrote about the facts of my own life, and particularly about losing a daughter in a divorce; you weren’t supposed to do that then. You also weren’t supposed to use your own name.” Snodgrass’s own decision to exploit the drama of his personal life for poetic ends was born out of his experiences in psychotherapy, and, somewhat ironically, a desire to “get away from a sort of high-flown and over-intellectualized language” that typified Lowell’s 1947 Pulitzer Prize winning collection *Lord Weary’s Castle* (to refer again to Snodgrass’s words, “Nothing against Lowell, it’s just that I’d stayed under his influence long enough”). Snodgrass was also at odds with T. S. Eliot’s theory of impersonality as it was described in Eliot’s essay, “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” first published in 1919. In his essay, Eliot states, “Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality.” By putting their personas to work, confessional poets relegated Eliot’s theory of impersonality, and the old school, academic values associated with the New Criticism to the dustbin. “By reinstating an insistently autobiographical first person engaged in resistance to the pressure to conform,” confessional poets, according to Middlebrook, “participated in the protest against Impersonality as a poetic value.” In choosing to break from these values, confessional poets helped to usher in a new era in not just American poetics, but life writing as well.

44. Ibid.
45. Ibid.
While this dissertation does not contain a chapter on either Snodgrass or Lowell, (or Sylvia Plath or Theodore Roethke, for that matter) it very well could have: they aren’t any more or less confessional than the poets I have elected to center in this project: John Berryman, Anne Sexton, and Etheridge Knight. However, I have chosen to limit my discussion to three confessional poets, rather than five or six, because given the genre’s entanglement with other forms of life writing such as autobiography, memoir, and diary, just to name a few, I wished to write of these poets biographically, which is to say, with an attention to the multifarious array of paratextual materials and ephemera that constitute any writer’s life work, their career. The materials given special attention to in this project include, but are not limited to: letters and correspondence, such as the kind exchanged by John Berryman and his mother, Jill Angel, and discussed in Chapter 1; family memoirs, like those published by Anne Sexton’s daughter, Linda Gray Sexton, and discussed in Chapter 2; and recorded and published interviews with the author, as in the case of Etheridge Knight, as discussed in Chapter 3. Furthermore, as I recognize it might appear counterintuitive to include in my roster of confessional poets someone like Etheridge Knight, a poet of the Black Arts Movement who began writing while he was incarcerated during the early 1960s, it is my hope that in examining Knight’s confessional tendencies, we can begin to reflect upon the unacknowledged whiteness of confessional poetics, and maybe even come to terms with the fact that just as poetry is a product of its particular place and time, so too is criticism.
Chapter I: Confession and Correspondence: John Berryman’s “Problem Mother”

Meddlesome mothers, brooding spouses, discontentment, and divorce. These provide the backdrop upon which confessional poets perform their life narratives; by exploiting the drama of their domestic lives, confessional poets, in the words of Steven K. Hoffman, enact an “almost numbing rehearsal of family conflict.” What specific family frictions are obfuscated by the genteelism family conflicts, and how do such conflicts shape the conditions of confessional utterance?

Embedded in the telling of certain confessional family frictions resides a certain amount of fiction (especially after these frictions are picked over and retold by biographers and critics). Consider, for example, Robert Lowell’s seminal autobiographical remembrance “91 Revere Street,” where the narrator, recollecting his New England childhood home, writes,

There, the vast number of remembered things remains rocklike. 
Each is in its place, each has its function, its history, its drama. 
There, all is preserved by that motherly care that one either ignored or resented in his youth.

A peculiar tone emanates from this minefield of mixed resentments. Moreover, something sinister lurks in that maternal phantom hand which renders things “rocklike” its presence can be felt elsewhere besides the work of Robert Lowell, namely, in fellow confessional poet John Berryman’s ground-breaking work The Dream Songs. This chapter examines the correspondence between Berryman, the canonical American poet,

and his problem mother Jill Angel in order to investigate that uncanny brand of maternal concern as it helped shape *The Dream Songs*.

I have borrowed the critical epithet “problem mother” from Robert Giroux, John Berryman and Robert Lowell’s publisher, because it speaks to the odd complications I have encountered while investigating the curious figure of Jill Angel. According to Giroux, problem mothers “cause difficulties greater than their sons’ illnesses.”50 I would add to this that the gender of the American *maudit*, or “problem child” (as Lowell referred to himself51), need not be exclusively male, for although Giroux was specifically referring to Jill Angel and Charlotte Winslow (or “Charlotte Hideous” as Lowell’s first wife, Jean Stafford, used to call her52), one could easily consider Aurelia Plath, the mother of confessional poet Sylvia Plath alongside the other problem mothers.

At what point does the poet’s mother cross over into the much maligned territory of the problem mother?, or, to put it another way: what problems can the confessional poet’s mother cause for a biographer? Several, as Janet Malcolm discovered in her rogue journalistic inquiry into the clusterfuck that is the Sylvia Plath estate. According to Malcolm, as Sylvia’s mother Aurelia was not the literary executor of her daughter’s estate (that pleasure was reserved for Sylvia’s husband, poet Ted Hughes), after the American publication of Sylvia’s autobiographical novel *The Bell Jar*, Aurelia sought to amend the public’s interpretation of her daughter as “not nice” by publishing a collection of Sylvia’s letters to her titled, *Letters Home: Correspondence 1950-1963*.53 Does mother

always know best? “In exposing her daughter’s letters to the world’s scrutiny,” Malcolm writes, Aurelia “not only violated Plath’s writer’s privacy but also handed Plath herself over to the world as an object to be familiarly passed from hand to hand. Now everyone could feel that he ‘knew’ Plath.”54 The problem mother hopes supplemental narratives, such as the kind afforded in private correspondence, can correct the reading public’s misguided interpretations; however, Aurelia’s reputation may have been too tainted by the time she sought to set the record straight; her efforts to convince the world that Sylvia was “not the hateful, hating ingrate . . . but a loving, obedient daughter” backfired.55 In addition to being an unreliable source, a problem mother is a nuisance.

In the confessional genre, problem mothers constitute part of the shaky indeterminate facts that the biographer must reckon with. And yet as a mythic point of origin, the problem mother’s role in a poet’s genesis is hard to track. Consequently, her intentions always appear somewhat elusive, if not suspect. Whatever their intentions, I would like to credit Aurelia Plath and Jill Angel for, at the very least, preserving their children’s letters. Surely such a thankless gesture in and of itself is worthy of some scholarly appreciation (unless perpetual scrutiny is our only means of paying tribute).56

As Jill Angel is no longer among the living (her ashes were buried in Berryman’s grave after she died in 1976), and the only personal papers of hers available to me are those contained in her son’s archives, she is a figure I have encountered solely by proxy.

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55. Ibid., 33.
56. Jill Angel offered to type Berryman’s letters for posterity’s sake. See Berryman to Jill Angel, 28 October 1936, in We Dream of Honour: John Berryman’s Letters to His Mother, ed. Richard J. Kelly (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1988), 66. Berryman writes, “Your offer to type out the letters is very generous, but frankly I don’t think I could bear looking at my effusions typed out by some one else as a formal record, and I should think it would kill you to type out some of the idiocy, so heigh ho and thanks awfully much for the offer.”
That being said, Jill Angel is anything but a static textual entity. She remains an inconclusive figure, knowable only through the letters, the work of her son’s biographers, and some half-truths she shared with certain intimates. Hence, part of what makes her a problem mother, I would argue, is that as a figure primarily captivating because of her proximity to the confessional poet, her place in the confessional canon is somewhat awkward, and some might say, ticklish.

Nevertheless, the letters exchanged between John Berryman and Jill Angel stand out as a testing ground and rehearsal space for some of the poet’s pivotal theories about writing. It is from her, I contend, that the poet inherited his funny relationship to truth. Given Berryman’s tendency to exploit his own biography as the materials for many of his poems, and given that the letters between him and his mother “are by far the most extensive and significant he wrote to any one individual,”57 this chapter chiefly takes as its object the hotbed of conflicting longings and preoccupations shared between mother and son as they shaped and informed some of Berryman’s most memorable *Dream Songs*. Although Jill helped the poet proofread and index the 385-poem volume while visiting him in Minneapolis, I argue her influence goes beyond that of a proofreader and indexer; it is my belief that the conflicts and drama between mother and son as they were rehearsed in the correspondence shaped Berryman’s idea of “confession” as both a literary genre (one which he infamously disavowed) and a compulsion. Jill Angel’s inability to confess a consistent narrative to her son of his father’s alleged suicide heavily influenced Berryman’s understanding of the relationship between confession and contempt.

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Confrontational is one mild way of describing the correspondence between mother and son, but first, allow me here to relate a historical anecdote so that I may frame Berryman’s publicized relationship to the genre of confession: in a Paris Review interview published in 1972, the interviewer, a former student of Berryman’s, asked the poet, “You, along with Lowell, Sylvia Plath, and several others, have been called a confessional poet. How do you react to that label?” Berryman famously responded, “With rage and contempt! Next question.”

Berryman’s tight-lippedness here is revealing. Is he just being difficult? He is, after all, a literary critic and not just a poet, so it seems bizarre that the poet-critic does not justify his rejection of the term any further.

As the interviewer presses Berryman with the follow-up question, “Are the sonnets ‘confessional’?” Berryman responds, “I don’t know. The word doesn’t mean anything. I understand the confessional to be a place where you go and talk with a priest. I personally haven’t been to confession since I was twelve years old.”

Strange. The poet’s father shot himself a few months before his son’s twelfth birthday. Throughout The Dream Songs, Berryman returns to the fact of his father’s death, often in great anguish (most memorably in Song 384); yet his evasiveness and reluctance to say anything further about “confessional poetry” may strike one as odd. This secret, the fact of the father, secrete. The omission is like a nocturnal emission. Why does the poet hesitate to disclose the details surrounding his last “official” confession? Berryman’s lack of interest in his former student’s question suggests that the word “confession” *does* mean something. However, if a poet refuses to confess, should he be

59. Ibid.
held in contempt? While the interviewer as a listener could at this moment charge the poet with his reticence to confess, such prodding would demand that Berryman stand outside of his poems as a privileged knower. Is it unreasonable to expect poets, beyond their poems, and at the expense of their own privacy, to know, confess, and “out” their relationship to literary history whenever asked? Can a confessional poet ever invoke his right to Blödigkeit, or “timidity,” a cognate of nonknowing, stupidity?60

If only Berryman wasn’t so much like his character, Huffy Henry. Rather than plead the fifth, the moody poet’s dismissive response gives him away as one caught up with confession against his will. As an intellectual in his own right, Berryman fancies himself and his work above the critical term, hence, his contempt. In her book, Ugly Feelings, Sianne Ngai observes, “Too weak or insignificant to pose any sort of danger, the object of contempt is perceived as inferior in a manner that allows it to be dismissed or ignored.”61 As much as Berryman would prefer to move on, his interlocutor insists and, as is the nature of the interview, puts him in the hot seat, causing the subject to sweat. Palpable in this confrontation between Berryman and his student is the well of Weltangst that both could fall into as they press upon the limits of such a loaded word: confession.

This anecdote demonstrates that confession is an act, a ritual, a practice based in rehearsal and repetition. In addition to being a literary genre or a posture one disavows, perhaps Berryman exemplifies that confession is also a compulsion: the impulse to confess is one we can’t help but give into. However, as soon as the poet is caught in the act of confessing, he is deemed a confessional, a privileged knower; as a result, the poet

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60. For a discussion of Blödigkeit, and other “cognates of nonknowing,” see Avital Ronell, Stupidity (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 6.
is, with or without his consent, called upon to confess the nature of his relationship to confession, over and over and over again.

Berryman’s conflicts suggest that the site of confession is a scene composed of eternal returns, mutually negotiated and refereed between reader-writer, performer-audience, public-penitent. Since “we know privacy by way of its invasion,”62 I intend to analyze primarily the scene of confession as it is rehearsed in the correspondence between John Berryman and his mother, Jill Angel. I suspect Jill’s inability to confess to her son the details of his father’s death heavily influenced Berryman’s understanding of the relationship between confession and contempt; their correspondence reveals a fraught dynamic where each prompts the other over the years to confess repeatedly to the same grievances. It is evident from their exchange that each procured from the other on several occasions varying degrees of contempt.

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What is the link between confession and correspondence? As in a diary, private correspondence prompts us to confess the details of our day; to our addressee, we disclose what happened to us, and what we wished happened to us. Unlike the diary form, however, in letters, we are compelled by both interest and politesse to inquire about the wishes and events experienced by those to whom we are writing. Innocent inquiries such as “How are you?” may be intended casually; as a convention of the epistolary genre, such gestures, in other words, are not always asked with the expectation that the question begs for an answer. At other times, in the context of a sealed letter between intimate

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correspondents, what may at first appear to be a benign social formality is actually a deeply consequential call to remember me; respond.

Response, a form of acknowledgement, is one way of affirming the lives of others. Whether it comes in the form of a reply, or the more personally directed form of advice, epistolary correspondence offers the writer a luxury not available to him in the diary or journal: the company of another voice, an interlocutor. Correspondence provides confirmation that I am not alone in the world and the voices with which I seek to consort and commiserate with, are indeed, not only my own. As John Berryman wrote on February 14th 1937 (Valentine’s Day) in reply to his mother’s suggestion of using a journal in order to better track his aesthetic development: “your suggestion of a journal is impossible, I find: I cannot write into blank air, I must address some near sensibility. Obviously it is you whom I must, with rare exceptions, address.”

Berryman’s early self-professed reliance on “some near sensibility” is strikingly acute given his later poetic tendencies, especially in The Dream Songs. Henry, the poem’s protagonist, for example, depends on the comic repartee of an unnamed end man to impart a sympathetic ear to his suffering. To this anonymous black friend, I will later return, but for now, I would like to interrogate the obvious aforementioned “you” upon whom the developing young poet depends: Jill Angel, the name under which Martha Little Berryman, John Berryman’s mother, had signed most of her letters.

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63. John Berryman to Jill Angel, 14 February 1947, 95.
Martha Little was born July 8th 1894. Alvin Little, Martha’s father, deserted the family by the time she was five years old. Prone to self-pity, Martha would come to view her plight as unfortunate, for she was, in her words, “the child of a broken marriage.”

In adulthood, Martha possessed a tendency to exaggerate and repeat her self-mythology ad nauseam; as her first-born, John, would describe it, her “incessant battering harangue” notoriously drove him mad to the point of collapse. As late as June of 1965, approaching her 71st birthday, Martha would continue to exploit her unenviable fatherlessness in an unsent letter addressed to John. She laments:

There is one thing we share about which we have never spoken; we have both known its almost incalculable effect on you, (incalculable to me, that is) and during these years when thinking was almost my only capacity I have come to realize that it has had far more effect on me than I had known or given any even glancing thought to. I speak of our deprivation: yours and mine, each abandoned by the father.

Besides being verbose, characteristic of the letters Martha sent her son over the course of their forty-plus year correspondence is their propensity for theatricality and dramatic effect. She goes on, “I do not blame my father or yours John, it is not for me to judge anyone including myself, but I wish they had not had or taken on such burdens, or laid them on others.” Her sentiments, most likely unsolicited, strike one as overtly staged: fake. One begins to doubt the biographical accuracy of Martha’s observations in part because her overly stylized speech rouses suspicion. Rather than direct, her syntax is stilted, and her logic, hard to follow; somewhat distorted, the truths within feel out of

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66. Jill Angel to John Berryman, 22 June 1965. John Berryman Papers (Mss 43), Literary Manuscripts Collection, University of Minnesota Libraries, Minneapolis. My thanks to Cecily Marcus, Curator, for her assistance while I consulted the archive. I also owe a special thanks to Berryman’s wife, Kate Donahue, for allowing me access to Berryman’s papers and providing me with permission to quote from letters located in the archive.
sync with the sentiments. Furthermore, the author’s rhetorical reliance on the “we” pronoun, the possessive “our,” or the use of phrases like “yours and mine” seems manipulative rather than matter-of-fact.

Martha’s obtuseness about particulars also renders her tone coercive, rather than confessional. The rigid framing of certain facts (“we both know”) leaves little room for contradiction or correction. But Martha is not exactly lying in this letter; regardless, in her attempt to couple and amplify mother and son’s separate grievances, she overlooks some pretty important distinctions. For example, unlike her father, Berryman’s father, John Allyn Smith, did not run out on the family: Smith shot himself (suspiciously, however, there were no powder burns, impossible in the case of a self-inflicted gunshot wound). Although the coroner officially ruled Smith’s death a suicide, Martha would maintain that Smith’s actions were an accident: “at dawn one day [Smith] was cleaning his gun; it went off and killed him,” she insisted.67 When her son, shortly before his own death, asked again about the event, his mother pleaded, “In the name of God, John, it is my deepest conviction that your father did not intentionally kill himself.”68 As he realized he had rattled his mother’s cage, Berryman apologetically replied, “I’m dreadfully sorry—even in my urgent-state—I laid such a burden on you. Please just forget it.”69 Doubtful as he may have been regarding the details of his mother’s story, Berryman resolved, for her sake, to follow the advice of his AA counselors and put the matter to rest. “I had gone as far as I could with that enquiry,” he conceded.70

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70. Ibid.
Martha’s accounts of her son’s “abandonment” and the events on Clearwater Island consistently ignore the circumstances preceding Smith’s death the early morning hours of June 26, 1926. As Berryman’s first wife Eileen Simpson would later corroborate, in her various retellings of June 26 and the events that led up to that fateful Florida morning, Martha is particularly mum about the details that allude to her involvement. Simpson recalls, “the circumstances of [Martha’s] first husband’s death were part of an ever-changing myth she periodically reworked, usually in response to her older son’s longing to be convinced that she was not responsible for driving his father to suicide.”71 Important details Martha neglected to mention when narrating the summer of 1926 included: her affair with the couple’s landlord, John Angus, who was twenty years Martha’s senior and already married; the date of the divorce proceedings between Smith and Martha, which were to be finalized on the day of his death; and a few weeks later, Martha’s immediate marriage to John Angus, who was to become John and his brother Robert’s stepfather.72

By overstating what she perceived as mother and son’s shared loss, Martha displaces the role her own actions might have played prior to Smith’s death. In contrast, she was also quick to emphasize her inner resolve and resourcefulness as a mother after the traumatic incident. Rather than play the part of the grief-stricken widow, at 32 years old, Jill Angel, as she began to call herself after marrying John Angus, moved the family to Jackson Heights, Queens. Over three decades later, in 1959, while her son was hospitalized for delirium tremens and exhaustion at Glenwood Hills Hospital in

71. Simpson, Poets in Their Youth, 63.
72. John Berryman was born John Allyn Smith, Jr.; after Martha married John Angus (also known as “Uncle Jack”) he adopted her children, and they in turn took John Angus’s last name, Berryman.
Minneapolis, she wrote him, “Did you never wonder why I remarried so soon?” So her “sons should never have to say they were fatherless,” she replied.  

Martha, ever the martyr. Although her letter of 1965 was never sent, it is difficult to ignore her desperate attempt so late in life to collapse her son’s misery with her own. The mother’s histrionic appeals as to what she perceived as her and her son’s shared deprivation feels insincere and unconvincing. Martha may have recognized only after she started typing the letter that her choice of words was clumsy and blatantly self-aggrandizing; perhaps she chose against sending because even she the author could not bring herself to believe it. Another reason may have been because the letter was ill-timed: her son, having just been awarded the Pulitzer Prize for 77 Dream Songs that very May, was again in and out of hospitals for alcoholism. That her letter was originally intended to solicit pity or attention is probable given the intensity with which her son worked. Nevertheless, such missives, I believe, provide a starting point: a place from which to ponder John Berryman’s relationship to confessionalism, a genre predicated on the poet’s “will to purge” the details of his autobiography, or how he came to be a poet.  

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In order to appreciate some of the resentment or “baggage” with which Berryman arrived upon the literary scene, it is necessary to analyze how Berryman himself narrated his own beginnings as a poet. After the publication of The Dream Songs in 1969, in a special issue of The Harvard Advocate dedicated entirely to Berryman’s work, in another interview, the poet was asked when he first began writing; he responded:

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73. Haffenden, The Life of John Berryman, 34.
I was very late in developing—very late in developing. I was
about nineteen when I wrote four sonnets for my mother’s
birthday—and they were about the worst sonnets that the world
has ever seen, but I thought they were quite good, and my
mother thought they were terrific. I have always had a very close
relation with my mother—that’s very bad for me, I’m told.75

Berryman’s attitude toward his mother’s influence would become increasingly
ambivalent as the poet came to fully inhabit his gifts. As he would write in Dream Song
270, “Womb was the word, where Henry never developed.”76 Before his disenchantment
set in, on the occasion of her fortieth birthday in 1934, his first sonnet to Jill began,

I sing a mother’s love, too strong to hold
Unto herself her son, though they were two
So near in mind and heart, and eyes controlled
By one strong light, they visioned a single view,77

As a youth, Berryman, heavily influenced by his devoted mother’s literary enthusiasms
and tastes, reveled in their shared intellectual passions. Not only did Jill encourage her
son’s academic efforts: when he shared with her his literary aspirations, she would offer
advice and suggestions. So when the son began to write poems, “De Bebe Dirl” (as he
would sometimes call her) naturally became his first reader. He relied upon her in order
to cultivate his poetic sensibility, and in the concluding sonnet of the same set, he praises
her intellect as his chief inspiration, above all:

When from the lyric, veritable wells
Of her mind, her thought as from a cage
Leaps out, and from the wealth which therein dwells
She summons poignant beauty to her page.
The quality that strains behind the words
A poet employs to freeze his soul, nor lose
From a phrase the explosive power of bawling herds—78

76. Berryman. The Dream Songs, 289.
77. Kelly, We Dream of Honour, 33.
78. Ibid., 35.
In his analysis of this sonnet, Charles Thornbury suggests that Berryman’s mother, as she is depicted here, functions as “the muse of his poems yet to be written.”\textsuperscript{79} I am struck, however, by “the quality that strains behind the words,” presumably those contained within his mother’s mesmerizing letters; such beauty, as the kind summoned by his mother, runs parallel to the poet’s frozen soul. Is the poet’s “late development” ironically foreshadowed and overdetermined by his mother’s seductive speech?

Toward the end of his life, SEDUCTIVE stands out among the words Berryman chose to describe the elusive quality that strains behind his mother’s words. In his notes for the posthumously published autobiographical novel, \textit{Recovery}, of his mother, the narrator reflects,

\begin{quote}
My debts to her immeasurable: ambition, stamina, resourcefulness, taste . . . faith, originality, her sacrifices for my schooling . . . blind confidence in me. But she helped destroy my father . . . & still hasn’t, let go of me in \textit{any} degree—e.g. interminable letters, clippings, incessant talk SEDUCTIVE—‘beautiful’, forcible but v. feminine\textsuperscript{80}
\end{quote}

Berryman’s later estimation of his mother’s beauty as seductive is worth pausing over because it describes the son as spellbound and unable to turn away from his mother’s gaze. In his older age, the poet recognizes that he is both fascinated and repulsed by his mother’s power over him; he writes in \textit{Recovery}, “1000 quarrels with Mother; utter admiration—my first literary subject, after the ASPCA gold medal essay, my first prize, eh? Or was it the statewide spelling award? \textit{Second} prize. The taller dark girl made ‘syzygy.’”\textsuperscript{81} In astronomy, syzygy describes a conjunction or opposition, as if between the moon and the sun. Carl Jung employed the term to describe a union of “paired

\textsuperscript{80}. Haffenden, \textit{The Life of John Berryman}, 33.
\textsuperscript{81}. Berryman, \textit{Recovery}, 69.
opposites, where the One is never separated from the Other, its antithesis.”

Syzygy is another way to think about correspondence as the simultaneous affinity and aversion experienced by both a mother and her son. Such paradoxical alignments constituted the start of John Berryman’s art.

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While away on fellowship abroad in Cambridge, England, Berryman eagerly wrote to Jill in the Spring of 1937: “We must do a lot of reading aloud when I return; you read beautifully and I am learning.” At 22, he was bursting with pride over his academic achievements and anxious to earn his mother’s approval; enthusiastically, he added, “I have a poem by Marvell which will stun you with excited joy and jump your heart.” Thornbury has characterized the pair’s dynamic: “[Berryman] is the dutiful son whose sense of himself is fused with his mother’s ambitions” and with reason: Jill was wholly invested in her first-born’s scholarly pursuits. Milt Halliday, a college friend of Berryman’s while the two studied at Columbia, confirms in his memoir John Berryman and the Thirties, “John’s mother was almost obsessively devoted to his welfare and success.” Asides from this comment, Halliday never speculates any further on the matter of Jill’s involvement in her son’s affairs, which may leave one to suppose that her particular brand of maternal concern was neither suspicious nor noticeably inappropriate.

Feeling lonely and emotionally isolated abroad, Jill’s letters during the 1930s afforded Berryman the opportunity to express his literary ambitions to someone he

84. Ibid.
85. Thornbury, introduction to John Berryman.
trusted would both understand and support him. On the one hand, the novice poet’s decisive reply to his mother’s writerly advice earlier in 1937 in which he elevates the epistolary presence of she who shares “some near sensibility” is meant to serve as praise: “Obviously it is you whom I must, with rare exceptions, address.” Upon further analysis, Berryman’s investment in his mother’s response to his aesthetic conflicts reflects more than just a son’s gratitude. In the same letter, the ambitious young Auden-imitator, conscious of these missives’ contribution to his development, asserted, “Letters can form a style.”87 Berryman depended on his and Jill’s shared intellectual exchange to arrive at his own aesthetic conclusions about poetry. In other words, beyond his mother’s book recommendations, Berryman sought out his mother’s advice and aesthetic approval in order to cultivate his personal voice.

This aspect of their correspondence would continue into Berryman’s later adulthood: he would rely upon his mother to remain the steadfast and reliable sounding board for many of his critical insights. Although the intensity of his dependence would wane as he came into his own as a well-regarded poet, their correspondence, not unlike a backstage dressing room, allowed him to compose his literary self. Richard J. Kelly, editor of John and Jill’s published correspondence writes, “The letters themselves clearly served as a means of testing [Berryman’s] powers of observation and expression, while providing him with, as he said, a place in which to organize his thoughts.”88 The possible pleasures of correspondence for Berryman were two-fold: first, in correspondence as letter-writing, one may come upon correspondence, the fortunate discovery of close similarity or close connection between addressee and addressee. In the epistolary

87. John Berryman to Jill Angel, 14 February 1937, 95.
88. Kelly, We Dream of Honour, 2.
company of those who “share some near sensibility” and empathize with our concerns, our life experiences, and whose dispositions are compatible with our own, we feel a kinship; such a kinship as the kind founded between certain intellectual confidantes as Berryman perceived it, provided a supportive and thoughtful environment necessary for aesthetic development. In addition, correspondence not only compounded his and Jill’s closeness; paradoxically, the likenesses they reflected in each other and mirrored in their letters provided a crucial writing space in which the poet could come to know himself and realize the uniqueness of his particular writerly style.

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Looking back, Berryman would come to describe this particular correspondence from his time abroad as “nauseatingly intimate” when he reread the letters years later. Against the backdrop of the many intimacies exchanged while the son was away, one starts to understand why, in hindsight, the poet might have shrunk back in shame when confronted by both the contents and candor contained in their letters. At times, their exchanges read like melodramatic declarations between Sirkian paramours: “Alas, how far and long from me thou art!” Berryman wrote in October 1936. In one of Jill’s few surviving letters from this period, to her son she confessed, “I am never without a sense of loss in your absence.”

According to Kelly, “A recurring element in [Berryman’s] Cambridge letters is his need to reassure his mother that she is the most important person in his life.” His pursuit of academic and professional opportunity seemed to be in conflict with his

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90. John Berryman to Jill Angel, 18 October 1936, 58.
91. Jill Angel to John Berryman, 15 December 1936, 78.
92. Kelly, *We Dream of Honour*, 44.
perceived indebtedness to his mother’s influence. At the time, the insecure scholar abroad understood her sacrifices and endless emotional support provided the conditions for his being away, and yet here she wasn’t to experience Europe with him. “It is a damn frightful pity,” Berryman would lament, “my being here and your being there.” How could he enjoy this experience without her, his biggest fan? In early December 1937, Berryman, who had already been gone over a year, wrote to Jill,

I believe I have never told you how deeply I am grateful for all your relationship with my verse. You neither discouraged nor unduly encouraged, but bore with patience and great wisdom my drivel, directing very quietly indeed my inclinations. Your insistence on the traditional and the plain kept me from sterile obscurity and formlessness. It is certainly most to you, perhaps to you entirely, that I owe what work I have done and shall do. I kiss you with love and gratitude and admiration.

Beyond respect and admiration, passages like these that pledge the son’s eternal indebtedness and border on religious devotion read like Saint Augustine’s *Confessions*. “Could anything of mine remain hidden from you, even if I refused to confess it?,” Augustine asks God, whereas in 1937, Berryman discloses to Jill: “I much love writing, even by hand, and especially to you, who know(s) more about me than anyone even God.” Self-aware and suspicious of his desire to be so deeply known by his intimates, Berryman adds, “it’s curious, when I want in general so little known about me, that I am passionately anxious that a few friends know as much as possible—underdeveloped exhibitionism, I daresay.” There’s something precocious about Berryman’s final remark, and maybe, a little disingenuous; in their charm, the words sound as if they belonged to Jill rather than John.

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94. John Berryman to Jill Angel, 7 Dec 1937, 113-114.
96. John Berryman to Jill Angel 6 January 1937, 84.
97. Ibid.
Augustine’s text also flirts with the blurry distinction between a mother and son. In the *Confessions*, of his own mother, Monica, Augustine writes, “where she was, there also was I.”98 Apart from influence, the tonal similarities between Augustine and Berryman’s utterances may be explained by the fact that the self of Augustine’s *Confessions* is, as Nancy K. Miller has pointed out, “inseparable from his intense relation to Monica.”99 For Augustine and for Berryman, there is no way to conceive of the devout, confessional self without referencing the relationship to the supreme and omnipotent other, not God, but mother.

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Increasingly conscious of his mother’s emotional dependence on him, in early December of 1937 Berryman wrote Jill in consolation: “Think of me as a cushion who loves you devotedly, will always try to be there for you to sit on, and will endeavor constantly to be as comfortable as possible for you.”100 It is likely that the geographical distance between the poet and his mother during this period exacerbated the intimacy with which the two wrote, for when he returned to these letters sometime during the mid-40s, in his diary, he wrote, “How desperately then, how obscenely . . . I was bound to Mother.”101 Bound is neither an inappropriate nor accidental choice of word: he was bound to be there for her, and consequently, he became bound by her, limited.

It would take several years following his return to the States until Berryman was better able to address the taxing effect such a closeness had on his physical and emotional well being. In Dream Song 166, he writes:

98. Augustine, *Confessions*, 68.
100. John Berryman to Jill Angel, 24 November 1937, 111.
I have strained everything except my ears, 
he marveled to himself: and they’re too dull—
owing to one childhood illness—
outward, for strain; inward, too smooth & fierce
for painful strain as back at the onset, yes
when Henry keen & viable

began to poke his head from Venus’ foam
toward the grand shore, where all them ears would be
if any.
Thus his art started, Thus he ran from home
toward home, forsaking too withal his mother
in the almost unbearable smother.

He strained his eyes, his brain, his nervous system,
for a beginning; cracked an ankle & arm;
it cannot well be denied
that nearly all the rest of him came to harm
too . . . Only the ears sat with his theme
in the splices of his pride.  

On one level, this Dream Song is an origin story. In one of Berryman’s versions of this
fantasy, the myth of the poète maudit begins when he emerges from le mont de Vénus; as
he advances toward the ears of his imagined audience, before he can call himself a poet,
the speaker foresees yet another task before him; like Homer’s Odysseus or Melville’s
Ishmael, he must leave home, and live to tell about it. But origins are notoriously hard to
pin down: he strained for a beginning. What kind of myth begins where in order to
become a poet, one of the hero’s labors is to finally move out from under the seat of his
mother’s ass? In Dream Song 76, also titled, “Henry’s Confession,” the poet, grief-
stricken over his dead father, muses over his inheritance: “A bullet on a concrete
stoop/close by a smothering southern sea/spreadeagled on an island, by my knee.”

Caught between a bullet and the maternal gulf lies the poet’s birthright, his patrimony.

On Mother’s Day of 1960, exasperated, Berryman confessed to Jill:

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103. Ibid., 83.
No matter what my condition, I am far from sure that I will ever again with equanimity and undamaged affection, be able to allow myself to be smothered with talk in the way that you permit yourself to do. Thirty times I tried to make a conversation out of it. On you rushed. – I do not blame you, it is not for me to blame you, but I am obliged to consider what I can stand; this is from the standpoint of self-preservation . . . I must emphatically dissent from your position of All-or-Nothing. You have been giving me this for many years. In 1960, as in 1953, as in 1935, when I can no longer, on some occasion, bear to be crushed and obliterated under your stopless talking, you cry out that I never want to hear you say anything, and so you never will again. Bear in mind that I am 45 years old as I now tell you that in my opinion this is nonsense, paranoid nonsense. The fact that a man is unwilling to be driven crazy says absolutely nothing to the absurdity of supposing that he is anxious or willing to relinquish his oldest and one of his closest ties of love . . . Everyone wants and needs to be heard, not smothered. 104

For the poet, the problem mother’s “stopless talk” had become an aural abhorrence. It must have required a considerable amount of energy for the poet knee-deep in Dream Songs to write this letter, but I suspect he also derived some pleasure and a sense of mastery when he heard embedded in his feelings of being smothered the source of his frustrations: mother. He strained his eyes, his brain, his nervous system for a beginning. It took years for Berryman to see the connection, the correspondence between the “smothering southern sea,” his mother’s “forcible” nature and the force that enjambed his art.

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Torn between his perceived debt to his only living parent and his desire for self-determination, Berryman tussled with himself to figure out the cause of his malady. By 1955, as he began to embark on the 385-poem undertaking that would become The Dream Songs, Berryman expressed to his mother of utmost importance in all writing was “to be clear and short; but rhythms matter too, and unexpectedness. You lead the reader

briskly in one direction, then you spin him round, or you sing him a lullaby and then hit him on the head.”\textsuperscript{105} The later part of Berryman’s analogy, which likens his idealized style to a lullaby that turns into a knock to the reader’s head, is impossible to ignore. In one sense, I take it Berryman here is speaking of the force of the poet: ideally, a poet’s style ought to disturb his reader’s sense of self and jar him. A Melvillian in many regards, Berryman believed the poem, a combination of forces emanating from the poet, ought to strike the reader, like a hand, or a harpoon. The lullaby, however, speaks to the rhythmic, and its associations with the maternal; she who sings the lullaby is the one who soothes the child to sleep and restores the disturbed to peace.

Jill was not exactly a source of quietude, and of this, she was often proud; as she herself said to Eileen Simpson after her son’s return from England, “did he expect to find me sitting by the fire in a rocker, like Whistler’s mother?”\textsuperscript{106} Jill had a loud presence and dynamic personality; her perception of herself as a mother was no less dramatic. An avid reader and occasional short story writer, in 1931, Jill set down to words her experience of motherhood:

\ldots They were alone; she pulled her robe aside carefully, bracing the bottle against her left hand, and knew surcease from a life-long ache as his cheek touched her breast. Until he came, there was no beauty: no beauty of slate-gray, remembering eyes, of fine fingers, of clutching toes, of golden fuzz outlining an ear-curve, no beauty, no beauty. \ldots He pushed at the bottle with his tongue, hunger assuaged, sleep hanging on his lids. Yearning over him, she dribbled milk on her breast and thrust the hardening nipple into his lax mouth; once, twice, he spit it out and then as the flesh-feel aroused him he closed and tugged, drawing long arduous pulls, ceasing only to wail aloud at failure, nuzzling again for the nipple, pulling and drawing, whimpering and crying at the unnatural nothingness. Needle pain was stilled in her by the ecstasy of his need; futility closed iron claws upon her at the anguish of her sterile breast. \ldots she would put him

\begin{footnotes}
\item[105] John Berryman to Jill Angel, 1 May 1955, 289.
\item[106] Simpson, \textit{Poets in Their Youth}, 66.
\end{footnotes}
down in a minute, but not now, not now. It was sweet with a
double happiness to hold him so; never in his life would he be
more fully hers than now.\textsuperscript{107}

Jill’s narrative is saturated with a range of sentiments varying from pain to rapture.

Olivia Laing, author of the travelogue-cum-literary study \textit{The Trip to Echo Spring},
contends that the passage “reads like a nineteenth-century seduction scene.”\textsuperscript{108} It’s true:
one need only go as far as Melville’s \textit{Pierre, or The Ambiguities} to discern the erotic,
Oedipal tensions that circulate through Jill’s words. In this sexualized narrative, Laing
detects that the infant’s experience of the sterile breast alongside the hardening nipple
foreshadows “a punishing lack of satisfaction.”\textsuperscript{109} Such a lack is consistent with Richard
Kelly’s description of Jill’s maternal shortcomings: “Attempting to meet some need of
her son’s, she would become far too involved and overly helpful and then, having
alienated him, withdraw and sulk and resent his lack of appreciation.”\textsuperscript{110} Intrigued as I am
by John and Jill’s dynamic, I am not entirely convinced by Laing’s conclusion that such
scenes, as Jill narrated them, “might explain at least in part why as an adult [Berryman]
would want complete control over his source of nourishment and comfort, and why he
might suffer lifelong from an appalling sense of thirst.”\textsuperscript{111} In a memoir that seeks to
explain why certain American canonical authors like John Berryman drink themselves to
death, I hesitate to place the burden of why on the problem mother’s breast.

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{107} Kelly, \textit{We Dream of Honour}, 3-4.
\textsuperscript{108} Olivia Laing, \textit{The Trip to Echo Spring: On Writers and Drinking} (New York: Picador, 2013), 256.
\textsuperscript{109} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{110} Kelly, \textit{We Dream of Honour}, 7.
\textsuperscript{111} Laing, \textit{The Trip to Echo Spring}, 257.
\end{footnotesize}
Fig. 1. Jill and John Berryman, ca. 1916. John Berryman Papers (Mss 43), Literary Manuscripts Collection, University of Minnesota Libraries, Minneapolis. Used with permission courtesy of Kate Donahue.
Still, I would like to say something more of the “punishing lack” as it intersects with Berryman’s *Dream Songs*. Take Dream Song 11 for instance, which begins, “His mother goes. The mother comes & goes.” The contradiction between the mother who excessively gives and the mother who suddenly withdraws mirrors the form Berryman employed to write *The Dream Songs*. Let’s linger a bit longer on the lullaby. Berryman’s formulation of effective poetic prosody suggests that the poet is both he who sings the reader to the seductive edge of tranquility, only to suddenly impose upon him a kind of unexpected syntactical blow. After the publication of *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet*, and especially after *77 Dream Songs*, many would recognize Berryman’s style as unique for its deceptively rhythmic six line stanza patterns, which would abruptly depart without warning from their basic 5-5-3-5-5-3 form. However, as complex as Berryman’s prosody may seem, perhaps in addition to being a groundbreaking American achievement, it is also worth appreciating as a culturally elevated form of child’s play (Freud’s fort/da)—for a poetics that soothes the reader as if through lullaby and then hits him over the head not only enacts the child’s wish to do what mother does, but also fulfills “the gratification of an impulse of revenge suppressed in real life.” In this game, the reader remains a substitute for Mother.

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It would be an over-simplification to quip, like mother, like son. Florence J. Miller, an acquaintance of Berryman’s who had the pleasure of meeting Jill on more than one occasion remembered her as an “ebullient, almost manic woman . . . charming for

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brief encounters, but might have been quite wearing in continuous contact.""114

Berryman’s friend, Milt Halliday remembers Jill as having “embodied everything suggested by the word ‘sophisticated’” right down to the scotch highball; despite appearances, Halliday discerned “her income was not adequate to her style of living.”115

Not yet married to Berryman, Eileen similarly recalls the effort Jill invested into her “performance” when the two met at a restaurant in New York:

Striding into the restaurant dressed in the bright colors and bold jewelry she favored, she commanded a different table from the one the headwaiter had seated me at and issued a series of commands in a voice that echoed of the Southwest, the twang only partly hidden by acquired Northern inflections. She was not beautiful (as John thought she was), but she was attractive and, to my eyes, glamorous because of her youthful appearance, her élan and vitality. Mother and son looked alike and they didn’t.116

Although both he and his mother shared a passion for literature and music (among the songs he recommended to her was “Go Home and Tell Your Mother”), one senses that Jill, more often than John, reveled in their likeness. Upon his return from Cambridge, Jill introduced John not as her son but as her brother to unacquainted friends and colleagues. She also insisted, not entirely in jest, that John introduce her to his friends and acquaintances as his older sister.

Berryman had not taken kindly to his mother’s requests, as Eileen had later estimated, because “he needed to believe in [Jill] as a reliable reporter. If she was capable of saying he was her brother, what was she not capable of saying about other relationships?”117

114. Florence J. Miller to John Haffenden, 11 February 1976. John Berryman Papers (Mss 43), Literary Manuscripts Collection, University of Minnesota Libraries, Minneapolis. Berryman was very close with Florence’s husband, Bhain Campbell.
117. Ibid., 66.
Following Berryman’s arrival back in New York in June of 1938, the poet briefly resided with his mother in the family’s Upper West Side apartment on 115th Street. Professionally frustrated and in desperate need of a stable income, Berryman was both irritable and unaccustomed to the physical proximity with which he and his mother lived. Moreover, at forty-four, Jill Angel, who had recently separated from Berryman’s stepfather, John Angus, was a single working woman making a decent income. Unnerved by his mother’s inappropriate behavior, and financially dependent on her, Berryman, with few professional options to speak of, felt himself driven mad. To make matters worse, it became obvious to everyone except Jill that the strain resulting from her nonstop barrage of small talk was more than the saturnine son could bear. Eileen recalls the quarrels:

In their outbursts, which occurred whenever they were together for too long, each feared to say unforgettable and unforgiveable things that would cause an irreparable break. Mrs. Berryman, denying this in the beginning, said, “You mustn’t make too much of our scenes (I see you’re very sensitive to them). John and I love each other dearly. But in a close relationship between two people with strong personalities there are bound to be occasions when the strong bully the strong.” From her laugh as she said this, one got the feeling that she recuperated quickly.\textsuperscript{118}

Contrary to Jill’s interpretation of events where both mother and son were mutually guilty of possessing “strong personalities,” Eileen, well-versed in Jill’s tendency to exaggerate the truth as she saw fit, wasn’t buying it. Naturally concerned for her husband’s well-being, Eileen experienced Jill as enacting a much greater power over John: “he so little felt that the contest was between equals that he resorted to the use of two weapons, each more damaging to himself than to her: the threat of suicide, and episodes of fainting.”\textsuperscript{119}

\textsuperscript{118}. Ibid., 66-67.  
\textsuperscript{119}. Ibid., 66.
The first time Eileen witnessed one of Berryman’s fainting fits was at the height of an argument John was having with Jill. Eileen remembers vividly,

At a moment when I was afraid he might strike out at her in rage and frustration, a gesture which would have been shockingly foreign to him, he fell to the ground instead. As if by the throw of a switch, Mrs. Berryman’s hysteria dropped away and she became a ministering angel. She removed John’s tie, opened his collar, asked me to help her lift his seemingly lifeless boy to the couch, put a cold compress on his brow, covered him with a blanket, and tiptoeing out of the room, closed the door, saying we must let him rest. From past experience she knew he would remain in a semicomatose state for hours.\(^{120}\)

Milt Halliday also remembers “John’s swoons,” as precipitated by his volatile altercations with his mother.\(^{121}\) In the case that he recovered within a few moments of having collapsed, the argument, Halliday recalled, would not be resumed.

Although doctors suggested Berryman suffered from a mild form of epilepsy known as petit mal, neurological testing failed to determine the cause of his episodes, and no conclusive medical reason could be given for them; still, his fainting fits were notoriously troublesome and caused his friends to worry. Among the concerned was Delmore Schwartz, who wrote to Mark Van Doren in the Spring of 1942,

My own impression, whatever it is worth, is that the only thing wrong with John is some kind of hysteria. The fainting fits he has occur when he is spoken to sternly or contradicted; I don’t think they’re sheer frauds, but if they spring from his secret disease, the disease is an open secret, and beside the fainting, there is no sign of anything wrong with him.\(^{122}\)

An open secret? Did Delmore know something Berryman’s doctors did not? In hindsight, Eileen felt, like Delmore, that her husband’s fits were a byproduct of hysteria, or a kind

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\(^{120}\) Ibid., 67.
\(^{121}\) Halliday, *John Berryman*, 169.
\(^{122}\) Delmore Schwartz to Mark Van Doren, 22 March 1942, John Berryman Papers, Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Columbia University Library in the City of New York. Van Doren was Berryman’s teacher and mentor at Columbia University.
of reaction formation. Eileen, who would later become a trained psychoanalyst, theorized the fainting fits originated from

an impulse John had had to attack his mother physically when he could no longer reach her with words had been subverted, striking him down instead. He had prevented himself from doing the unforgivable and simultaneously transformed his enemy into a devoted nurse.123

In other words, Eileen interpreted the poet’s behavior as symptomatic of a deeper wish to strike down his mother, a formative adversary in her own right. This desire, however, came into conflict with the devoted son’s imago of his mother as a kind of totemic life-giving figure. His simultaneous desires to inflict violence upon and find comfort in the source of his strife were unconsciously satiated when he fell down prostrate, and, like a possum, played dead. Only then would Jill respond accordingly and assume the role of responsible, care-taker. This scene between mother and son, as Eileen recalled, was rehearsed again and again, and would continue well into the dissolution of Berryman’s second marriage.

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Only much later, after Berryman began analysis, would he become concerned with the extent to which his mother’s emotional demands for contact and intimacy prove excessive. John Haffenden, one of Berryman’s biographers, surmises that Jill Angel “swaddled him with feelings so intense that he could never reciprocate her insistent love, and grew to be burdened by it.”124 The burden with which he experienced her need had overwhelmed him, and as he embarked on further independence professionally and emotionally, he was not in any shape psychically or otherwise to bear it. In 1947,

Berryman started seeing psychiatrist Dr. James Shea. Having embarked on intense dream analysis, and facing the end of his first marriage after the conclusion of a disastrous affair, Shea advised Berryman to limit his contact with his mother and work instead on his marriage. Haffenden reports,

Berryman himself was aware of the insidiousness of his mother’s influence, and tended from time to time to distance his affairs from her, especially if his mother deemed them to detract in any way from the prospects which she had appointed for him. He was always to be reminded just how much he owed to his mother’s selflessness, and how much his independence hurt her.125

Although Berryman dedicated his first full-length collection titled, *The Dispossessed*, to his mother in 1948, analysis prompted him to reconsider her influence. According to Paul Mariani, another biographer of the poet, Berryman “wondered if his mother might actually have killed his father, at least by insisting on a divorce at a time when his father’s world was collapsing on him.”126 In an attempt to bait a response, in a letter dated June 9th 1950, Jill, provoked by a telephone argument and her son’s diminishing presence, wrote:

it may be that to love your father you must hate me . . . As for me, I love you and hold you dear, and shall do so always—if my love has not faltered in these past years, there is no reason to suppose that it may now, when all strain is gone. Let my love be no burden to you, but rather a strength.127

Having consulted with Berryman’s psychiatrist, Jill, as she noted herself on the top of the letter, “decided against speech or sending.”128

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125. Ibid., 70.
128. Ibid., 235.
In Dream Song 143 Berryman revisits the death of his father and grieves, “I repeat: I love him/until I fall into coma.” The poet can only go back so far into the irretrievable moment. Unable to reconcile his feelings with his father’s blank image, Berryman was always in part tortured and riddled with guilt over the fact that he could remember virtually nothing of his father. That he also would never know what thoughts or moods may have passed through his father’s mind in the final moments of his life maddened him. In the final stanza of Dream Song 145, as he revisits the father’s death, the poet mourns,

I cannot read that wretched mind, so strong & so undone. I’ve always tried. I—I’m trying to forgive whose frantic passage, when he could not live an instant longer, in the summer dawn left Henry to live on.

Beyond experiencing a sense of loss, Berryman was further disturbed by the fact that he himself could not say how exactly he felt about his father. Meditating on “the missing years and his father” Berryman poses the question in his novel Recovery, “How had he really felt about him, down the deep backward and abyss?” Furthermore, Berryman was perplexed by the empty blankness surrounding his father’s relationship to him, especially when compared to the dynamic relationship he maintained to his mother. While hospitalized in 1970, Berryman, desperate to get at the emotional root cause of his alcoholism, wrote in his diary:

Did I myself feel any guilt perhaps—long-repressed if so & this is mere speculation (defense here) about Daddy’s death? (I certainly pickt up enough of Mother’s self-blame to accuse her once, drunk & raging, of having actually murdered him & staged a suicide.) . . . Can’t seem to remember his ever getting angry at

130. Ibid., 162.
me . . . BLANK, probably odd . . . Such a vacant relationship compared to the (horrible) richness of mine with Mother!

ODD\textsuperscript{132}

Hard as he tried, he could remember virtually nothing of his father, so in order to conjure his father’s image, Berryman would inevitably fall back upon his mother’s image of Smith; he was understandably frustrated that he had only her version of him, rather than his own.

Despite his frustrations, one reason why Berryman may have felt compelled to revisit the death of the father within his poems and correspondence is because his mother’s version of his father’s death failed to satisfy him. According to Eileen Simpson,

> The accidental-death ending John never for a moment accepted, at least not as an adult. What he did waver over was the degree to which he believed in his mother’s responsibility: The Smiths and John Angus Berryman lived in the same building. Did his mother drive his father to despair by flirting under his nose with the courtly older man? By insisting on a divorce when her husband was frantic with worry, had she not pushed him to that last, desperate act?\textsuperscript{133}

Jill’s guilt would remain a central conflict for Berryman. To what extent was she responsible, and how would he reconcile his anger with his devotion? John Haffenden keenly observes that Berryman, who was an experienced biographer (he published a well-received biography on Stephen Crane and, toward the end of his life, attempted one on Shakespeare), was conspicuously less thorough while in pursuit of the more problematic details concerning his own life story. How was it that the experienced scholar still relied so exclusively on his mother to be his only reliable source? Haffenden explains,

> What may reasonably be inferred from his deliberate restriction of research about his father is that he wanted to comprehend the situation from his mother’s point of view, and to avoid any contradictions and ambiguities which might accrue from

\textsuperscript{132} Haffenden, \textit{The Life of John Berryman}, 30.
\textsuperscript{133} Simpson, \textit{Poets in Their Youth}, 64.
alternative evidence.\textsuperscript{134}

In other words, the son, relying on the testimony of his surviving parent, one on whom he was emotionally dependent, felt compromised. If he was going to rely on his mother’s testimony, and her remembering such a traumatic event on his behalf, then didn’t he owe it to her to trust, rather than doubt her? Haffenden continues, “Berryman could meet his duty to his mother only by disallowing the claims of affection owed to his father, her antagonist.”\textsuperscript{135} In Dream Song 384, the poet aims his rage onto the unknowable and invisible father:

\begin{quote}
The marker slants, flowerless, day’s almost done,  
I stand above my father’s grave with rage,  
often, often before  
I’ve made this awful pilgrimage to one  
who cannot visit me, who tore his page  
out: I come back for more,  

I spit upon this dreadful banker’s grave  
who shot his heart out in a Florida dawn  
O ho alas alas  
When will indifference come, I moan & rave  
I’d like to scrabble till I got right down  
away down under the grass  

and ax the casket open ha to see  
just how he’s taking it, which he sought so hard  
we’ll tear apart  
the mouldering grave clothes ha & then Henry  
will heft the ax once more, his final card,  
and fell it on the start.\textsuperscript{136}
\end{quote}

Berryman acknowledges his return as a repetition: \textit{often, often before} the poet writes, \textit{I come back for more}. The penultimate poem of Berryman’s major lifework speaks to the unresolved nature of grief, marked only by a series of eternal returns to “the start.”

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\textsuperscript{134} Haffenden, \textit{The Life of John Berryman}, 30.  
\textsuperscript{135} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{136} Berryman, \textit{The Dream Songs}, 406.
\end{flushright}
Berryman’s loss compounded with his loyalty to his mother caused him great anguish, for her account always felt somewhat inadequate. Inconsistencies in Jill’s accounts disturbed her son. What picture of his father was he to develop? Unable to create his own narrative, he was also unable to conjure a memory of his father with which he could live. In order to remember his father, or speak of his feelings for the ghost, Berryman relied on Jill to paint his father’s portrait over and over again. Eileen Simpson observed,

At a time of crisis, either following a violent quarrel or when John was re-examining his life, he would turn to her and ask her to go over the ground anew. She would obligé, sometimes in person, sometimes in three- and four-page single-spaced typewritten letters, with fresh inventions and interpretations, which he accepted or (privately) ridiculed, depending on his need at the moment.  

By the time Berryman wrote Dream Song 320, he had outlived his father already by several years (Smith was 39 years old when he died). Still, he was haunted by the possibility that his mother had more to do with the matter of his father’s death than she let on. And even Jill’s mother, Berryman’s grandmother, felt suspicious of her daughter’s role in Smith’s suicide. Already deep in the throes of alcoholism, Berryman wrote,

Steps almost unfamiliar toward his door
depth in night came. ‘I am a fierce old man’
Henry called out.
Was it his mother? Might it be a whore
out of his youth? Some foe—cold his blood ran—
forgotten in the crowd

In Dream Song 320 the tortured speaker’s soliloquy runs on *le léger moteur de la paranoïa*, to use Roland Barthes’s words. The haunted speaker feels the object of his

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terror advancing upon him: “he waited: a soft hiss/bad to his ears, & hurt.” Trembling, the poet hallucinates and “His nerves hear the lock turn.” Is the “open secret” to which Delmore had once referred on the other side of the dreamer’s door? The poem concludes when the poet rouses from his dream “waking sweated & sordid.” The speaker’s paranoia has its literary precedent in Shakespeare’s King Lear, a text with which Berryman was very familiar.

Despite the fact that Berryman never completed his planned biography of Shakespeare and labored unsuccessfully for years on a revised edition of Lear, he was respected by his peers as a fluent Shakespearean. A few years before he began writing the first Dream Songs, at age 36, Berryman was offered the prestigious Hodder Fellowship at Princeton in 1951. The public lectures, an obligation of the fellowship, offered the poet an opportunity to perform for his peers the part of the serious scholar. He lectured on Macbeth as well as The Tempest, but his final lecture on Hamlet was the main event. In his lecture, Berryman was to analyze Hamlet’s conflicted feelings toward his father and alongside the all-too-soon marriage of his mother, Ophelia, to the man who would become his uncle. As word traveled on campus lecture after lecture of Berryman’s reputation as a brilliant and engaging orator, the audience, filled to capacity, awaited with great anticipation the speaker’s thoughts on Hamlet. No one was quite prepared, however, for the “scene-stealing” Jill Berryman. Eileen Simpson remembers,

Every seat, except one reserved in the front row, was taken. John shifted his papers about on the lectern, looked at his watch, looked at me and, tightening his mouth with impatience, gestured that he could wait no longer. Making an effort to master his vexation, he began. Halfway through his introduction there was a commotion at the rear door. The private drama, the play within a play, was about to begin. All eyes turned—who would

have the brass?—to see enter, in vivid dress, Mrs. Berryman. She walked straight down to the first row and took the empty seat directly in front of her son.\textsuperscript{141}

Following the lecture, admirers surrounded Berryman having marveled in his erudition; Mrs. Berryman spoke of everything but. Dejected, the son neither spoke nor corresponded with his mother for nearly three months following the incident. Finally, July 2\textsuperscript{nd} 1951, Berryman wrote back, “I am sorry . . . it is dangerous for us to try and mix public and private occasions when I am as tired as I was then at the end of the lectures . . . I repeat: I am very sorry and I hope that you have forgotten whatever I said.”\textsuperscript{142}

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Just three weeks shy of his 40\textsuperscript{th} birthday, in the Fall of 1954, Berryman moved to Minnesota, the same state where his father, John Allyn Smith, had been born. Separated from his first wife Eileen, Berryman was making a-go of it on his own; he wasted no time reacquainting himself with his origins. Although Berryman’s arrival in Minneapolis was for work (thanks to Allen Tate’s recommendation, he was to teach the history of western civilization at The University of Minnesota), his return to his father’s state seems overdetermined, especially given the fact that his father died at age 39. The strangeness of his being there was not entirely lost on him; he wrote Jill October 7\textsuperscript{th}: “It is curious to be in my father’s state.”\textsuperscript{143} Actually, what is beyond “curious” is that Berryman, both a Shakespearean and a Freudian, did not register the uncanny and ghostly implications that he, the son, would inevitably inhabit his dead father’s state. “In order to snatch the loved object from death,” Berryman, the melancholic, identifies with the lost love-object, “becomes what he has been, but ends by experiencing himself in the death of the other

\textsuperscript{141} Simpson, \textit{Poets in Their Youth}, 209.
\textsuperscript{142} John Berryman to Jill Angel, 2 July 1951, 238.
\textsuperscript{143} John Berryman to Jill Angel, 7 October 1954, 265.
and can retain the other in his own life by rejoining him in death.”¹⁴⁴ In Jill’s narrative of accidental deaths, her son would eventually take his father’s place.

Following his arrival in Minneapolis, the poet would experience much exasperation as he was called upon to repeatedly account for his work and whereabouts in his correspondence with Jill. After Thanksgiving of 1954, she impatiently begins a letter:

> It is now five weeks since you last wrote me, on your birthday, or at least that is the last letter I’ve had. It does not seem unduly demanding to hope or even expect news more often than that . . . I am not reproaching you, John, you may not have realized how much time has gone by, or been in no mood to write or even been annoyed with or put off by something in my letters. I hope not the last but with my ineptness it may be so.¹⁴⁵

As the poet struggled to embark on *The Dream Songs*, he begins a letter to Jill characteristically with an apology: “I’m just this minute through a piece of analysis that’s taken since 8 this morning, and intellectually & emotionally & physically exhausted, but I want to say if very quickly how sorry I am for your worry about my not writing.”¹⁴⁶ Jill, who was made insecure about her son’s journey, continued to pry; geographically isolated, anxious, and in debt, she was incapable of giving Berryman the psychic space he needed in order to produce these intensely personal poems. After a quarrel in 1956, for instance, she wrote to John, “Never before, under circumstances no matter how dire . . . have I felt it possible to think of cutting myself off from you.”¹⁴⁷ The rest of Jill’s letter also admits jealousy on her part. Having just met her son’s soon-to-be second-wife, Ann Levine, Jill concedes, “Somehow, somewhere in me, was the profound surety that you

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¹⁴⁶. John Berryman to Jill Angel, 5 December 1954, 276.
might need if not me someone and I might be that one.” 148 Not wishing to alienate her son any further, the problem mother softens and pleads, “It is unlikely that I will grow easier to be with, wiser, more bearable—there is no blundering like that of the well-meaning obtuse person.” 149 Once again, Berryman accepted his mother’s apology.

Based on the correspondence and diaries, coincident with Berryman’s move to Minnesota and his pursuit of The Dream Songs is a growing awareness of his and Jill’s emotional co-dependence. Recalling a session with Dr. Shea in an undated fragment in a folder marked “1958,” from Berryman’s notes and diaries, the poet confesses, “Mo. ∞ me in a cocoon > ‘me weak’.” 150 I have wondered at this illegible symbol between “Mo.” and “me.” Is it an infinity symbol, or an inverted & sign? Or is it an amalgam of both, indicating the prospect that mother and son are forever intertwined, each implicated in the other’s well-being?

Perhaps the word cocoon contains its own clues. In a letter sent by Jill December 7th 1954, she attempts to describe to her son the family dynamic in the years preceding Smith’s death; self-effacingly, she writes, “I wasn’t much more than a cocoon.” After he received the letter, Berryman underlined this sentence, and noted in the margin bracketed beside it, “v. late developing.” 151 In Dream Song 270, the poet writes, “Womb was the word, where Henry never developed.” 152 What can be inferred from such fragments is only that Berryman began to reconcile himself, however vaguely, with the burden he experienced as a result of his mother’s excessive attention. His attempt to resolve his

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148. Ibid., 301.
149. Ibid.
ambivalences would appear sometimes in his and Jill’s correspondence, or, when Berryman was hospitalized and advised to speak to no one, he would rely on his notes, or a Dream Song to put the pieces back together.

In January 1959, shortly before he was hospitalized the first time for alcoholic-related causes, Berryman, distracted by the dissolution of his second marriage, confessed to Jill, “I didn’t write because I had an impression that you tried to break up my marriage.” Wounded, Jill replied, “It is clear that you do not love me.” Although the two would eventually reconcile, by Christmas 1959, Berryman’s limits would again be tested when Jill decided to show her son pictures of his father. Deeply distraught by these photos, which he had not seen in thirty-five years, Berryman was “bombed,” as he later told his second-wife, Ann. Exasperated, on Dec. 30th, he wrote Dream Song 103; the poet asks, “can he get free/of the hanging menace, & this all, and go?/ He doesn’t think so.”

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In Spring of 1967, Berryman flew to New York to accept an award from the Academy of American Poets. While visiting, he was scheduled to give a reading on April 27th at the Guggenheim Museum; to his mother’s chagrin, he read Dream Song 14:

Life, friends, is boring. We must not say so.
After all the sky flashes, the great sea yearns,
we ourselves flash and yearn,
and moreover my mother told me as a boy
(repeatingly) “Ever to confess you’re bored
means you have no
Inner Resources.” I conclude now I have no
inner resources, because I am heavy bored.

153. John Berryman to Jill Angel, 13 January 1959, 324.
155. Mariani, *Dream Song*, 354.
156. Berryman, *The Dream Songs*, 120.
Peoples bore me,
literature bores me, especially great literature,
Henry bores me, with his plights and gripes
as bad as Achilles,

who loves people and valiant art, which bores me.
And the tranquil hills, & gin, look like a drag
and somehow a dog
has taken itself & its tail considerably away
into the mountains or sea or sky, leaving
behind: me, wag.157

Contrary to the poem’s introductory thesis, the poem goes on to suggest that at the very least the poet’s inner life is anything but boring. It is the American maudit’s ennui that sustains this particular Dream Song’s strange energy, and yet it’s not like this poem is exactly Une Saison en Enfer; the speaker of Dream Song 14 is a university professor, a pedagogue, not a Rimbaud.158 Take for instance the bourgeois tensions surrounding the maternal dictum (the poem’s central inner resource). Alongside the poet-son’s turgid and labored pronouncements, the mother’s truth, effortlessly dispensed, appears enviably economical. This truth reverberates throughout the poem to comic effect. The problem mother induces a swerve in the poet’s associative logic; rather than sabotage the poem’s production, the problem mother only further incites it. In confirming the poet’s condition, the problem mother ironically re-structures the poet’s relation to lack. By the poem’s end, beyond boredom, there is still a poet, and, more importantly, a new poem.

Unfortunately, whatever optimism or hint of appreciation may be gleamed from Dream Song 14, was lost on Jill Angel; much displeased by the poet’s depiction of her, she wrote Berryman’s third wife, Kate Donahue:

157. Ibid., 16.
The reading was one of the most painful experiences of a life not unfamiliar with pain . . . I do not expect ever to attend a reading again, I am not strong enough for such stresses nor do I wish to embarrass John by my presence, or be present when his holding me up to scorn as a stupid fool evokes nervous titters from a bewildered audience – as my grandfather was wont to say, one should wash one’s dirty linen in private . . . He must have needed to vent this venom but I am not able to endure another hearing of it . . by ridiculing, it is like taking a missile to destroy a flea.\(^{159}\)

It is evident from Jill’s letter that her pride was wounded, but can you really blame her?

She could not foresee, as critic Deborah Nelson would eventually reflect, that “Confessional poetry, because it exposed the poet’s intimate others, was always in danger of destroying someone else, or at the very least wounding them.”\(^{160}\) Jill’s response indicates that she was the biggest supporter of John’s work up until the moment that she saw herself unflatteringly implicated in it. A problem mother, it seems, takes everything very personally, but as Janet Malcolm has succinctly said of Sylvia Plath, “art is not pleasing your mother.”\(^{161}\) Though one could also add to this discussion the opinion of the chilly Charlotte Winslow who preemptively remarked of her son, Robert Lowell: “his poetry was nice but valueless since once must please the many, not the few.”\(^{162}\)

In addition to being embarrassed by the way she is comically portrayed in her son’s poem, Jill was also caught off guard by the publication of Berryman’s Sonnets; written in 1947, Jill, who usually knew everything her son was working on, did not know about the Sonnets until she saw a review in The New York Times. Embittered, she wrote to him a few days before her 73\(^{rd}\) birthday:

For the last time, for the record, John, I did not kill your father or drive or lead him to his death. If you do not know in your blood

\(^{159}\) Jill Angel to Kate Berryman, 3 June 1967. John Berryman Papers (Mss 43), Literary Manuscripts Collection, University of Minnesota Libraries, Minneapolis.

\(^{160}\) Nelson, “Confessional Poetry.” 41.

\(^{161}\) Malcolm, The Silent Woman, 158.

\(^{162}\) Mariani, Lost Puritan, 122.
and bone that I am incapable of assuming the burden of another’s death, nothing I can say would make sense to you . . . Think of me as dead, John.¹⁶³

What prompted Jill in this letter to bring up John Allyn Smith? It is most likely that Jill felt jilted by her son’s recollections; Dream Song 14 was, in her eyes, a public denunciation. Unlike the sentimental and unmemorable Dream Song 100 written for her just a year earlier for her 72nd birthday where the poet praises “the goodness of this woman in her great strength,” Jill experienced Dream Song 14 as a betrayal.¹⁶⁴ Was she not, in spite of the circumstances, to her son, a good enough mother?

Jill Angel’s maternal discontent resembles that of Aurelia Plath’s upon the American publication of Sylvia’s semi-autobiographical novel The Bell Jar.¹⁶⁵ In The Silent Woman, Janet Malcolm offers,

> It seems simply never to have occurred to Mrs. Plath that the persona of Ariel and The Bell Jar was the persona by which Plath wished to be represented and remembered—that she wrote this way for publication because this was the way she wished to be perceived, and that the face she showed her mother was not the face she wished to show the reading public.¹⁶⁶

Jill Angel, I imagine, similarly could not see the contradictions in her son’s poetry as he himself had insisted (repeatedly) to his readers and critics regarding the central protagonist of The Dream Songs, “Henry both is and is not me, obviously.”¹⁶⁷ Entangled as the author and his character are, we can forgive Jill for her vexation, and her inability to confirm to us how to tell the two apart.

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¹⁶⁵. In 1971, following the posthumous re-publication of The Bell Jar, incensed, Aurelia wrote to the publisher, “As this book stands by itself, it represents the basest ingratitude.” See Malcolm, 33.
After Berryman’s suicide in 1972, his publisher, Robert Giroux, whom the poet met while both were students at Columbia in 1935, later remembered

Jill, as everyone called her, was a campus mother who haunted him daily, from his undergraduate days at John Jay Hall to his wintertime suicide in Minneapolis in 1972. She was so theatrical that when she phoned the news of his death, I didn’t at first understand what she meant. One of his suicide poems used the words “going in under the water,” so instead of telling me he had killed himself, she said, Bob, John has gone in under the water. I yelled, For God’s sake, Jill, what do you mean?168

A problem mother is a kind of Trojan woman, one prone to inappropriate fits of public feeling, a hysterical. But if you had just learned your first-born son jumped off the Washington Avenue Bridge not long after his 57th birthday, what words would you use?

Beyond being an attentive reader or supportive parent, Jill was wholly absorbed in her son’s work. When Giroux describes Jill as “a campus mother,” perhaps he is suggesting she is a cliché; the poet’s editor may have felt Jill Angel, in the making a spectacle of herself, was something like the poet’s pageant mom. Unbridled maternal enthusiasm is gauche. There may be some truth in that. Given the life-long intensity of Jill and John’s relationship (in 1971, six months before his death, Jill moved into an apartment down the block from John’s house), the maternal appropriation of the phrase “under the water” is consistent with the pride Jill took in her son’s poetic achievements.169

169. The “suicide poem” Giroux is probably referring to is titled “Henry’s Understanding,” Delusions, Etc., (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1972), 53. The last lines read,

. . . it occurred to me
that one night, instead of warm pajamas,
I’d take off all my clothes
& cross the damp cold lawn & down the bluff
into the terrible water & walk forever
under it out toward the island.
It is worth noting that immediately following the incident, Jill did not wish to admit that her son had killed himself. As in the case of John Allyn Smith, she insisted her son’s death had been an accident: when he sat on the icy railing to look upon the Mississippi as he often did, according to Jill, her son had slipped. Kate Donahue believed Jill’s story was intended to protect the children from a more sordid truth. Such a wish, that the children never know, is consistent with Jill’s refusal to ever fully confess to her own children the details surrounding the death of her first husband, John Allyn Smith.

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Unable to mourn or move beyond a truth not told, in Dream Song 34, the poet asks his reader, “Why should I tell a truth?” Fatigue, resentment: I sense in Berryman’s challenge to his reader certain misgivings, something like a confessional backlash. In a confessional poetics, critics have historically placed the burden of Truth regarding the poet’s “I” upon the poet; that seems to me an unfair burden for any poet or poem to bear. Why do we read the confessional poet as always-already guilty, as if he were, by virtue of his utterance, in full and criminal possession of the secret knowledge behind the pronoun “I”? We have yet to entertain that in a confessional poetics a poet might be sorry for not-knowing. As Berryman writes in Dream Song 370,

The horizon is all cloud.
Leaves on leaves on leaves of books I’ve turned
and I know nothing, Henry said aloud,
with his ultimate breath.

172. Ibid, 392.
By imposing the confessional label upon the poet while overlooking the poet’s complicated relationship to truth-telling, we have come to expect unrealistically of Berryman’s “I” that it say more about itself than it can.
In my case studies, I include Anne Sexton, born Anne Harvey Gray, November 9th, 1928, as one model and paragon of poet-performer-penitent. Like John Berryman, Sexton embodied the poem-as-patient, lay sick person. However, unlike Berryman, from her modeling career to her staged readings, Sexton gendered confession by performing in public the private horrors of domestic femininity. In the words of Sexton’s biographer, Diane Wood Middlebrook, her poetry “reflected the high cost of socializing women into feminine roles. Hers were truths that had not been put into poetry before, or with quite the same emphases, by a woman writer.”¹⁷³ What “truths” would this woman, so “at odds with what her mother, mother-in-law, and husband expected,” tell us about the ubiquitous problem with no name?¹⁷⁴

Although I contest that male confessional poets such as Lowell or Berryman did not live beyond or without gender, I think it is significant to consider the ways in which Sexton, as Lowell’s former student, understood her confessions differently: as did her critics; for instance, according to scholar Diana Hume George, “When Lowell confessed, at first we slapped his patrician hand and told him to shape up and put back the stiff in his upper lip. When Sexton confessed, we sharpened the knife and heated the pot.”¹⁷⁵ What do such comments suggest about the gendered expectations projected onto confessional poets by their critics, and moreover, what was so especially unsettling about the confessional truths exposed by the mad housewife-turned-poet?

In part, Sexton’s performances were witnessed and understood as commenting culturally on a facet of female life left untended in the works of other confessional poets. For this reason, she is often mythologized as a suburban *succès de scandale*. Poems like “The Ballad of the Lonely Masturbator” and “In Celebration of My Uterus” caused many critics to balk, for such topics seemed unrefined as they exercised the exact opposite of poetic restraint. Even her friend, the poet and critic Louis Simpson, could not bring himself to defend a poem like “Menstruation at Forty” which was, in Simpson’s words, “the straw that broke the camel’s back.”\(^\text{176}\) That Sexton was able to force her critics, let alone her friends, into such compromising positions with respect to her poetics suggests that the “honesty” employed by her poems provided readers with too much information.

Within the genre of confessional poetics, Sexton went beyond “the personal,” proudly asserting, “I hold back nothing.”\(^\text{177}\) That flamboyance earned Sexton the reputation for being something of a performance artist. After arriving roughly ten minutes past the scheduled start of her own reading, Sexton would commence by addressing her audience first with a preface: “I’m going to read a poem that tells you what kind of poet I am, what kind of woman I am, so if you don’t like it you can leave.”\(^\text{178}\) Bold. The infamous poem with which Sexton liked to begin was “Her Kind”:

\[
\text{I have gone out, a possessed witch,} \\
\text{haunting the black air, braver at night;} \\
\text{dreaming evil, I have done my hitch} \\
\text{over the plain houses, light by light;} \\
\text{lonely thing, twelve-fingered, out of mind.} \\
\text{A woman like that is not a woman, quite.}
\]

\(^{176}\) Qtd. by Maxine Kumin, forward to *The Complete Poems*, by Anne Sexton (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1999).
On stage, such a poem took on the proportions of a dramatic monologue. As an “actress” in her own “autobiographical play” Sexton liked to ham it up, performing for her audience the role of a bewitched woman. Maxine Kumin, Sexton’s best friend and foremost literary confidante, recalls, “[Sexton’s] presence on the platform dazzled with its staginess, its props of water glass, cigarettes, and ashtray. She used pregnant pauses, husky whispers, psuedoshouts to calculated effect.” Not everyone, however, was won over by the performer’s seductive charms. Take for instance Sexton’s 1967 appearance at the opening night event of the Poetry International Festival in London (although she had been invited by Sylvia Plath’s husband, Ted Hughes, to read later that week, after the originally scheduled reader, John Berryman, failed to show up, Sexton, at the last minute was slated to read in his place)— as if it wasn’t enough for Sexton to offend the master poet W.H. Auden by reading over her scheduled allotted time, she then concluded her reading by throwing open her arms and blowing a big kiss to the British crowd. One witness confirmed, “It was the most grotesquely ill-judged gesture I’ve ever seen at a poetry reading . . . Nonetheless . . . for all the complaints, she made the headlines.”

Sexton’s readiness to flout convention and mock pretension both in print and in public set her apart from the more somber academic poets of her time. After her death, Robert Lowell would concede, “At a time when poetry readings were expected to be boring, no one ever fell asleep at Anne’s.” Sexton’s stock and trade was her persona, 

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181. Kumin, forward to *The Complete Poems*.
and she sold it exceptionally well. According to the feminist scholar Jacqueline Rose, Sexton’s exhibitionism renders her within the confessional canon as the performance artist of intimacy. Standing before her audience, she would, seemingly without inhibition, offer up in her poetry the most private details of her life. It was the great literary roadshow of the unconscious, writing as psychic striptease.\textsuperscript{184}

Even if the aura of vulnerability exuded by the poet was all part of an act, a ruse, Sexton’s fans ate it up all the same. It seems she in turn enjoyed the attention; in “The Freak Show,” a short autobiographical account of Sexton’s experience on stage, she vaguely recalls an event where she had been feeling under the weather and from the audience heard a man cheer: “Whatever you do, Annie, baby, we’re with you!”\textsuperscript{185} Keen to reap the financial rewards of her growing readership, Sexton made sure to adjust her reading fees accordingly. By 1974, her reading fees for out-of-town trips peaked at $2,000 (partly due to the fact that Sexton preferred not to travel).\textsuperscript{186} One can imagine then how these emotionally charged performances (or as Sexton once referred to them, “my little one-night stands”\textsuperscript{187}) captivated her readers, but for Sexton, I suspect, the intimacy she was after in these events was just another part of the poetry business, one that she uniquely excelled at. In an attempt to further profit from the devotion lavished upon her by her most loyal supporters, Sexton went so far as to briefly perform and tour with the musical act Anne Sexton and Her Kind, a chamber rock group whose rhythms accompanied Sexton’s as she read from her poems.

\begin{footnotes}
\footnotetext[184]{Jacqueline Rose, “‘Faking it up with the truth’: Anne Sexton,” in \textit{On Not Being Able to Sleep: Psychoanalysis and the Modern World} (London: Chatto and Windus, 2003), 17.}
\footnotetext[185]{Anne Sexton, \textit{No Evil Star}, 33.}
\footnotetext[186]{Middlebrook, \textit{Anne Sexton}, 385.}
\end{footnotes}
Popular as she was among her fans, without an artist statement or academic credentials, Sexton’s most conservative readers (among them, her extended family) had a hard time getting over “the poet’s absorption in her one woman show.”\(^{188}\) Well after her death, Sexton’s critics sought to discredit her for “crying *me me me*” in her poems time and time again.\(^{189}\) The bitchiest and most frequently cited reviews of Sexton’s work may be attributed to the poet and novelist (as well as friend of John Berryman’s) James Dickey. In his review of Sexton’s first book, *To Bedlam and Part Way Back*, Dickey announced, “one feels tempted to drop [Sexton’s poems] furtively into the trashcan, rather than be caught with them in the presence of such naked suffering.”\(^{190}\) Two years later, in *The New York Times Book Review*, he wrote of her second book, *All My Pretty Ones*: “It would be hard to find a writer who dwells more insistently on the pathetic and disgusting aspects of bodily experience.”\(^{191}\) (Had Dickey never heard of Georges Bataille or Jean Genet?) With the exception of this last criticism, which was found folded up in Sexton’s wallet after she had committed suicide, Sexton, for the most part, did not allow such digs to distract her and once quipped, “I don’t worry about popularity; I’m too busy.”\(^{192}\)

That star persona coupled with the poet’s brand of confessional candor shocked and offended male and female readers alike. Upon receiving a review copy of Sexton’s first book, the poet Elizabeth Bishop wrote her esteemed friend, Robert Lowell: “I feel I

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know too much about her” after having read the work.\textsuperscript{193} Michiko Kakutani, book critic for \textit{The New York Times}, observed that at her worst, “[Sexton] could sound like a spoiled child, whiny and repetitive, self-consciously maudlin and melodramatic - a bad, greeting-card version of Sylvia Plath or Robert Lowell.”\textsuperscript{194} Sexton herself was no less cagey about the association with her early mentor; in a letter written to the poet W.D. Snodgrass, Sexton admitted that although she respected Lowell as a poet, as an acquaintance, he remained somewhat aloof and “difficult to figure.”\textsuperscript{195} Sexton had reason to doubt Lowell’s interest in her work even as he went on to blurb her first book, claiming that the poems of her debut had the “enviable swift lyrical openness of a Romantic poet.”\textsuperscript{196} After Sexton’s death, he casually professed, “Unlike Snodgrass and Sylvia Plath, [Sexton] was an amateur.”\textsuperscript{197}

Sexton was not oblivious to the hostility her poetry could provoke in others—in “The Ballad of the Lonely Masturbator” she writes, “I horrify/those who stand by.”\textsuperscript{198} As early as 1959, in another letter to W. D. Snodgrass, Sexton playfully admonishes herself, declaring, “I NEED some poetic tact.”\textsuperscript{199} Sexton was sympathetic to those she may have disturbed, for her writing was capable of disturbing not least of all herself: “part of me was appalled by what I was doing,” she once admitted while reflecting on her process;

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{195} Anne Sexton to W. D. Snodgrass, 11 January 1959, 48.  \\
\textsuperscript{196} Qtd. in “Introduction” to \textit{Selected Poems of Anne Sexton}, eds. Diane Wood Middlebrook and Diana Hume George (New York: Mariner Books, 2000), xviii.  \\
\textsuperscript{197} Lowell, “Anne Sexton,” 71.  \\
\textsuperscript{198} Anne Sexton, \textit{The Complete Poems}, 198.  \\
\textsuperscript{199} Anne Sexton to W. D. Snodgrass, 1 February 1959, 53.
\end{flushleft}
“on the one hand I was digging up shit, with the other hand, I was covering it with sand.”

What Sexton perceived as her lack of tact, and others, an unruly exhibitionism, was of course accompanied by various contradictions; she outlines them in a letter written to a fan in 1965:

I am 36, fairly attractive, a mother, two girls are 10 and 12, a husband in the wool business. I live nine miles outside of Boston. I do not live a poet’s life. I look and act like a housewife. My daughter says to her friends “a mother is someone who types all day.” But still I cook. But still my desk is a mess of letters to be answered and poems that want to tear their way out of my soul and onto the typewriter keys. At that point I am a lousy cook, a lousy wife, a lousy mother, because I am too busy wrestling with the poem to remember that I am a normal (?) American housewife.

These contradictory aspects of Sexton’s persona distinguished her from her once teacher, Robert Lowell, and her contemporary, John Berryman. Still, it’s a rather modest self-portrait Sexton paints. How rogue could this “normal (?) American housewife” really be?

Although Sexton remains something of a cult figure today, her kind of confessionalism continues to divide fans of the genre. The sympathetic poet and critic Alicia Ostriker explains, “Anne Sexton is the easiest poet to condescend to. Critics get in line for the pleasure of filing her under N for Narcissist and announcing that she lacks reticence.” But in the patriarchal imagination, is the scopophilic desire to see the woman not also part of the repressed fantasy to subjugate her image, especially, if, like Sexton, she is mostly remembered for having compulsively revealed herself? Sexton, however, would not be derailed by the critical scrutiny to which she was subject. As

201. Anne Sexton to Jon Stallworthy, 24 September 1965, 270.
Maxine Kumin succinctly puts it: “Accused of exhibitionism, [Sexton] was determined only to be more flamboyant.” For example, in her epigraph to the poem “Suicide Note,” Sexton responds to her critics: “You speak to me of narcissism, but I reply that it is a matter of my life.” The confessional poet, animated in part by her audience’s attention, courts controversy because it provides the performer with the occasion to reveal herself once more.

Whereas fans of Sexton’s such as the poet David Trinidad praise the manner in which Sexton “helped shatter the conservativeness of post-World War II verse,” not everyone believed Sexton’s self-disclosure justified the very brazen poetics. In a review of Sexton’s *Collected Poems*, the prominent poetry critic Helen Vendler refused to cut the cocksure poet any slack, asserting, “Taboo-breaking is not in itself a poetic task. No poem is improved by having a shattered taboo in it, or an abortion in it either.” Whereas I would disagree with Vendler and instead offer that the tendency of contemporary poetry has, since Sexton, only further sought out the territory of the unutterable (inevitably, always the autobiographical) I remain intrigued by the critical discussion surrounding Sexton’s “messy preoccupations”—would such preoccupations “remain to stain the linen of the culture” as one critic supposed, or will good taste, manners, and the stuff of T.S. Eliot’s theory of impersonal poetry win out?

And yet for every critic who remains unimpressed by Sexton, there exists a handful of feminist critics and poets (some of them Sexton’s friends) eager to defend the _

204. Ibid.,158. Epigraph is attributed to Antonin Artaud, the French writer and performer.
suburban housewife-turned-poet’s risky poems. Kathleen Spivack, a classmate of both Sexton’s and Plath’s from Robert Lowell’s Boston writing seminar, fondly remembers,

Anne was something of a renegade. She broadcast her messy personal life, rather than hiding it beneath a veneer of polite and tightened fury. So Anne, by virtue of her lack of formal education and by her “excessive” emotionality and obvious vulnerability, was a lightening rod for criticisms. She inspired controversy.208

Sexton, who is remembered by Spivack as wearing a pendant bearing the phrase “Don’t Let the Bastards Win,” was bold and unapologetic.209 Her frankness, combined with her fashion model good looks, caught the attention of many other aspiring female poets of the time, such as Alicia Ostriker, who values Sexton’s contribution because the work challenges our residual certainties that the life of the body should be private and not public, and that women especially should be seen and not heard, except among each other, talking about their messy anatomies.210

By writing about the social traumas and experiences that accompanied the white, middle-class, American female body, “Ms. Dog,” as Sexton took to calling herself, had managed to distinguish herself from the confessional boys’ club that included Robert Lowell, John Berryman, W.D. Snodgrass, Theodore Roethke, and Randall Jarrell. Whereas Sexton exposed and exploited the horrors of being-Anne-Sexton, one not available to the vantage points of Berryman’s “Huffy Henry,” or the Larger-than-Life Lowell of his seminal work Life Studies, she also stylized self-disclosure as no other poet could. Similar to other female confessionals of the period, such as Adrienne Rich and Sylvia Plath, Sexton dared to render that which was considered “private” and “taboo” (the feminine mystique) as a new and noteworthy poetic subject. “But in a system that rewarded young women chiefly

208. Spivack, With Robert Lowell & His Circle, 63.
209. Ibid., 59.
for being worshipful and self-effacing,” Kathleen Spivack claims that Rich and Plath “had managed to win prizes, recognition, and approval from the male establishment” whereas Sexton, because of her exhibitionist impulses, Spivack implies, had not.211 Given the fact that Sexton had been awarded several honorary doctorates, the Pulitzer Prize,212 a Guggenheim Award (or “Guggy” as she called it), among other prestigious accolades, and was earning close to $50,000 a year by the time she committed suicide, this last point could be further debated.213 Still, there’s something to be said for why the mere citation of Sexton as an influence can make a teacher’s “heart sink.”214

Is it a stretch to insist that what differentiated Sexton from other female confessionalists is that she made poetry sexy in an important way for many women? I don’t believe so. After having met Sexton for the first time in the summer of 1959 at a party hosted by Robert Lowell and his then wife, Elizabeth Hardwick, the poet Adrienne Rich recalls:

I remember feeling that suddenly there was this woman whom Lowell and people around Cambridge were talking about, this woman who was going to publish a book called To Bedlam and Part Way Back . . . I didn’t expect her to be such a knockout—tall, tan, wearing white, and looking very gorgeous.215

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211. Spivack, With Robert Lowell & His Circle, 63.
212. See David Trinidad, “How Anne Sexton Won the Pulitzer Prize,” Harriet (blog), June 17, 2014, http://www.poetryfoundation.org/harriet/2014/06/how-anne-sexton-won-the-pulitzer-prize/ for an account of Sexton’s win “when none of the jurors were particularly enthusiastic about her work.”
215. Middlebrook, Anne Sexton, 111.
Neither an “intellectual” nor “the Harvard type,” Sexton must have stood out that night, for even as Adrienne Rich would quickly surpass her as one of the period’s most formidable American poets, she could not deny that Sexton demanded one’s attention.²¹⁶

Sexton’s keen ability to hold the gaze of both her admirers and critics prompts one to wonder: what kinds of larger cultural attitudes as well as unspoken (and gendered) codes of literary decorum did her confessional truths rub up against, expose, and/or resist? As one pores over the critical responses to Sexton’s body of work, perhaps what we receive goes beyond a justification for or dismissal of her poetics. What we get when we look at her work and the energy it galvanized in her readers is actually a glimpse into the larger cultural anxieties surrounding the changing role of the postwar American mother and housewife, for as Diana Hume George has so insightfully pointed out, “Not only was Sexton among the original members of the confessional school; she might legitimately be said to be its mother.”²¹⁷ In reviewing the critical language employed by her readers, most famously among them, her eldest daughter and literary executor, Linda Gray Sexton, it is evident that the trespasses of the problem mother pale in comparison to those of the “monster-mother,” Anne Sexton.²¹⁸

I have specifically chosen to prioritize whenever possible Linda Gray Sexton’s published accounts of her life with her mother in this chapter because for all of the Sexton scholarship that exists in print, virtually none of it (with the notable exception of Diane Wood Middlebrook’s biography) includes the testimony of the daughter.²¹⁹

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²¹⁶. Ibid.
²¹⁷. George, Oedipus Anne, 90.
have Sexton’s scholars neglected to make greater use of Linda’s memoirs on the subject of her mother? Does the daughter’s proximity to the mother-poet contradict a “fair” and “critical” reading of Sexton’s work? Or do the mother-daughter tropes that Linda invokes in her analyses fail to convince her more “academic” readers of her narratives’ merits? As necessary as it may be to pose such questions, I am equally interested in addressing how Linda, a memoirist, came to writing through her act of witnessing and managing the spectacle of her mother’s audaciousness, inseparable as it was from her mental illness. I believe a more thorough appreciation of Linda Gray Sexton’s public reckoning with her mother’s confessional legacy will provide readers with a greater understanding of the burden Anne Sexton’s truths placed on her most affected (and critically neglected) readers: her family.

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In her self-mythology, Anne Sexton claims, “I have always lived in the suburbs of Boston—nothing special, in Wellesley as a child and in Newton as a wife and mother.” The youngest of three daughters, Sexton would always remain to a certain extent the baby of the family well after she became a wife and mother. According to Diane Middlebrook, “Until diagnosed as mentally ill, Sexton had been regarded by her exasperated family as childish, selfish, incompetent.” Much to the consternation of her father, Ralph Harvey, a successful wool salesman, and Mary Gray, a housewife who (like Charlotte Winslow) “doled out approval parsimoniously,” Anne was something of a

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220. Linda Gray Sexton has published two memoirs about her life with Anne Sexton; in this chapter I focus on the first, *Searching for Mercy Street: The Journey Back to My Mother, Anne Sexton* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1994). With the exception of a few supporting quotations, I have chosen not to discuss the darker, though less captivating follow-up memoir, *Half in Love: Surviving the Legacy of Suicide*, as it primarily focuses on Linda’s struggle with depression in the wake of her own suicide attempts at age 45, the same age her mother had been when she had committed suicide.


defiant and disorderly child.\textsuperscript{223} Neither well mannered nor well kempt, from a young age, Anne failed to meet the social expectations of proper Boston female etiquette. She was constantly scolded for being “chronically messy, fidgety, and loud.”\textsuperscript{224} As an adolescent, Anne also suffered her father’s alcoholic tirades; he refused to even eat at the same table because her acne so disgusted him. The narcissistically inclined Mary Gray could not be bothered to assist in repairing her wounded daughter’s sense of self.

From a young age, Anne may have recognized that if she could not win her parent’s adulation, she could, at the very least, win their attention. By the time she was old enough to smoke cigarettes, the Harveys, increasingly distressed by their teenage daughter’s “boy-crazy” behavior, sent Anne away to Rogers Hall, a boarding school for girls.\textsuperscript{225} When her early poems were accepted for publication in the school yearbook, Mary Gray would not be upstaged. Convinced that her daughter’s cinquains must have been plagiarized, she “sent a sheaf of Anne’s writing to a college professor she knew in New York, for an expert opinion.”\textsuperscript{226} This lack of belief in her daughter’s talents further crippled Anne’s confidence; in an interview conducted in 1968, Sexton would reflect, “my mother said as I graduated from high school that I had plagiarized Sara Teasdale. Something about that statement of hers . . . I had been writing a poem a day for three months, but when she said that, I stopped.”\textsuperscript{227} It would be another decade before Sexton would try to write again.

Sexton’s proto-gurlesque poem, “Cripples and Other Stories,” from the Pulitzer Prize winning collection \textit{Live or Die} provides her readers with some insight as to how the

\textsuperscript{223} Middlebrook, \textit{Anne Sexton}, 37.
\textsuperscript{224} Ibid., 9.
\textsuperscript{225} Ibid., 19.
\textsuperscript{226} Ibid., 21.
\textsuperscript{227} Anne Sexton, \textit{No Evil Star}, 85.
“Child-woman” (as she refers to herself in the poem) may have internalized the perpetual disappointment expressed by her parents:

My father’s cells clicked each night,  
intent on making money.  
And as for my cells, they brooded,  
little queens of honey.

On boys too, as a matter of fact,  
and cigarettes and cars.  
Mother frowned at my wasted life  
My father smoked cigars.

My cheeks blossomed with maggots.  
I picked at them like pearls.  
I covered them with pancake.  
I wound my hair in curls.²²⁸

The macabre tone of this poem revolves around the twisted image of a girl with a “little withered limb” whose physical defect lands her first in the doctor’s office, and then, through the experience of transference, in the arms of the seductive “father-doctor,” a stand-in for the poet’s emotionally inattentive father. The speaker implies that her psyche is further crippled by this series of traumatic events when she poses the question to her reader half-way through the poem, “Would the cripple inside of me/be a cripple that would show?”²²⁹

I detect in the poet’s provocation a desire to be further scrutinized by her reader. The question that invites the reader to look and to judge possesses an uncanny ability to disrupt the conventional and sacredly held notion that the lyric poet and her audience occupy what literary scholar Gillian White has termed “parallel privacies.”²³⁰ By addressing her readers and indulging their voyeurism, Sexton dramatizes the fact that her

²²⁹. Ibid, 161.  
“confessions” were never intended to be experienced as truly private utterances—they are better appreciated instead as deftly staged poetic productions where Sexton’s readers are seldom allowed to occupy a “safe” or innocent position “outside” of the poems or their performance; consequently, her readers are never too far away from her poems’ perverseness.

This studied ability of Sexton’s to use the form of the confession as an opportunity to pull the audience into the emotional dynamic of her poems renders her something of a confessional con artist. The success in pulling off the con partly depends on the perceived “realness” or authenticity she was able to conjure in her work. For example, the effect of a Sexton stanza that reads,

> God damn it, father-doctor,  
> I’m really thirty-six.  
> I see dead rats in the toilet.  
> I’m one of the lunatics.  

functions very similarly to Robert Lowell’s from “Skunk Hour”:

> One dark night,  
> my Tudor Ford climbed the hill’s skull,  
> I watched for love-cars. Lights turned down,  
> they lay together, hull to hull,  
> where the graveyard shelves on the town. . . .  
> My mind’s not right.  

Going a step further than Lowell, Sexton sought to create the illusion of intimacy in her work by fostering a feeling of connection and empathy between herself and her readers. In order to cultivate that feeling of intimacy (a project that I suspect neither Lowell nor Berryman was invested in), Sexton had to make her kind of vulnerability seem sincere and spontaneous (rather than studied and rehearsed). In her quest for authenticity, as Sexton developed as a poet, she even went so far to incorporate the voice of her

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naysayers—those who would write her off as just another (emotional) cripple; by absorbing these readers’ negative criticisms, Sexton also managed to deny them their desire to be as far removed from her “truths” as possible so that they too, despite their resistance, inevitably became part of her poems’ complex emotional dynamics.

The poet’s refusal to grant her reader the privilege of being an “invisible listener,” to use the words of Helen Vendler,\textsuperscript{233} has prompted the Sexton scholar Jo Gill to ask, “Is it possible to read and respond to the text while retaining a cordon sanitaire?\textsuperscript{234} I would add, as it is impossible for a poet to produce intimacy (or even the illusion of intimacy) without some readerly collusion, one gets the impression that Sexton not only courted her readers’ reactions of disgust, empathy, repulsion, and identification equally, but also depended on such reactions to make the poetry work. In “Cripples and Other Stories,” Sexton uses the disgust of the mother, father, and doctor figures to amplify the feelings of her harshest critics:

\begin{quote}
Disgusted, mother put me
on the potty. She was good at this.
My father was fat on scotch.
It leaked from every orifice.

Oh the enemas of childhood,
reeking of outhouses and shame!
Yet you rock me in your arms
and whisper my nickname.

Or else you hold my hand
and teach me love too late.
And that’s the hand of the arm
they tried to amputate.\textsuperscript{235}
\end{quote}


\textsuperscript{235} Anne Sexton, \textit{The Complete Poems}, 161.
Sexton’s deployment of the second person pronoun is as strategic as it is confounding. Her gift for rerouting the emotional vectors at play so that we are no longer sure who is to blame for the speaker’s emotional disarray — is it the mother, the father, the father-doctor, us, or someone else? — is special in so far as it allows for a certain kind of psychical disorientation to take place in the reader. That immodest tactic of repeatedly calling upon the reader to gaze upon and respond to the spectacle that is Anne Sexton is what constitutes, I argue, Sexton’s particular brand of confessionalism.

Does the disfigured female speaker of “Cripples and Other Stories” delight in her own hideousness and the disgust it may prompt in others? Or do such exhibitionist gestures knowingly play into our wish to interpret and pathologize (like the father-doctor) the poet even further? It is this particularly coy and transgressive aspect of Sexton’s work that anticipates the more recent “gurlesque” style of contemporary poetics which embraces “the new grrly, grotesque, burlesque” mode exemplified by poets like Lara Glenum, Danielle Pafunda, and Ariana Reines.236 In Glenum’s words, “Gurlesque poets enact signs, bodies and psyches in crisis, and do so by making the spectator complicit in their crisis.”237 So much of the pleasure in Sexton’s “Cripples and Other Stories” is derived from the sinister circumlocution, the speaking-around incest, pedophilia, and rebirth that the poet subjects her reader to:

Father, I’m thirty-six,
yet I lie here in your crib.
I’m getting born again, Adam,
as you prod me with your rib.238

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In this grim poetic fable, the baby-arm reaches out and back to the poet’s past, but that reach, itself a compulsion, is what constitutes the Child-woman’s perpetual regress, a psychological illness. This dark tale anticipates the swerve Sexton would take in her immensely popular and best-selling collection, *Transformations*, a re-telling of Grimm’s Fairy Tales published in 1971. One wonders if in this version of the poet’s self-mythology the baby-arm is the same arm with which the maimed woman wrote her poems.

However, as I consider this image of the maimed woman further, I am (counterintuitively) reminded again of the poet Adrienne Rich. Not long after Sexton’s suicide, Rich published her seminal work “Twenty-One Love Poems” in her book *The Dream of a Common Language*. In one of the poems we are privy to an image of Adrienne herself crippled with “an inflated foot, Philoctetes/in woman’s form, limping the long path.” The poem then departs from Sexton’s (and Plath’s “Lady Lazarus”) in its heroine’s resolute proclamation:

> Well, that’s finished. The woman who cherished her suffering is dead. I am her descendent. I love the scar tissue she handed on to me, but I want to go on from here with you fighting the temptation to make a career of pain.  

In the history of contemporary women’s poetry, Rich’s decisive break from other female confessionals in this moment has always struck me as a completely radical gesture because she is so straight-forward and matter-of-fact in her assertion that Plath and Sexton were not just dead, but past. There’s also an element of Adrienne reading herself

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as the mature, enlightened woman poet alongside those unfortunate, ill, naïve, adolescent others. Given the long and committed feminist trajectory of Rich’s successful career after *The Dream of a Common Language* as well as the influential poetics of political engagement that she came to exhort, it makes sense to me why so many poets hesitate to embrace, or worse, imitate the genius of a poem like Sexton’s “Cripples and Other Stories,” for to do so would seem so passé, even as one recognizes, contrary to Rich’s claim, that Sexton’s *kind of* poetics, a poetics of female suffering, endures, as suggested by the continued popularity of the mode that is the gurlesque.

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It was in the spring of 1948 that Anne met through an exchange of letters a Colgate pre-med student, Alfred Muller Sexton II, also known by his intimates as Kayo. Although Anne was already engaged to someone else, by the end of that summer, fearful that she was pregnant, she and Kayo eloped in a small town in North Carolina. She was not yet twenty years old.

The couple’s quick courtship and hasty marriage incensed Anne’s in-laws, especially Kayo’s mother, Wilhelmine Muller Sexton—“Known as Billie to her friends, she was attractive, with chestnut hair and blue eyes, her figure trim,” writes Linda Gray Sexton, Anne’s eldest daughter, in her memoir *Searching for Mercy Street: My Journey Back to My Mother*; “She dressed beautifully in a conservative Bostonian fashion and her makeup (which she called ‘her face’) was always in place.”241 Billie did not think much of Anne, who prior to marrying her son had made a bad impression at Sunday dinner with the Sextons’, for not only did she smoke, but also her cheap cherry lipstick stained

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Billie’s good linen napkins. Between Anne and Billie, there would always remain something of a tension. Linda explains her grandmother Billie had always hewed to a rigid set of rules regarding the proper conduct for a wife and mother. She left Cornell after her junior year when she became engaged to George Sexton, because she believed it inappropriate for a wife to have more education than her prospective husband. Her daughter-in-law, Anne, however, broke every rule, and this offended her deeply. By eloping with my father at nineteen, my mother had created the circumstances that pushed him to give up his education—instead of the reverse, as my grandmother had done. The fact that Anne had mistakenly believed herself to be pregnant lowered her further in my grandmother’s eyes.242

Pregnancy scares aside, Kayo dropped out of college after he married Anne because he felt he could not support his new wife and go to medical school at the same time. It is not impossible to imagine how Billie may have both resented and blamed her daughter-in-law for her son’s decision.

Once Kayo started working as a sample boy in a wool firm, it became increasingly obvious to Billie that “[Anne] didn’t show much interest in learning to manage a home.”243 In Linda’s words, “all my grandmother’s hopes for her blonde, blue-eyed son . . . seemed to lie in ruins because of his marriage to this flamboyant, pretty child who wore too much lipstick and slept all morning while the housework lay undone.”244 During this time, Anne (accompanied by her sister-in-law, Joan) did manage to work every so often as a model for the Hart Agency in Boston, and briefly, after she and Kayo finally moved out to their own apartment, as a lingerie saleswoman.

On July 21st 1953, Anne gave birth to her daughter Linda, and shortly thereafter, Kayo bought the family’s first house. He also began working for his father-in-law at the

242. Ibid., 29-30.
244. Linda Gray Sexton, Searching for Mercy Street, 30.
wool firm, R.C. Harvey Company. Despite the fact the position of traveling salesman kept Kayo away from home, at the time, the job seemed like a promising opportunity, one that the then young (and naïve) son-in-law hoped would lead to his inheriting the company. In *Searching for Mercy Street*, Linda pieces together that during this period her father “had been on the road selling wool and garnets at least half of every month, sent there by a father-in-law who had promised to make him heir to the business.”245 Although Kayo would eventually come to regret the decision of being under his patronizing father-in-law’s thumb, it was the time spent traveling that caused Anne the most distress, especially after the birth of the couple’s second daughter, Joyce.246

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Following Joy’s birth, at the age of 27, Sexton began to exhibit symptoms of intense anxiety and depression. During the hours that “she shuttled between extremes of stupefied vacancy and panicky agitation,” Sexton began to dread being left alone with her children.247 As her abilities to function as a mother became increasingly compromised, her psychotherapist, Dr. Martha Brunner-Orne, diagnosed Anne with postpartum depression and prescribed medications. However, it was Kayo’s frequent business trips to cities in the South and the Midwest that triggered his wife’s worst panics. According to Sexton’s biographer, “whenever Kayo left home on a trip that would keep him away overnight, [Anne] would stop eating and grow weepy, fearful, and listless. Virtually all of her serious difficulties arose during his absences, and only his return released her from

245. Ibid., 24.
246. Joyce is usually spoken of as “Joy” in Anne’s, Linda’s, and Middlebrook’s biographical accounts.
them.” 248 Kayo, away from home, failed to realize the severity of his wife’s condition, and Anne’s behavior toward the children only continued to worsen.

Linda characterizes the repressive atmosphere that surrounded her family’s house while she was growing up as unbearably stifling in everyone’s combined efforts to act as though the dramatic events incurred by Anne’s illness were not as destabilizing as they in fact routinely became (over the course of her life, Anne had attempted suicide on at least eight separate occasions). Linda writes, “My father, weighted down with caring for a sick wife and trying to earn enough money to keep us all afloat, never spoke of her illness, and both Nana and his sister, Joan, were also sworn to secrecy.” 249 Several years after Anne’s suicide (she was found dead at age 45 in her idling red Mercury Cougar with the garage door closed) Linda questions her father over dinner about this tumultuous time in their early family life; Kayo expresses, “Usually I knew what was going on, but I couldn’t do anything because I was too far away.” 250 In spite of her anger, as an adult, Linda reckons that in the midst of such an unanticipated and increasingly volatile situation, her father too had been hemmed in by the circumstances surrounding her mother’s mental illness. Kayo was, in Linda’s words, “trapped.” 251 His upbringing as well as his tentative position in the Sexton-Harvey hierarchy provided him with neither the coping mechanisms nor the language to compensate for his daughter’s distress.

As autumn approached, Anne found herself significantly less able to control the violent impulses she felt toward her toddler in 1956. Linda writes,

> whenever my father traveled for business, Mother found it impossible to eat, paced the house twirling her hair, or lay in her

248. Ibid., 34.
251. Ibid.
room masturbating and crying. Her loss of control accelerated, and this manifested itself in alternating bouts of depression and rage—a rage wherein she often slapped me or tried to choke me.252

Despite the disturbing account Linda provides of these early years, in *Searching for Mercy Street,* the daughter (at the time of the book’s writing, an adult with two children of her own) does not disavow the powerful emotional bond she shares with her mother, nor does she turn away out of shame from the most repellent details of Anne’s illness even as she finds she cannot always remember them. Reflecting on the uncertainty that accompanies these early traumas, Linda contemplates, “Maybe the numbness, the blankness, kept me safe. Perhaps that time of my life did not feel so bad to me then as it appears to me now.”253 While the lack of an autobiographical subjectivity at age three might force the memoirist to speak belatedly of the past, perhaps that “blankness,” a kind of infantile amnesia, serves its protective purpose, Linda reasons. We can also read the blankness in *Searching for Mercy Street* as one of the ways Linda’s text “bear[s] the imprint of trauma.”254 If the recollection of a trauma moves a writer to an affective territory outside the bounds of linguistic representation, can we still count on the writer to be a reliable key witness and spectator to her past and the feelings that accompany it? In other words, is it possible for a memoirist to occupy a position “outside” memory? Linda’s reflections on her own inability to conjure in print the full effect of her past experiences demonstrate, in the words of the affect scholar Jill Bennett, that “Memory . . . is neither that possessed by the individual, or that which resides inside (as conventional

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252. Ibid., 12.
253. Ibid., 85.
expressionism holds), nor that which is representational or representable (the outside); it is rather the dynamic of contact” between inside and outside.  

Furthermore, in speaking of the past in present terms, the memoirist reminds us that autobiographical acts of remembrance always occur within a context. In this particular case, Linda’s writerly desire to recall and record these early scenes of childhood abandonment is sparked by the occasion of her mother’s death; Searching for Mercy Street might then be read as an “autothanatography,” to use Nancy K. Miller’s term— a “writing against death” which includes “the [m]other’s and one’s own.” One might consider Simone de Beauvoir’s memoir A Very Easy Death as well as Marilyn Minter’s photographic series, Coral Ridge Towers, as autothantaographic texts which similarly confront the imminent mortality that specifically accompanies the maternal body.

In Linda’s attempt to reckon with the reality of Sexton’s suicide, she ultimately must come to terms with the sordid truth of “Mother’s mental illness, which lived among us like a fifth person.” Linda’s admission that she cannot always be relied upon to remember the traumas associated with that truth ironically render her, within the context of her mother’s story, as a character to be sympathized with as well as a narrator to be trusted. After all, who else could confirm what Anne Sexton was and was not like better than her own daughter? Then again, in the case of Sylvia Plath, no one believed her mother Aurelia could be trusted as an editor or critical reader of any of Sylvia’s writings.

255. Ibid., 44.
258. Linda Gray Sexton, Searching for Mercy Street, 11.
because she was her mother. In Searching for Mercy Street, Linda briefly describes how the overwhelmingly negative response to Aurelia Plath’s Letters Home instructed her as to how not to go about sentimentalizing or sanitizing the truth of her mother’s story:

It was rumored that Aurelia Plath had taken a pair of nail scissors and cut out portions of Sylvia’s diaries that she had not wanted anyone to see. I was determined to be different—frank and to the point—and to make my candor match that found in Mother’s poetry. 259

Are we to take such plain statements at face value? Linda’s decision to admit her own narrative limitations while letting the reader in on the process of “how the human mind rewrites its own history when that history is too ugly to be embraced” strikes me as a brave and admirable gesture, executed, no doubt, in tribute to her mother. 260 However, if Linda desires her candor to match that found in Sexton’s poetry, and I typically read Anne Sexton’s candor as staged, one of her “put-ons,” then I must also doubt the “frankness” or openness Linda claims to embrace if she has inherited it from her mother: “My mother imparted to me her enduring belief: what actually happened is not nearly so important as how you feel about what happened.” 261 Stumbling upon a sentence such as this is like coming upon a true fork in the road for anyone interested in confirming what actually happened in Anne Sexton’s house: can we rely on this narrator to provide a “reliable” account of the central events concerning her mother’s life? No wonder Sexton scholars are so hesitant to include Linda in their analysis of her mother’s work. The conundrum calls to mind a posthumously published poem by Anne Sexton titled, “The Inventory of Goodbye.” She writes:

Propaganda time is over.
I sit here on the spike of truth.

259. Ibid., 210.
260. Ibid., 209.
261. Ibid., 38.
No one to hate except that slim fish of memory
that slides in and out of my brain.
No one to hate except the acute feel of my nightgown
brushing against my body like a light that has gone out.²⁶²

The image of the confessional poet impaled by the spike of truth is a seductive one, but I
don’t really buy it, which is not to say I don’t like and admire it. Sexton’s deployment of
sincerity as a pretense for other, more interesting truths to come to the fore intrigues me.
However, I suspect that more often than not, Sexton’s harshest critics have gotten stuck
on the image of the guilt-ridden woman (a Jocasta of sorts) and never move past it.
Nevertheless, both Anne and Linda’s preoccupation with the truth give me the impression
that neither of the Sextons subscribed to the cliché “the truth will set you free.” We are
captured, both writers seem to suggest, in truth’s inconsistencies and powerfully
implicated, each in her own way.

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With no improvement in her condition and increasingly fearful that she might
unintentionally kill her children, Anne finally confessed to her extended family the
seriousness of her situation in 1956. To the best of their abilities, both the Harveys and
the Sextons gathered all of their resources to help Anne. The Sextons paid for her
psychiatrist’s bills and tried to ensure that whenever Kayo was away on business, Joan,
Anne’s sister-in-law, would stay with her, while the Harveys assisted in paying for
Anne’s medical bills and also sent their housemaid twice a week “so that Anne would not
be burdened by housework.”²⁶³ According to Linda, “While the Harveys neither
understood nor empathized with their daughter . . . they nevertheless did make an effort
to help her through the mental crisis she was undergoing by doing what they could to

²⁶³ Linda Gray Sexton, Searching for Mercy Street, 17.
ease her distress in a practical sense.”

The combined efforts of both families proved not to be enough; Anne began to suffer from suicidal ideation and was soon hospitalized at Westwood Lodge in the summer of 1956. She returned home after three weeks. During her hospitalization, Dr. Brunner-Orne observed that in particular, Ralph, Anne’s father, was less than sympathetic, noting, “he feels as if it were a personal insult that someone in his family is not able to overcome an emotional condition.” Shortly thereafter, Anne began psychotherapy with Dr. Martin Orne, as his mother, Dr. Brunner-Orne, was on vacation during Anne’s hospitalization; she would remain Dr. Martin’s patient for the next eight years.

Sexton’s first suicide attempt took place the day before her twenty-eighth birthday; she swallowed an overdose of Nembutal while Kayo was in the Midwest again away on business (he had received the news from Billie by telephone). The Harveys had to succumb to the difficult fact that their daughter was now one of “the sick” while the Sextons tried their best to temporarily care for Anne’s children. Of this turbulent time, Linda writes, “What I remembered from those early years was my own fear, the anxiety that lived inside me like a boa constrictor and made it hard to breathe . . . Fear was the four-letter word with which I lived, locked inside me like a dirty secret.” Anne’s illness had thrown her family into a world of perpetual instability. Following this hospitalization, everyone, including her children, felt responsible for maintaining Anne’s well-being.

The most able family member would prove to be the powerful matriarch, Billie Sexton. Linda recalls, Billie, who she called “Nana,” stepped up during this chaotic time.

264. Ibid.
265. Middlebrook, Anne Sexton, 33.
266. Linda Gray Sexton, Searching for Mercy Street, 13.
and, as per her nature, “took up much of the slack in ‘mothering’” the children when her
daughter-in-law, Anne, was either unwilling or unable.267 In this sense, Linda confirms,

Nana became more of a mother to me than Mother herself. She
was not a large woman, but I always think of her that way—solid
and strong enough to take on all our burdens . . . She stood in
stark contrast to my mother, who alternated between wearing
flamboyant clothing, makeup, and jewelry—a stunner—and
sitting slumped at the kitchen table in her coffee-stained
bathrobe, her hair tangled from her fingers as they twirled
endless knots, her eyes empty.268

At first, Anne was not always grateful to her mother in-law for the routines she had
established in Anne’s absence; whereas Billie had restored order to her son’s house, in
the process, she had also excelled where her daughter-in-law had failed: as a responsible
mother, wife, and caretaker. Consequently, Anne had initially resented the impotent role
into which her illness had thrust her and expressed every so often her frustration with her
mother-in-law’s “interfering.”269 Anne’s resentment most likely stemmed from feelings
of insecurity first prompted by her illness. However, as she began to notice the strong
emotional attachments forming between Billie, Linda, and Joy, Anne’s bitterness
sometimes got the better of her. This mounting tension between them did not go
unnoticed by the other members of the Sexton household. According to Linda, “As time
passed [Billie] became more matriarchal, more stubborn and controlling. The situation
often demanded such attributes, and when it did not, the pattern had become too
ingrained to abandon.”270 The issue of Billie’s involvement in Anne’s family would
resurface throughout Anne and Kayo’s marriage and inevitably come to a head in the
couple’s alcohol-induced fights. One argument lead Anne in therapy to surmise,

267. Ibid., 86
268. Ibid., 27.
269. Middlebrook, Anne Sexton, 35.
When we married [Kayo] thought I was going to be like his mother; and I used to be more like that, to keep a nice house. Now I’m kind of like a comrade—kind of amiable about disorder, where his mother isn’t at all. The thing that really crushes me inside is that he thinks his mother is a better mother than I am . . . It’s one of the central issues of our marriage.\textsuperscript{271}

The fact remains that Billie was a better mother, and although Anne would never admit as much, eventually, she would confide to Linda, “I was too sick to be your mother.”\textsuperscript{272}

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Soon after her first hospitalization in 1956, Anne’s psychiatrist, Dr. Orne, encouraged her to write about her anguished experiences. It is here where Anne’s life as a poet begins. According to Diane Wood Middlebrook, who was able to interview Dr. Orne as well as review recorded therapy sessions kept by both Orne and Sexton, “By writing poems, Sexton confirmed her own existence as an able person; by typing them out for her doctor, she entrusted herself ever more deeply to his affirming attention.”\textsuperscript{273} Anne’s family members, on the other hand, were beyond confused by her newfound passion, not least of all, Billie, for whom “family was sacred.”\textsuperscript{274} When Anne’s health began showing signs of improvement, both the Harveys and the Sextons became perplexed by the energy the once bedridden woman was able to set aside for writing. Everyone, including her children, wondered why Anne couldn’t get with the program and fulfill her duties as a “normal” wife and mother.

In an interview conducted in 1968, Anne reflects on the dramatic transformation beginning to take place at the end of 1956:

Until I was twenty-eight I had a kind of buried self who didn’t know she could do anything but make white sauce and diaper

\textsuperscript{271} Middlebrook, \textit{Anne Sexton}, 155.
\textsuperscript{272} Linda Gray Sexton, \textit{Searching for Mercy Street}, 12.
\textsuperscript{273} Middlebrook, \textit{Anne Sexton}, 45.
babies. I didn’t know I had any creative depths. I was a victim of the American Dream, the bourgeois, middle-class dream. All I wanted was a little piece of life, to be married, to have children . . . I was trying my damndest to lead a conventional life, for that was how I was brought up, and it was what my husband wanted of me. But one can’t build little white picket fences to keep nightmares out.  

For Sexton, poetry, like therapy, was a way of giving order and meaning to her emotional life. By the time Linda was old enough to understand her mother’s madness, she had already begun to internalize the logic of Sexton’s method: “Writing works better at cleaning up the mess than doing laundry or making beds.” Linda’s account empathizes with Anne’s ambitions as it steers us away from judging her (or her aspirations) too harshly; if we are to “side” with Linda’s interpretation of events, we should not (as certain members of Anne’s family may have done, unintentionally or otherwise) fault the poet for her pursuit to know and share herself outside of her family and home.

With the encouragement of her psychiatrist, in January of 1957, Anne began feeling well enough to enroll in a poetry workshop taught by Professor John Holmes at the Boston Center for Adult Education. In addition to therapy, this humble workshop space (where she also befriended the invaluable Maxine Kumin) provided Sexton with the affirmation necessary to continue to write. Additional encouragement from Holmes motivated her to begin sending poems out for publication (even though many of them would be returned with rejection slips). “Once she arrived at this feeling of vocation,” Middlebrook writes, “she pursued it at the expense of all else.”  

By December of that year, Sexton had written over sixty poems.

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275. Anne Sexton, No Evil Star, 84.
276. Linda Gray Sexton, Searching for Mercy Street, 95.
277. Middlebrook, Anne Sexton, 61.
During the Spring of 1958, Anne, frustrated by the defense mechanisms she continued to exhibit while in therapy (which included but was not limited to self-induced trances), reflected on her therapeutic gains and setbacks. In these notes, which she shared with Dr. Martin Orne, she writes:

I realize, with guilt, that I am a woman, that it should be the children or my husband, or my home—not writing. But it is not—I do love my children but am not feminine enough to be all lost in their care. It wears me—I do not have the patience. (How can you really know what I mean—you have never been worn down by a nagging child?)

The inner conflict Anne was struggling to articulate during this time coincided with the pressure she was beginning to receive from her family to resume a normal life; according to her biographer, it did not sit well with them that “she felt well enough to join a poetry class but not well enough to resume full responsibility for her children.”\(^\text{279}\) With everyone else pitching in and still paying for her psychiatrist bills, Anne had to compromise, they felt, and follow through with the family’s wishes. According to Linda, Billie was especially convinced that, “If Mother was strong enough to write poems all day long, meet other poets for lunches and readings, or even go to week-long poetry retreats, surely she must be strong enough to make a meatloaf for supper, surely she did not need such extensive, expensive, psychiatric help.”\(^\text{280}\) Although Anne resented Billie’s constant surveillance and expressed to Dr. Orne, “Wish I didn’t have a mother-in-law at every move,” she knew that without her family’s support, she was vulnerable and likely to suffer another breakdown.\(^\text{281}\)

\(^{278}\) Ibid., 63.
\(^{279}\) Ibid., 73.
\(^{281}\) Middlebrook, *Anne Sexton*, 73.
Given the pressure Anne was under to manage her illness and get better for the sake of her children, one wonders: where did the troubled woman who briefly sold beauty cosmetics door-to-door with her sister-in-law just to pay for babysitters find the time and the resources to write so well that by 1967, she would go on to win a Pulitzer Prize? In Searching for Mercy Street, Linda explains, “The speed with which Anne Sexton found acceptance within the cadre of the literary elite was indeed remarkable, but it belied the work required.”

Although “the work” to which the dutiful daughter so curtly refers to here is only one part of the story, for the moment, let’s give credit to Anne Sexton’s early accomplishments.

Unlike Berryman and Lowell, Sexton had not gone to college, so she could not reap the benefits of knowing other writers and editors through these typical academic channels. She made up for her lack of college contacts by soliciting feedback whenever possible from writers whose work she admired (often through letters which included drafts of poems). These influential first readers included Maxine Kumin (with whom she workshopped many a poem over the telephone), W.D. Snodgrass, Robert Lowell, and George Starbuck (an editor at Houghton Mifflin). In addition, Anne had to overcome her agoraphobia (she self-medicated with pills and alcohol) enough to mingle with other poets, such as Sylvia Plath, who noted over martinis Sexton’s “marvelous enviable casualness” about the whole poetry business.

In this version of the story, Anne’s success can be attributed to her very intense work ethic. According to Kathleen Spivack, “For Anne, as for Sylvia, the drive to create and be successful was seen as a ‘masculine’ one, at odds with what her mother, mother-

in-law, and husband expected.” That intellectual perseverance and passion to perfect a poem (some of which would remain unpublished even after having undergone countless revisions) was what propelled Sexton to stardom in ways neither her husband nor her mother-in-law could imagine. In Linda’s words, “She was a success in ways my best friend’s mother, who loved to iron, would never be. She earned a lot of money; sometimes she could pay the bills all on her own. People respected her. My mother had power beyond the home.” For Linda, these triumphant aspects of her mother’s life were a point of identification as well as a source of pride. Whereas she may not have had in Anne Sexton a healthy mother, that doesn’t negate the fact that what she had instead was something of a celebrity and an icon: “With her black hair and eyes of aquamarine, she was as beautiful and dramatic a woman as a daughter could hope for. How I would pray to look just like her—tall, slender, statuesque, and dark.”

There’s a certain psychological heaviness that accompanies Linda’s use of the word dark in this description of her mother; couldn’t the same adjective be used to describe Sexton’s entire oeuvre? While it is important to note that not all of Sexton’s poems are uniformly “dark” (see the life-affirming poem “Live” for example), it is no coincidence that the closer the woman was to death, the darker her poems got. Among the most potent of these darker works is “The Evil Seekers.” It begins,

We are born with luck
which is to say with gold in our mouth.
As new and smooth as a grape,
as pure as a pond in Alaska,
as good as the stem of a green bean—

286. Ibid., 13.
I am reminded here of a line from the conceptual artist John Baldessari’s *Ingres and Other Parables*: “Moral: Beware of artists with a golden tongue.” In other words, whenever a Sexton poem opens with a promising, Romantic image of lyric fecundity, proceed with caution; such beginnings are meant to both charm and disarm and constitute another layer of the poet’s brand of seduction. The poem continues:

we are born and that ought to be enough,  
we ought to be able to carry on from that  
but one must learn about evil,  
learn what is subhuman,  
learn how the blood pops out like a scream,  
one must see the night  
before one can realize the day,  
one must listen hard to the animal within,  
one must walk like a sleepwalker  
on the edge of the roof,  
one must throw some part of her body  
into the devil’s mouth.\(^{288}\)

Must “one”? I am intrigued by the way the poem’s instructions assume a female reader, and so finding myself called upon to do as the poet-sorceress commands, I read on:

Odd stuff, you’d say.  
But I’d say  
you must die a little,  
have a book of matches go off in your hand,  
see your best friend copying your exam,  
visit an Indian reservation and see  
their plastic feathers,  
the dead dream.  
One must be a prisoner just once to hear  
the lock twist into his gut.  
After all that  
one is free to grasp at the trees, the stones  
the sky, the birds that make sense of out of air.  
But even in a telephone booth  
evil can seep out of the receiver  
and we must cover it with a mattress,  
and then tear it from its roots  
and bury it,  
buried it.

\(^{288}\) Ibid., 444.
Surely part of what made Anne such an arresting figure was how close she always seemed to death, “the devil’s mouth,” and yet despite her multiple suicide attempts, and the fact that she “wrote unhappy,” she “lived to the hilt.”

That Sexton was able to live, let alone write, having shared such intimate and close quarters with her nightmares certainly fascinated Linda as a child, but I get the impression that throughout her memoirs, Linda is careful not to let this fascination overwhelm the candor of her remembrances. This guardedness is also part of the reason why Linda selected Diane Middlebrook as Anne’s biographer; in Linda’s words: “[Diane’s] wariness regarding Mother’s charisma seemed an asset, as I wasn’t looking to engage an ‘Anne junkie.’”

In Middlebrook, Linda discovered a biographer who could discern Sexton’s talents whilst remaining immune to the spell of the artist with the golden tongue.

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The glamour, talent, and success that prompted Linda as a young girl to bask in her relation to the popular poet prompted many other women, such as Sylvia Plath and Adrienne Rich, to envy the attention Sexton received. Around the time Sexton’s first book came out, Adrienne Rich recalls, “I would never have acknowledged it at the time, but I felt threatened, very competitive with her . . . I think I suspected—and not because of some profound character defect in me—that if she was going to take up space, then I was not going to have that space.”

When Sexton, Plath, and Rich began writing, there did not yet exist a recognized tradition such as “women’s writing”—there was only the pervasive belief that “few women write major poetry,” as Robert Lowell had put it.

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290. Linda Gray Sexton, Searching for Mercy Street, 234.
291. Middlebrook, Anne Sexton, 112.
Those “few women” who did write major poetry (such as Elizabeth Bishop and Sylvia Plath, both of whom Lowell had ranked) could not compete with the lyric genius of men like Eliot, Pound, Yeats, or Frost. Although Sexton was not considered by Lowell to be among the chosen few, her boldness rendered her a force to be reckoned with.

Still, I suspect fans of Sexton’s, like Kathleen Spivack, tend to overemphasize the gutsy aspect of the self-made woman’s story—in the eyes of her admirers, Sexton had made it during a time when

Women mostly wrote to please. To please: a father/man/lover/husband/teacher/critic/editor. The whole establishment was male! If you wanted to make it, you had to attach yourself to a man or try and become the man in some fashion: change your name, disguise your identity, so an editor of a magazine would read your work rather than throw it away. The field was full of misogyny.293

Women of Spivack’s generation who dared to write poetry relied on the praise, blurbs, and recommendations of men like Robert Lowell to validate their talents because, in Sexton’s words, “in the early 1950s . . . women didn’t think they could be poets.”294 This is of course further complicated by the fact that everyone seemed to know “Lowell selected his women students for his classes at Harvard mostly on their looks.”295 That being said, one can imagine how much moxie a woman must have needed to go into the poetry business, for no matter how intellectual or ambitious the pursuit, a woman could never be accomplished enough to escape the male gaze of the “master” poet.

And yet unlike any other poet before her, Anne Sexton used her sex appeal to her every advantage. She embraced her to-be-looked-at-ness rather than shied away from it because she felt no conflict in being attractive and accomplished; the many photographs

293. Spivack, With Robert Lowell & His Circle, 58.
294. Anne Sexton, No Evil Star, 201.
of her in which she sits glamorously posed either by her pool or desk project an image of Sexton as having the style and panache that could only belong to a star poet. That attentiveness to the ways in which her image would be disseminated, consumed, and reproduced is part of Sexton’s artifice—beyond being a knock-out, she looked smart, laid-back, savvy—*sharp*. (Of course such images reveal nothing of the disturbances within Sexton’s house.)

One iconic image of Sexton features the author sitting cross-legged at the edge of her desk in her Weston home in 1966 (see figure 2). We know it is Sexton’s desk, and not her husband’s, because her position on the desk rather than at the desk suggests as much: *This is my workspace: the charmed inner circle.* The relaxedness of her shoulders and exposed neck also intimates that the writer-is-at-home in her workspace with her typewriter; surrounded by her books and various papers, she is able to access clear, lucid, erotic, self-possessed language. There is nothing ungainly, unattractive, or private about what I do; it’s natural, so natural I *almost* don’t even realize I’m doing it, kind of like smoking. And yet Sexton’s faraway glance which appears fixed on some object beyond the photo conveys an interior life that contradicts the casual and seemingly candid setup of the composition. The serene look of repose is perhaps is *too* serene. Do we trust the euphoria that appears without compromise? It is as if in this instance Anne was Mabel, the eccentric housewife in John Cassavetes’s 1974 film, *A Woman Under the Influence*, as played by Gena Rowlands: somewhere between the sublime and the unhinged.
Fig. 2. Anne Sexton in her home in Weston, Massachusetts, 1966.
Photo courtesy of the Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin.
Besides her glamour girl looks or her chummy relation to the male gaze, what distinguished Sexton in her beginnings from both Rich and Plath, was that in the cases of the latter, Middlebrook writes, “not only were their literary models intellectual men, but their teachers and lovers were too.” In her study of Plath, Janet Malcolm similarly observes that for many women (herself included) who were trying to write during the ’50s and ’60s, “writing got all mixed up with men.” Diane Wood Middlebrook’s *Her Husband: Hughes and Plath, A Marriage*, David Laskin’s *Partisans: Marriage, Politics, and Betrayal Among the New York Intellectuals*, Kate Zambreno’s *Heroines*, and most recently, Jeffrey Meyers’s *Robert Lowell in Love* all examine the doomed marriages and combustible romances that resulted from the mix-up of writing, men, and women during this time period.

More relevant to my immediate discussion is Eileen Simpson’s memoir, *Poets in their Youth*, which narrates to comic effect the domestic dysfunction between married literary men and women as Simpson experienced it first-hand while married to the poet John Berryman. She describes her early infatuation with him: “To be the ‘helpmate’ (wasn’t that the word we undergraduates used in the student cafeteria, talking of such things?) to a poet would be the most interesting and useful way for a woman to spend her life.” The primary relationships women shared with literary men were limited to assistant, wife, muse, and mistress. If not for these, who would deliver the poet to himself? It was only after Simpson had married Berryman that she realized his shortcomings as a spouse; she writes, “responsibility toward marriage vs. responsibility toward art became a serious conflict for one who was almost as ambitious to be a good

husband as a good poet. With a nervous system such as John’s, lapses in the former were inevitable. “Berryman was no less aware of his inability to balance his literary ambitions with his marital obligations; after Simpson had severely injured her back around the same time Berryman’s first book was to be released, he recorded in his journal, “E’s saying softly she worries more about my book than her exams; a twinge, that I do not feel so for her. Nor for anyone.” Even as the “demands” of his chosen vocation seemed incompatible with the role of the supportive husband, Berryman re-married twice after his split from Simpson. My guess is that he needed someone to take care of him. In a letter to John Haffenden (Berryman’s biographer), Elizabeth Hardwick, Lowell’s second wife, reflected of Berryman and his tumultuous romantic relationships, “I am sure his wives suffered, but there is always something voluntary in the suffering of a mate—isn’t there?”

In the context of Hardwick’s twenty-plus year marriage to the manic-depressive mad-poet par excellence, her comment, much like her prose, is as precise as it is discreetly self-referential. Like Berryman, Robert Lowell had also married three times, but I suspect, given the literary acumen possessed by all three of his wives, Lowell desired something beyond just a caretaker. To refer again to the witty intellect that is Elizabeth Hardwick’s: “[Lowell] married three wives. And each of them was a writer. I call that rather heroic, don’t you?”

In Poets in Their Youth, Simpson recalls Lowell’s first wife, Jean Stafford, whose “eyes seemed to be bathed in an excess of fluid, so that they looked permanently welled-

299. Simpson, Poets in Their Youth, 42.
300. Haffenden. The Life of John Berryman, 201.
302. Spivack, With Robert Lowell & His Circle, 149.
up, giving the impression that she had been crying or might do so at any moment.”\textsuperscript{303} The multiple biographies written of Jean Stafford suggest the woman had reason to cry.\textsuperscript{304} After Lowell had broken Stafford’s nose not once, but twice (the first time was in a car accident, the second, in a fight), Stafford, who was preoccupied with the demands of writing her first novel, \textit{Boston Adventure}, typed Lowell’s verse. According to David Laskin, “Much as she resented typing her husband’s poems, and resented even more being expected to type them, much as she insisted that she didn’t know or care much about poetry or even \textit{like} it particularly, Stafford wanted [Lowell] to succeed as a poet.”\textsuperscript{305} Lowell did not reciprocate such gestures nor did he refuse them; as long as they were married, and in spite of the success her first novel had won her, Stafford remained careful not to upstage her poet-husband.

Somewhat tragically, Stafford’s self-effacement excludes her from being remembered as the “self-sacrificing” wife in this narrative, for she never surmounts the grace so often attributed to that “singular woman,”\textsuperscript{306} Elizabeth Hardwick (who stuck by Lowell even after he had left her for Lady Caroline Blackwood and then appropriated portions of Hardwick’s letters for his book of poems, \textit{The Dolphin}).\textsuperscript{307} After Lowell’s departure from the marriage, Stafford suffered a nervous breakdown; Simpson visited her in the glamorous Payne Whitney psychiatric clinic in New York. Pitying Stafford’s

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{303} Simpson, \textit{Poets in Their Youth}, 120.
\end{itemize}
newly acquired bitterness over the success Lowell had earned upon the publication of his collection *Lord Weary’s Castle*, Simpson reflects, “What a mistake it had been to marry an intellectual!”308 In a letter written to her sister, Stafford would lament, “Being a writer and being married to a writer is a back breaking job and my back is now broken.”309 After the dramatic dissolution of her marriage to Lowell, Stafford, “the interior castle,” became something of a recluse; in her effort to become a private person, as far as female literary personas go, she strikes me as a unique foil to the attention-seeking Anne Sexton.

In *Robert Lowell and His Circle*, Kathleen Spivack marvels at, “the martyrdom of the wives of these twentieth-century poets. They endured humiliations and blame, and yet continued to type and revise manuscripts. They had, as Eileen Simpson put it, ‘agreed to marry the work,’ and were either fully or almost destroyed in the process.”310 The subtext of Simpson’s memoir reveals itself to be that one inversion of confessional poets and their lives was poets and their wives, for as the poet Delmore Schwartz, Berryman’s friend, had warned her: “All poets’ wives have rotten lives.”311 How does Anne Sexton, who was no poet’s wife, exist as a confessional poet within this narrative? Not having belonged as a member to any confessional boys’ club, she stood for many to be an exemplary woman, and she embraced the part—but is this posture not also something of a put-on? While Sexton didn’t typically work under anyone else’s terms but her own, it’s not as if in her journey to becoming Anne Sexton she made a go of it on her own without a husband, family, and housekeeper helping her all the way. On the contrary, Sexton depended on the routine stability afforded by the hetero-domesticity she inhabited to

308. Simpson, Poets in Their Youth, 152.
produce a poem like “The Fortress,” sparked by the memory of “taking a nap with Linda”:

We watch the wind from our square bed.
I press down my index finger –
half in jest, half in dread –
on the brown mole
under your left eye, inherited
from my right cheek: a spot of danger
where a bewitched worm ate its way through our soul
in search of beauty. My child, since late July
the leaves have been fed
secretly from a pool of beet-red dye.312

In *Searching for Mercy Street*, Linda describes the memory that inspires the poem as one that holds “the luxury of rest, of love in proper proportion.”313 While scenes and recollections of intimacy between mother and daughter in Sexton’s poetry are often accompanied by traumatic flashbacks (of anal inspections, or incest for example), “The Fortress” functions much like a place of respite, as well as a lyrical safe space:

I cannot promise very much.
I give you the images I know.
Lie still with me and watch.
A pheasant moves
by like a seal, pulled through the mulch
by his thick white collar. He’s on show
like a clown. He drags a beige feather that he removed,
one time, from an old lady’s hat.
We laugh and we touch.
I promise you love. Time will not take away that.314

I believe Sexton was emotionally and aesthetically inspired by such moments more often than many of her darker and perhaps more performative poems would have us believe.

However, since Sexton was attached to no literary man, her myth makes her appear as if she was her own mid-wife. That Anne Sexton, Sylvia Plath, and Adrienne Rich were

determined to write about their own lives as mothers, wives, and daughters in spite of the fact that there was no women’s movement and no alternative spaces yet for them to practice their craft is something worth marveling at. However, I also believe, at least in the case of Anne Sexton, that this narrative of “the self-made woman” is a little tired, if not entirely inaccurate; such a monolithic narrative undermines the extent to which Sexton’s closest friends and family members offered her their emotional support. I use the term “emotional support” with many reservations because it fails to communicate all the routine and random acts of kindness, forbearance, and patience exercised by those who cared for Anne in the ways that they could. It is in these instances that I find it the most necessary to defer to the testimony of Sexton’s caretakers. I wonder if these secondary narratives have been pushed aside because of the way they cut “the self-made woman” down to size even as they assure us Sexton was anything but a “normal (?) American housewife.”

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Notwithstanding, in early 1957, Anne had only just begun to reconcile herself with the fact that “my feeling for my children does not surpass my desire to be free of their demands upon my emotions.” According to Linda, “I had been, Mother said later, an impossible three-year-old. ‘You cried all the time,’ she explained. ‘You whined. You were a difficult, annoying child.’” Eventually, Anne would use her poems as a place to explore the emotional whirlwind that characterized much of her and her daughters’

315. As Peter Davison, an acquaintance of Sexton’s, remarks in his memoir, The Fading Smile, 30: “I don’t recall ever having been with Anne Sexton when she did not require someone to take care of her.”
316. Middlebrook, Anne Sexton, 37.
childhoods. In the widely anthologized poem “The Double Image,” addressing her daughter Joy, Sexton writes in the poem’s last section:

I could not get you back
except for weekends. You came
each time, clutching the picture of a rabbit
that I had sent you. For the last time I unpack
your things. We touch from habit.
The first visit you asked my name.
Now you stay for good. I will forget
how we bumped away from each other like marionettes
on strings. It wasn’t the same
as love, letting weekends contain
us. You scrape your knee. You learn my name,
wobbling up the sidewalk, calling and crying.
You call me mother and I remember my mother again,
somewhere in greater Boston, dying.318

Influenced by W. D. Snodgrass’s “Heart’s Needle,” Sexton performs the part of the guilty parent and the negligent daughter in this poem, but is the poet’s confession an act of atonement, or is the speaker just having “a moment”? The poem ends

I, who was never quite sure
about being a girl, needed another
life, another image to remind me.
And this was my worst guilt; you could not cure
nor soothe it. I made you to find me.

The poet’s ambivalent relationship to her guilt and culpability characterizes the conscience-stricken tone of much confessional poetry. It would be a mistake, however, to assume that the emotions and insights expressed in a Sexton poem belonged to the woman herself; she would later concede that whereas you might solve problems with a psychiatrist, “you don’t solve problems in writing.”319 For Sexton, above all, the poem

provides an occasion for a certain kind of intimacy to take place between reader and writer. Furthermore, if anything is to be achieved from this intimacy, it is a poetic truth rather than a factual one.

As Sexton maintained both in therapy and in published interviews that “the poem counts for more than your life,” it mattered more to her that the experiences and emotions expressed in a Sexton poem felt true more than they were true. In this endeavor, Anne was often successful. (Case in point: the first time she read “The Double Image” in public, she drew tears from the audience.) In a justification of her mode of self-disclosure, Sexton relates, “you don’t have to include everything to tell the truth. You can exclude many things. You can even lie.” Jo Gill, a scholar committed to Sexton’s poetics, appreciates this seemingly counter-confessional tendency within Sexton’s oeuvre as it demonstrates “the essence of confession lies in dressing up, rather than undressing, in disguise rather than nakedness.” In a similar vein, scholar Deborah Nelson reads the poet’s feigned “openness” as proof of her “great insight into female privacy”: by exploiting “the fiction of sincerity” and appearing to “tell all,” Sexton maintains for herself “a paradoxical privacy.” In other words, Sexton’s uncanny multiplication of truth that could dupe a reader like Helen Vendler (who claimed “Sexton’s poems read better as a diary than as poems”) further establishes her within the confessional canon as something of a con artist. As she once offered in an interview, “It’s very hard to reveal yourself. Frankly, anything I say to you is useless and probably more deceiving than

320. Anne Sexton, No Evil Star, 75.
321. Ibid.
Sexton’s multiple guises throw us off and force us into a conundrum: how do we as readers know when to take the confessional poet at her word if she confesses, “I’ll often confess to things that never happened”?

Curiously, the omissions, lies, and half-truths Sexton indulges in her confessional acts set the stage for her daughter Linda to fill in the blanks. Through the form of the memoir, Linda, ever the confessional poet’s daughter, picks up where her mother left off, giving voice to the private truths that her mother could not.

Among the central myths that Linda debunks in her account of Anne Sexton is the extent to which her mother “successfully” balanced the obligations of her writing career with her life at home. When Sexton was asked in 1968 for the Paris Review whether her responsibilities as a wife and mother interfered with her writing, Sexton responded, “Well, when my children were younger, they interfered all the time. It was just my stubbornness that let me get through with it all.” Sexton’s account is, of course, only partially true. The flip-side of the writer’s “stubbornness” is Linda with her younger sister Joy quietly tiptoeing around the house, “anchors for each other in a stormy Sexton sea.” Since Anne’s responses toward her children tended toward the unpredictable when she was at work writing, Linda and Joy learned from a young age not to disturb Anne while she was at her typewriter. Their silence provided the initial conditions for Sexton to fine-tune her poetic voice.

Another one of the powerful narratives Linda brings to the fore in Searching for Mercy Street is that of Billie Sexton’s. In Linda’s words, Billie “rescued my mother again

325. Anne Sexton, No Evil Star, 74.
326. Ibid., 134.
327. Ibid., 100.
and again from chores she did not want to perform (sewing, cooking, driving us to the
doctor, dentist, and after-school activities) and the roles my mother did not want to play
(a housewife and devoted mother).” 329 If one were to go by Anne’s portrayal of Billie,
her mother-in-law would appear as expected—the meddlesome nag (as Anne recalls
Billie once commenting, “Why aren’t your husband and children enough—why don’t you
make [writing] a hobby?”) 330 Linda, however, understands Billie’s role altogether
differently. From caring for the children when Anne was out of town to altering the hems
on the dresses Anne would wear to poetry events, Linda concludes that Billie, as a kind
of behind-the-scenes shadow wife, “ran all the errands that made it possible for Mother to
work at her art full-time.” 331 Whereas one might be tempted to believe (as Anne
mistakenly had by the end of her life) that it was Anne alone who had thus far been
responsible for her achievements, or that Billie Sexton was both a nuisance and an
obstacle to the innate creativity that was Anne’s, Linda revises this myth and asserts it
was actually Billie “who provided the freedom that enabled the poet to do what she did so
well.” 332 Linda explains how this complicated relationship mutually benefitted both
women:

while my grandmother complained about her daughter-in-law’s
lack of ability in the wifely arts, secretly she felt glad that Anne
gave her room to take over and that her son still needed her;
while my mother bitched about having her space invaded,
secretly she felt relieved to have a domineering mother-in-law
who commandeered the household and cared for her as if she
were another one of the children, freeing her to become, quite
simply, a star. 333

330. Middlebrook, Anne Sexton, 152.
331. Linda Gray Sexton, Searching for Mercy Street, 35.
332. Ibid., 36.
333. Ibid.
In part, Linda emphasizes this narrative in *Searching for Mercy Street* for the same reason she chooses Diane Wood Middlebrook as her mother’s biographer—so as not to indulge the cult of “Anne junkies” as she called her mother’s most unwavering fans. By appointing Middlebrook as Anne’s official biographer and then later stressing in her own published memoir the key roles played by other family members in the management of Anne’s illness, Linda refutes the overblown myth of Anne Sexton as an independent, self-made woman while also asserting that her mother’s life story was more complicated and nuanced than that of “a flashy case study.”

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While Sexton takes great care not to include Billie in her self-mythology, we know from Middlebrook’s biography and Linda’s memoirs that Anne was not oblivious to the ways her illness drastically rearranged the emotional lives of those around her—as she admitted in some notes she typed up for Dr. Martin Orne in 1957, “I want to be a child and not a mother, and I feel guilty about this.” Sexton’s guilt may have derived from the fact that she understood her desires to be in direct contradiction with the “self-less” maternal role her family expected her to adopt.

According to Linda, it was this particular “childish” aspect of Anne’s illness that perplexed Billie Sexton the most:

> My mother’s worst transgressions, however, lay in the fact that by becoming mentally ill—and both branches of the family viewed this illness dubiously—she had rendered herself incapable of caring for her children, whose protection and guidance were—to my grandmother—a decent woman’s main responsibility in life. It seemed to my grandmother that Anne had never grown up.

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334. Ibid., 234.
If, as the feminist scholar Nancy Chodorow has previously theorized, “Women mother,” then Anne’s inability to perform the traditional feminine role expected of her disturbed her family because it seemed so unnatural (i.e. sick, abnormal, pathological) for a woman (especially one who had already given birth) to function without her maternal instincts.\(^\text{337}\) As Anne’s depressions compromised any ability she may have had to manage a home, her helplessness was perceived by her family as having stemmed from a puzzling lack of interest. What kind of respectable woman lacked an innate desire to care for, to nurse, to mother?

The Harveys and the Sextons were not especially backward in their beliefs—the notion that women naturally enjoyed motherhood, marriage, and all things domestic, was, at the time, quite conventional in postwar American society. The introduction to the critical anthology “Bad” Mothers: The Politics of Blame in Twentieth Century America suggests that the exemplary maternal model held dear by most Americans still to this day bears the “vestiges of the Victorian ideal” where “the ‘good’ mother remains self-abnegating, domestic, preternaturally attuned to her children’s needs; the ‘bad’ mother has failed on one or more of these scores.”\(^\text{338}\) These widely held cultural assumptions, Middlebrook argues, partly explain Sexton’s distress, for during the 1950s:

women were supposed to be naturally good at mothering. They were also expected to find their greatest satisfaction in homemaking. Women who weren’t and didn’t found little validation in social institutions for their “unfeminine” departures from the norm.\(^\text{339}\)


\(^{339}\) Middlebrook, Anne Sexton, 40.
For Sexton, as for many other married women experiencing a similar kind of daily listlessness (diagnosed at the time as “hysteria”), wifedom and motherhood left a lot to be desired. However, in expressing that dissatisfaction, one assumed the risk of being infantilized, ostracized, and reprimanded. Regarding the social expectations white middle-class women such as Sexton came of age under, Kathleen Spivack, Sexton’s friend, adds that during the post-war era:

> A strong streak of misogyny ran through American pioneer/masculine culture: Puritanism and Freudianism combined both gleefully and conveniently to keep women “in their place.” Add a bit of Blame-the-Mother for any possible societal and psychological ill, and every homespun expert conspired to make sure that women stayed in their allotted places: stupid, pleasant, and compliant.³⁴⁰

In light of such cultural truths, it is no wonder that Sexton, “tired of the gender of things,”³⁴¹ sought to write her own.³⁴²

Anne’s family was less than thrilled by Sexton’s new vocation. The Harveys, “puzzled by this odd woman they had spawned,” could not bring themselves to celebrate Anne’s passion, especially when her poems eventually dared to air her family’s dirty laundry.³⁴³ After speaking candidly with Anne’s sister, Blanche, Linda explains that none of them could understand why Anne wanted to breach the code of old Boston ethics upon which they had been raised by making family matters public. Nor could they understand what all her complaints were about: my mother had a privileged childhood, Blanche insisted earnestly. Who cared about incidents like their father’s beatings with straps? None of the rest of them were upset by any of it. And so, ultimately, they suspected my mother’s mental illness was nothing other than posturing for attention, her poetry nothing more than Anne once again acting

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out her most dramatic, disgusting impulses.\textsuperscript{344}

Neither Mary Gray nor Ralph Harvey lived to see Anne’s first book, published in 1959, \textit{To Bedlam and Part Way Back}; Blanche’s comments (at least as they are relayed to us by Linda, her niece) suggest that had her parents lived, they too would have felt betrayed by Anne’s poetic truths. To Blanche it didn’t matter that Anne had applied herself—her public recollection of matters considered private broke the family law and, to her sister’s perpetual astonishment, threatened to tarnish the Brahmin Boston image in which the Harveys fancied themselves.

Kayo’s feelings on the matter of his wife’s writing life are complicated for different reasons—according to Linda, “He resented Mother’s writing almost as much as he resented her psychotherapy: he didn’t understand either, and they both took her away from him.”\textsuperscript{345} Kayo, “a large, roast-beef affable man who appeared totally bewildered by the wife that fate had handed him,”\textsuperscript{346} was primarily disgruntled by Anne’s literary preoccupations because her obligations as a poet “took her away from home during her ‘best’ hours, those times when she was energetic, and lucid, focused on more than her own difficulties.”\textsuperscript{347} Once Anne became a regular in the Boston poetry circuit, Kayo grew to be made further insecure by the pretentious “poetry types” he and his wife were surrounded by (some of whom Anne had engaged in not-so-discreet and brief affairs with).\textsuperscript{348} This insecurity was exacerbated by the fact that when Anne began to host poetry workshops in their house, Linda explains:

\begin{quote}
my father could to little more than pretend to be a congenial host and act as their bartender. To play this sort of subsidiary role
\end{quote}

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\textsuperscript{344} Ibid. \textsuperscript{345} Linda Gray Sexton, \textit{Searching for Mercy Street}, 85. \textsuperscript{346} Spivack, \textit{With Robert Lowell & His Circle}, 58. \textsuperscript{347} Linda Gray Sexton, \textit{Searching for Mercy Street}, 85. \textsuperscript{348} Ibid., 86.
\end{flushright}
humiliated him and underscored one of his deepest insecurities: how could he keep pace with people who had college educations when he had left college after marrying my mother in order to support his family?

It is of course ironic that the “contemporaneity” for which Anne is so often celebrated was by and large sustained by her husband’s conservative commitment to both marriage and family. For Kayo, as for his mother Billie, family, not fame, took precedence; as these traditional values conflicted with the vision of success Anne held for herself, the relationship between Kayo and Anne slowly deteriorated under the strain. In an undated letter to Anne, Kayo, worn down by the constant feuds, humbly wrote: “I’m just a jerk, tongue-tied, emotionally unable to keep up with you.”

Although Anne sympathized with some of her husband’s frustrations, she felt hard-pressed in her ability to placate him. In a letter to W. D. Snodgrass written Nov. 24th, 1959, she writes, “Kayo (who we all agree is better than I deserve and all) does resent the poetry and sometimes I feel chained to this place ... not to him ... but to this suburban place.”

Anne’s ambition confused her, for although she wished to differentiate herself from her husband and, in her words, “become a me without him,” she also recognized the extent to which she depended on Kayo. Her private correspondence reveals that she was deeply ambivalent about the nature of this dependence. Vacillating between pity, gratitude, and resentment, Anne confided to the poet Robert Bly, “MY husband is an ‘ordinary salesman’ and his case is worse (more EXTREME) than Willie Loman’s because he is married to me (gray eyes).” To another correspondent, Sexton wrote, “I am married to a very intense, practical SQUARE. He is good for me for he has complete plans on how to run each

350. Anne Sexton to W. D. Snodgrass, 24 November 1959, 95. The ellipses are Sexton’s.
351. Ibid.
Without her husband, Anne was rudderless and unable to keep up a healthy routine; this did not stop her, however, from belittling him when she felt her autonomy threatened. Linda recalls one specific fight, after Kayo had accused Anne of being “selfish” for wanting to go on a lunch date to meet yet another big deal poet and editor, Anne retaliated: “My work is beyond you . . . You’re a dope! . . . A little old maid!”

Despite the altercations that took place between them, in public Kayo made his best effort to appear alongside Anne as the camera-shy, but supportive husband. Even so, Anne divorced Kayo in 1973, but “by the time of the divorce hearing,” Middlebrook writes, “she wished she had never undertaken the separation: broken by losses, she recognized how the routines of family life had upheld a sense of security that she had confused with inward strength.” In a letter written to the writer Erica Jong, Anne acknowledged as much shortly before her suicide: “There are many times I wish I had not left my husband or at least I had left him for somebody.” After Anne’s death, even though Kayo would go on to remarry, he reflected, “Somebody was always paying the price of living with her. Always, it was me.”

While Linda’s memoir does not refuse her father’s truth, she does, in a sense, contradict it in her consistent assertion throughout Searching for Mercy Street that it was not just Kayo but the whole family who bore the burden of Anne’s illness, each in his and her own way. For Linda to valorize her father’s heroic tolerance, she would have to negate the validity of her own experience of having not just lived with Anne as her

353. Anne Sexton to Philip Legler, 4 May 1966, 293.
355. Middlebrook, Anne Sexton, 379.
357. Middlebrook, Anne Sexton, 370.
daughter, but after her suicide, in her shadow as her literary executor (the responsibility was a “gift” from Anne bestowed upon Linda on the occasion of her 21st birthday).

As the custodian of Sexton’s life’s work, when the time came for Linda to appoint an official biographer, she admits, “I did not ask my father or his mother, or my mother’s sisters, for their opinions on the matter. I already knew their answer: they would wish to suppress any revelatory book on Mother’s life—and their own—instead seeking a privacy my mother had never granted them.”

In honoring the open spirit of her mother, Linda refuses to reproduce the family silence that so typified her own childhood. Her decision to set the truth of her and her mother’s life to print was not without its consequences. The most indignant response to Linda’s decision to expose the facts of her mother’s life predictably belonged to an extended branch of the Harvey family—Lisa Taylor Tompson and Mary Gray Ford (daughters to Blanche Harvey, Anne’s sister). In their joint letter to The New York Times, Tompson and Ford condemn the truths set to print in Middlebrook’s biography (they seem primarily concerned with Anne’s unverifiable claims that her father, Ralph Harvey, may have molested her at some point in her youth). Among the most pronounced trespasses committed by the biography, the authors argue, is the degree to which Middlebrook accepts Sexton’s “poetic perceptions” as evidence of the Harvey family’s horribleness. “By expressing her invective through poetry—a multifaceted, intentionally cryptic medium through which [Anne] could conveniently deny unprovoked attacks upon those who loved her and who worked tirelessly to provide the patience, understanding and attention she craved,” Tompson and Ford argue, both Anne’s biographer and daughter conspired to present a “puerile, psychobabble attempt” to explain Anne’s poetic

358. Linda Gray Sexton, Searching for Mercy Street, 224.
creativity. I suspect Linda’s decision to take on the truth of her mother’s life through the medium of the memoir may have been motivated in part by her family’s disbelief that confessional poetry could count in the public discourse as a persuasive form of truth otherwise known as evidence.

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As her mother’s daughter, Linda uses the truth-telling form of the memoir to add to Anne Sexton’s biography the narrative of the neglected daughter who spent most of her childhood longing for the attentions of a healthier mother. Linda admits that as a child, “Secretly I craved my best friend’s house, where her mother often was ironing when we came through the door”; she consoled herself however by looking down on “this same woman, who had ‘nothing better’ than housework and family fill her days. My mother, I told myself, was a poet.” An interesting contradiction reveals itself in these admissions (but what is a memoir without its contradictions?). Yes, Sexton had worked incredibly hard and within ten years her star had risen very quickly, as Linda states, but in addition, Sexton never found herself healthy enough to “do it all”—to excel as a professional in her field while taking on the house, the children, and the expectations of a mature and maternal femininity put upon her by her family.

Shortly before she committed suicide, Sexton reflected in a letter written to Linda on her life’s work as it came into conflict with her maternal obligations: “You and Joy always said, while growing up, ‘Well, if I had a normal mother . . . !’ meaning the apron and the cookies and none of this typewriting stuff that was shocking the hell out of friends’ mothers . . . But I say to myself, better I was mucking around looking for truth,

etc. . .”⁶¹ For Sexton, the philosophical (i.e. “masculine”) drive to seek out “truth” was incompatible with the cultural imperative for her as a woman to don the apron and bake the cookies. How would Linda internalize her mother’s calling (or, better yet, Sexton’s prophetic statement to Linda, “For better or worse you inherit me”⁶²)? It seems if Linda were to inherit anything of value from her mother’s legacy, it would be her mother’s impulse toward truth. Linda wrestles with this inheritance in *Searching for Mercy Street* as she cautiously circles around the question, “What happens when a daughter chooses to make her mark in the same field as her mother?”⁶³ In carrying her mother’s confessional torch, Linda finds herself inevitably embroiled in the turmoil that is life writing. By exposing the controversial truths of her mother’s life first in bits and pieces through Diane Wood Middlebrook’s biography, and then more fully in *Searching for Mercy Street*, Linda exposes herself inevitably to the same criticisms faced by her mother while validating the risk that is the confessional endeavor.

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⁶¹ Anne Sexton to Linda Gray Sexton, 3 July 1974, 417. Ellipses are Sexton’s own.
⁶² Anne Sexton to Linda Gray Sexton, 23 April 1969, 342.
Chapter III: Who the Hell Ever Heard of Etheridge Knight?

After reviewing the major critical anthologies dedicated to the subject of confessional poetry, I am embarrassed by what seems obvious, but nevertheless goes unstated: the thematic cohesiveness of the confessional genre can partially be explained by the fact that every major confessional analyzed in these studies has been, without exception, white. To borrow from Anne Sexton, *Odd stuff, you’d say*. Yes—given the concurrence of the confessional moment and the Black Arts Movement, how was it that the only “black voice” in all of confessional poetry belonged to John Berryman, who, in *The Dream Songs*, writes in literary blackface? But as the American Studies scholar Anne Anlin Cheng has observed, “the canon is a melancholic corpus because of what it excludes but cannot forget.” Again, if the most pronounced absence—or repressed presence—that pervades the confessional canon, as well as the body of literary criticism that maintains that canon as an important and influential postwar American literary movement, is the absence of an actual black voice, then what are we to make of Berryman’s racial ventriloquism and the general “imperialist nostalgia” that praises the ingenuity of such acts? Despite some of the gains made during the Civil Rights era and the liberal attitudes associated with the American intellectual cadre of the 1960s, I suspect something of the segregationist impulse survives this period in both its poetry and its criticisms.

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For example, throughout Berryman’s *Dream Songs*, melancholia often takes the form of an unnamed black “friend” who bears the strains of confession when the poem’s protagonist, Henry, cannot. This unnamed interlocutor, who addresses Henry as “Mr Bones” and variations thereof, is often confused with Henry himself, who also speaks in blackface, as in Dream Song 40, for example:

I’m scared a lonely. Never see my son, easy to not see anyone, combers out to sea
know they’re goin somewhere but not me. Got a little poison, got a little gun, I’m scared a lonely.

I’m scared a only one thing, which is me, from othering I don’t take nothing, see, for any hound dog’s sake.
But this is where I livin, where I rake my leaves and copy my promise, this’ where we cry oursel’s awake.

Wisin was dyin but I gotta make it all this way to that bed on these feet where peoples said to meet.
Maybe but even if I see my son forever, never, get back on the take, free, black & forty-one. 367

Deeply suspicious of Berryman’s “imaginative identification with oppressed peoples,” I always do something like wince when I revisit this unsavory aspect of *The Dream Songs*, especially after evaluating the various ways that literary critics have both marveled at Berryman’s elevated form of minstrelsy and worked so hard to validate its legitimacy. 368

Upon their publication, the general response to *The Dream Songs* was such that the “joky

mixture of blues and coon language” in the work marked Berryman as an innovator and a poverty maverick. As a result, he was lauded and historicized for having expanded the possibilities of American poetry in a manner that ranked him with the likes of the era’s major poets such as T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound. In addition, Adrienne Rich, an acquaintance of Berryman’s, declared in her 1969 review of *The Dream Songs*: “Some streak of genius in Berryman told him to try on what he’s referred to as ‘that goddamned baby-talk’, that blackface dialect, for his persona,” and “A man who needs to discourse on the most extreme, tragic subjects, has recourse to nigger talk.”

Does he? Even Rich, who I, among others, typically designate as the voice of wisdom on ethical matters related to poetry, failed to observe that Berryman’s use of dialect was not only offensive, reductive, and appropriative, but, more importantly, symptomatic of postwar American literary culture’s colonialist relation to an imagined black Other.

Thirty years later, in 1998, scholar Aldon Nielsen’s comments on the subject provide a much needed context and counterargument to Rich’s faulty evaluations of Berryman: “Liberal poets of midcentury have argued more forcefully and frequently than at any time since Reconstruction for racial justice, but they not only failed to deconstruct the discourse of racism within the American language, they sometimes spoke in its image” (emphasis mine).

In other words, if one endorses a liberal politics (as opposed to a radical or militant politics), it is in fact possible to overlook Berryman’s attempts at “reproducing” black vernacular as egregious and/or even commend it as valorous,

369. Alvarez, *Beyond All This Fiddle*, 88.
371. It is worth noting that the English translation of Frantz Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (New York: Grove Press, 1967) was made available around this same time.
especially if one finds some redeeming value in the fact that Berryman’s black friend, the novelist, Ralph Ellison, gave his approval: “I wasn’t about to let the poetry of what [Berryman] was saying be interrupted by the dictates of my ear for Afro-American speech. Besides, watching him transform elements of the minstrel show into poetry was too fascinating.”

Perhaps.

More recently, Peter Maber’s important essay, “‘So-called black’: Reassessing John Berryman’s Blackface Minstrelsy,” thoroughly considers the inclusion of dialect in *The Dream Songs*, and asks if, in Berryman’s case, “Negritude [is] something which can be said to be imported.” Can it? Through *The Dream Songs*, the black voice is smuggled into the confessional canon by means of impersonation only to eclipse any thoughtful consideration and discussion of the confessional tendencies exhibited by black poets writing during the same time period. So while I remain intrigued and even inspired by the array of critical attitudes and ugly feelings triggered by Berryman’s aesthetic and political choices, I am, at present, more preoccupied with the bigger critical blunder of how the secrets and confessions of one white confessional poet in blackface have come to count more than the secrets, strains, and confessions of a lesser-known African-American poet. Honestly, who the hell ever heard of Etheridge Knight?

Similar to the canonical confessional poets who were writing throughout the ’60s and early ’70s, Etheridge Knight used his life’s story to explore in his work the traumas of alcoholism and addiction; even as he depicted the perpetual havoc his addictions

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373. Mariani, *Dream Song*, 387.
wreaked upon himself and his relations, Knight’s name appears only twice in the literature on confessional poetry. In one of these entries, titled “What Was Confessional Poetry?” written by Diane Wood Middlebrook and published in *The Columbia History of American Poetry*, Knight is erroneously cited as having been born in 1933 (he was born in 1931).  

In another earlier instance, Knight’s first book, *Poems from Prison*, published in 1968, appears in the selected bibliography of primary sources for Robert Phillips’s *The Confessional Poets*; however, neither Knight nor the book are ever mentioned anywhere else in the study.  

This final chapter of the dissertation seeks to revise these small, but telling errors and omissions while considering Knight’s poetry as forming one of the divergent and unsung strains of confessional poetics.

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Etheridge Knight was born to Belzora Cozart and Etheridge “Bushie” Knight in Corinth, Mississippi on April 19, 1931. Etheridge, who was known as “Junior” to many of his relatives, was the third of seven children. An early biographical sketch of the poet describes Knight’s father as a common laborer who “followed jobs from city to city” and, as a result, “re-located his family whenever a situation looked particularly promising. In this manner, Etheridge, having started in Mississippi, moved to Kentucky . . . from poverty to poverty.”

According to Knight, when he was eight years old, his father found a job in Paducah, Kentucky as a construction worker helping to build the Kentucky Dam. In Knight’s words, “He went up there and worked a couple of weeks and made a

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couple of paydays. Then he sent back for Ma and me, you know how it goes.\textsuperscript{379}

However, in an interview with Knight scholar Michael Collins, Knight’s younger sister, Eunice Knight-Bowens, “remembers her father as a railroad worker who followed the rails to Paducah, where she was born.”\textsuperscript{380}

Such variations in Knight’s biography are common—he was, after all, not just a poet, but a teller of tall tales who collected and performed narrative Southern folk poems known as toasts, many of which he picked up as a teenager in Paducah hanging “where men congregate—poolrooms, parks, jails, prisons.”\textsuperscript{381} As a toast-teller and something of a trickster, Knight, like Sexton, addressed his audiences by always donning the performative persona associated with other kinds of spoken word artists such as orators, actors, magicians, and priests. Furthermore, numerous accounts of Knight as related by his intimates suggest that he wasn’t the most reliable narrator of his own life story in part because of his interest in lore. As his last partner, Elizabeth Gordon McKim, once commented in a joint interview with the poet, “Etheridge can lie a rainbow. He can.”\textsuperscript{382}

Following Knight’s death of lung cancer in 1991, McKim reflected, “Everything you say about him, you could say the opposite, and it would all be true. And it would all be a lie.”\textsuperscript{383} To put it another way, Knight’s life, as it is retold through various recorded and published interviews, often takes on the shape of a biomythography more so than an

\textsuperscript{379} Interview clipping, n.d. Etheridge Knight Papers, 1964 – 1995. Ward M. Canaday Center for Special Collections, The University of Toledo Libraries. My thanks to Lauren White, Curator, and Tamara Jones, librarian, for their assistance while I consulted the archive. I also owe a special thanks to Mary McAnally for granting me permission to quote from the Knight correspondence that belongs to her.


autobiography. According to scholar Leigh Gilmore, a biomythography materializes when “the topos of autobiography—self/life/writing—is exchanged for the terrain of biomythography . . . a representational space where homes, identities and names have mythic qualities.”

Through the spell of biomythography, the South, and Mississippi in particular, becomes more than just the place where Knight was born; biomythography transforms the South into “blues country”—the place where the poet played “the dozens” and “learned the American language. The stories and the music.”

One early narrative thread that constitutes part of Knight’s biomythography is his story of how he picked up his keen sense of language as a shoe-shine boy working in a small town in Kentucky, as told to an interviewer in 1986:

imagine a little black boy on Market Street, down near the river, down where farmers and townspeople buy their groceries there [were] taverns and juke joints and when you’re a black boy growing up in the South where violence is always . . . You listen to every nuance; it’s a matter of surviving—really . . . A little black boy out there on a street with a shoeshine box, he’s vulnerable.

Whether this account is probable but embellished for dramatic effect is irrelevant, for such narratives gather their significance from the fact that when read alongside Knight’s literary output, they lend a sense of cohesiveness to the larger language-centered arc of Knight’s life, especially with regard to matters of race and the significance of growing up in the South. It seems that for these reasons, the poet Terrance Hayes in his Bagley Wright lecture on Knight has admitted:

When I began collecting interviews and stories more than a decade ago, I swore I’d never write a biography of Knight—it

would take more than a decade to complete. I still feel ill equipped to verify Knight’s life. I must rely mostly on the poems, but they are, after all, poems, subject to omissions and imagination. What I can say is that his biography is a story of restless Americanness, African Americanness, and poetry.\footnote{Terrance Hayes, “The Space Between Everything: The Elliptical Life of Etheridge Knight,” \textit{The Daily Paris Review} (blog), March 12, 2015, http://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2015/03/12/the-space-between-everything/} Like Hayes, I have struggled to confirm and triangulate the various and often contradictory facts and accounts of Knight’s life. Since there exists only one book-length study on the poet, \textit{Understanding Etheridge Knight} by Michael Collins, this chapter builds on Collins’s work while continuing to wrestle with Knight’s “restless Americanness” in order to call to readers’ attentions the confessional tendencies in his work. Despite the fact that Knight wrote autobiographically about his struggles with addiction, marital discord, and familial grief, like Berryman and Sexton, he disavowed the term “confessional” to describe his work. Given Knight’s consistent refusal to identify with or describe himself using the terms provided by a white, academic, and elitist literary culture, his complicated relationship to the genre, as well as his invention of the term “geneological” to describe his work, deserves greater consideration if we are to address the fact of confessional poetry’s synonymousness with a poetics of white people problems.

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As a child in Paducah, Knight attended an all black segregated school where he was introduced to the work of “legitimate poets” like Phyllis Wheatley and Paul Lawrence Dunbar.\footnote{Etheridge Knight, interview with Rebekah Presson, \textit{New Letters on the Air}, February 17, 1989, https://beta.prx.org/stories/92639.} Even though he was a straight-A student and valedictorian of his class in junior high school, at age fourteen, Knight dropped out; he would later comment

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on his decision, “I know the feelings I had then, like: what’s the use. My dad was a common laborer . . . he only went to the 4th grade [.] I could see myself there in that town forever and ever . . .”389 During this period, Knight, barely a teenager, frequently ran away from home and, in the words of Terrance Hayes, “discovered the allure of the Paducah pool halls and bars, the jive talkers, shit talkers, and big talkers.”390 Every time Knight ran off, sometimes as far as his hometown of Corinth, he would tell his family he was “going to get rich and they’d be sorry.”391 When taken into consideration with Knight’s remarks about his father, these details give one the impression that Knight’s rebellious behavior during this period may have been the result of mixed resentments having to do with his growing up poor, as well as his father’s physical abusiveness: “My old man didn’t talk much. He was physical. We’d get into it and I’d say, ‘You think I’m going to stay here and grow up like you?’ Then I’d take off . . .”392

By the time Knight was age sixteen, he’d had enough: “I said I am not going to wind up in this town and accept the same kind of destiny that my father accepted. I am going to break out here.”393 And so in 1947, Knight, desperate to be different, lied about his age, forged his parents’ signatures, and signed up to join the army. Knight’s younger sister, Eunice, offers a slightly different version of this same narrative: “[Knight] had talked Daddy into signing the papers giving permission for him to join the army at age 16. Brother said that he was going to be free, ‘because in the South a

BLACK BOY COULD ONLY GROW UP TO BE ANGRY.” Both versions of the story depict Knight as a frustrated young man who possessed a desire to be self-determining.

In the summer of 1950, the United States became involved in the Korean War; there, Knight saw active duty and suffered a shrapnel wound. He was barely twenty years old. In a taped interview for *New Letters* magazine from 1989, Knight reflected of his experience, “War is not really a good place for a 17 year old boy . . . I was trained as a medical technician, but nobody’s ever really trained for all that blood and dying, so I started using drugs.” Knight eventually developed a morphine addiction; later, he reasoned, “It allowed me to live or I would certainly gone crazy over there.” The same year Knight remained hospitalized and in recovery at Walter Reade Medical Center in Washington D.C., his father died of cardiac issues two years after moving the family from Paducah to Indianapolis.

After Knight was honorably discharged from the army in November of 1950, he returned home to his family, but his addiction to narcotics followed him back to Indianapolis. According to Michael Collins, around this time, Knight “became an artful forger of prescriptions—‘scripts’—for himself and other users, and became a ‘usual suspect’ for the police whom according to his sister, he often outwitted.” Knight recalls, “All of the ’50s I spent in the streets. I call ‘em ‘my mad years.’ It was spent getting busted, getting out, getting hooked, getting busted, getting out, getting hooked.”

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Although there is hardly any record of Knight’s ‘mad years,’ he did once disclose to a reporter a puzzling dream he’d had back when he had been first locked up; as he remembers, “The first time I went to the penal colony, I was like 19 or 20, I worked in the rock quarry. I’d been there like a week, and this night, I had this dream. I saw my daddy on the edge of the quarry, laughing at me busting rocks saying, ‘I told you.’”\textsuperscript{399}

The dream seems to suggest that despite Knight’s anxieties about being “different” from his father, he was fated (because of his rebellious nature) to be worse off than the elder Etheridge. Given Knight’s adversarial relationship with his father, as well as his unwillingness to embrace the same kind of unremarkable life that he perceived his father had accepted, the re-telling of the dream at this point in Knight’s life (after he had been nominated for a Pulitzer Prize by his publisher and second father of sorts Dudley Randall) is interesting insofar as it endows the poet’s story with a biomythographical significance. By depicting himself as the victor over the ominous fate forecasted by his vision, such narratives contribute to the reputation Knight may have cultivated as something of a hustler-trickster-folkhero, or he who is capable of outwitting death.

Hidden within the final dream image of the laughing father is also the image of the laughing grandfather from Ralph Ellison’s \textit{Invisible Man}, first published in 1952. At the close of the infamous Battle Royal chapter, after the protagonist of Ellison’s novel receives a briefcase containing “a scholarship to the state college for Negroes,” he has a dream in which his grandfather has him opening a briefcase that contains an envelope.\textsuperscript{400}

After opening a series of envelopes, each contained inside the next, the protagonist finds an engraved document containing a short message in letters of gold. “Read it,” my grandfather said. “Out loud!”

\textsuperscript{399} Jim Daniels, “Etheridge Knight,” \textit{The Almanian}, Nov. 11, 1975.
\textsuperscript{400} Ralph Ellison, \textit{Invisible Man} (New York: Random House, Inc., 1995), 32
“To Whom It May Concern,” I intoned. “Keep This Nigger-Boy Running.” I awoke with the old man’s laughter ringing in my ears.401

Both dreams forecast a Sisyphean image of the not-yet-writer struggling against the patriarchal and systemic structures of American racism in their wish to establish themselves as the sole authors of their lives. However, despite Knight’s later claim that “[he] doesn’t try to be literary,” or that he was “not too concerned with the Pulitzer Prize,” the fact that Knight does not reveal his dream until after he is established enough to contradict the fatalism embedded within it, suggests to me something of his secret wish to be considered, with Ellison, among the great Black mythmakers of his time.402

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Knight’s “mad years” of the ’50s came to an abrupt end on December 6, 1960 after he and two associates were arrested and charged with armed robbery after “forcibly by violence” snatching an elderly white woman’s purse for “what turned out to be ten dollars.”403 After having “nearly crippl[ed]” the victim in the process “to get some money for his habit,” Knight was found guilty of the crime, and sentenced to serve ten to twenty-five years at Pendleton Reformatory.404 However, he was soon transferred to Indiana State Penitentiary in Michigan City, which, in the words of Art Powers, an acquaintance of Knight’s at the prison, “amounted to stamping his packet with the recommendation that he serve his ‘maximum sentence.’”405 Powers recalls of Knight that during his first few years in incarceration,

401. Ibid., 33.
403. Collins, Understanding Etheridge Knight, 5.
405. Ibid., 115.
He didn’t have much going for him in confinement. His work record was spotty; he had a limited education; and his outlook on life was blackened by his sense of injustice. He was assigned to menial jobs and was in and out of the hole for refusing to work. His friends called him a “low rider,” a real sonofabitch. And so Knight, like countless thousands of convicts before him, wallowed in a haze of red anger and self-pity.406

Various interviews with Knight given after he was released on parole in November of 1968 indicate that before he started writing and submitting poems to popular periodicals like *Negro Digest* and the *Journal of Black Poetry*, Knight spent his time in prison immersing himself in books such as James Baldwin’s 1962 novel, *Another Country*, as well as Langston Hughes’s edited anthology, *New Negro Poets, U.S.A*, which he had his mother send him in February of 1966.407 After Knight’s death, the poet Haki Madhubuti (formerly known as Don L. Lee) observed in memoriam of Knight that it was a “paradox . . . he had to go to prison to find his calling and to discover the meaning, significance, and beauty of ideas and literature. He had to wake up behind bars before he realized the empowering magic in the acquisition of knowledge.”408 Following his release from prison, Knight would later compare the monastic period of study he underwent during his incarceration as being similar to the intellectual growth one might experience while enrolled in college.

For these reasons, Knight’s story of how he came to be a writer has often been compared with that of the former Black Panther Minister of Information, Eldridge Cleaver, who wrote the best-selling memoir-manifesto *Soul on Ice* while he was incarcerated at California’s Folsom state prison (“one of the better-known places on the map of the Afro-American,” according to Roberto Giammanco, the Italian translator of

406. Ibid.
Knight’s *Black Voices from Prison*.\(^{409}\) Notably, Cleaver’s *Soul on Ice* was published in 1968, the same year as Knight’s first full-length poetry collection, *Poems from Prison*; however, aside from the fact that both books were written in autobiographical modes that reflect the authors’ experiences of the racist American carceral system, the similarities between the two mostly end there.\(^{410}\)

In addition to reading and to expanding his vocabulary by copying the meanings of words he found in the dictionary into a notebook, Knight kept his sanity intact by socializing with other prisoners, often writing letters on their behalf; working as “a reporter, columnist, make/up-layout-man, and token nigger” on the prison newspaper (titled *The Lakeshore Outlook*, presumably because the prison overlooks the southern coast of Lake Michigan); and entertaining them with his toast-telling abilities.\(^{411}\) “A toast-teller,” in Knight’s words, “is really a community poet—a village poet.”\(^{412}\) Toasts are collectively-authored, narrative folk poems, usually composed of rhyming couplets. The performative and collaborative nature of the genre requires the toaster excel as an entertainer, a bard, and a skillful improviser; in other words, he needs to be a man who can think on the fly. Furthermore, since toasts are, in general, memorized and performed by black men in and for the company of other black men, they tend to circulate within homosocial spaces such as pool halls, bars, prisons, and elsewhere. In this way, toasts often speak to “The Life”—the everyday tragicomedy that the hustler, the thief, the pimp,

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and the junkie all face by making light of the common plight that “a fall” is always on the other side of “a very good run of luck.” Eventually, Knight would end up publishing a version of the popular toast commonly known as “The Titanic” in his second book, *Belly Song and Other Poems*; Knight titled his version, “Dark Prophecy: I Sing of Shine.” The poem begins:

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And, yeah, brothers
while white/ america sings about the unsinkable molly brown
(who was hustling the titanic
when it went down)
I sing to thee of Shine
the stoker who was hip enough to flee the fucking ship
and let the white folks drown
with screams on their lips
(jumped his black ass into the dark sea, Shine did, broke free from the straining steel).
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In *Black Fire: An Anthology of Afro-American Writing*, first published in 1968 and co-edited by the poets Larry Neal and LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka), Neal writes in the afterward to the influential collection of radical black writings that urban toasts such as “The Titanic” form “part of the private mythology of Black America . . . Shine is US.” Neal relates that it is crucial that the folklore, myths, and oral-musical traditions of black life be preserved in separatist anthologies such as *Black Fire* in order to transmit a collective spiritual and revolutionary history of the souls of black folk and their art to performers, artists, and wordsmiths of future generations.

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414. The revised version appears in Knight’s later collections, *Born of a Woman* and *The Essential Etheridge Knight* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1986), 49 – 50. Notably, the earlier version of the poem, published in *Belly Song and Other Poems* (Detroit: Broadside Press, 1973), 25 – 26 bears a different ending, alongside other minor variations. The last lines read: “—and dancing in the streets./Yeah, damn near drunk and dancing in the streets.” Since Knight used intralinear slash marks in some of his poems, double slash marks are used here and henceforward to indicate a line break.
The communal and potentially transformative social aspect of the toast-telling tradition was not lost on Knight. As an experienced toaster, he understood first-hand the potential of the “TRINITY” that was “the Poet, the Poem, and the People. When the three come together, the communion, the communication, Art happens.” The function of performing toasts for other inmates forms a crucial part of Knight’s initial efforts to restore his sense of self during his incarceration; as he would reflect in 1982: “by having an audience in whose interests I was able to maintain a sense of myself,” Knight admitted, other inmates provided him with “a sense of affirmation.” Reciting the toasts he had picked up while roaming the Paducah dives allowed him to “receive some strokes, some much needed strokes, by people who appreciated the jokes” he would tell.

Although Knight would later maintain, “Guys in the joint were my first primary audience,” once he committed himself to the practice of putting the pen to paper and spending all his money “on postage sending out poems to publishers,” he began to write as though he were anticipating a different kind of reader. Of these early attempts, Knight would remember, “It was like 3 years, nothing but rejects, and finally I had a poem accepted by the Negro Digest, it was a sister magazine to Ebony.”

The first poem Knight had published was titled, “To Johnny Mathis’ Ruby” in the January 1965 issue of Negro Digest (renamed Black World in 1970):

Young and fragile, not yet ripe
But bursting with the promise of things to come
A girl running through a meadow of flowers

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416. Knight, Born of a Woman, xiv.
418. Ibid.
420. Daniels, “Etheridge Knight.”
Elusive
Always just out of grasp\textsuperscript{422}

Knight’s choice to write a poem to a song, and a miscredited one, at that—“Ruby” is incorrectly attributed to Johnny Mathis rather than to the performer Adam Wade in the poem’s title—is a curious exercise, but the end result, a bungled ode/ekphrastic, falls short. While this poem may have been the one to finally catch the attention of Hoyt Fuller, then editor of \textit{Negro Digest} and friend to Broadside Press founder and editor Dudley Randall (Fuller and Randall had first met when they were both students at Wayne State University), it is worth appreciating how “To Johnny Mathis’ Ruby” as well as some other similar, short poems printed later that year in \textit{Negro Digest}, such as “To Dinah Washington” and “To Gwendolyn Brooks,” bear zero resemblance to the toast form Knight had previously found so much validation in. The sudden swerve in style may be explained by the fact that once Knight started writing his own poetry, he had yet to reconcile the gap he perceived between the oral and the written word. In his early attempts to graft the audience-centered dynamic embedded in the toast-telling mode onto a more conventional lyric form, he also may have experienced enough rejection from various editors and publishers to reconsider for whom was he writing. As Knight would later comment of his first attempts to enter into the world of “legitimate poetry”: “Prison is the worst place to get a poem rejected... man, you’re already rejected.”\textsuperscript{423} If poetry was to play a key role in Knight’s redemption story, a narrative of “rehabilitation,” then his success, and to a certain extent, his freedom, was contingent on writing not exclusively for “the guys in the joint,” but also a literary audience who could confer some legitimacy upon the emerging poet.

\textsuperscript{423} Daniels, “Etheridge Knight.”
Among the two central literary figures that Knight cites again and again as having personally encouraged and influenced him the most are the poets Gwendolyn Brooks and Dudley Randall, both of whom made the effort to visit Knight while he was still incarcerated at the Indiana State Penitentiary. In a documentary titled *The Black Unicorn*, directed by Melba Joyce Boyd, Randall’s literary executor and assistant editor at Broadside Press, Knight recalls:

I already had an audience in the prisons, but I wanted to extend my voice over the walls. . . . [Dudley] oriented me towards the page more. . . . He taught me the formal aspects of the craft. If anybody reads my poetry and reads Dudley’s and Gwen’s, it’s clear they are my major influences. It’s almost plagiarism to some point, I knew they were the best out there.424

One particular poem Knight may have had in mind when he made the specific comment regarding plagiarism is his poem, “Feeling Fucked/Up,” written after his first wife, the poet Sonia Sanchez, had divorced him in 1970:

Lord she’s gone done left me done packed / up and split
and I with no way to make her
come back and everywhere the world is bare
bright bone white crystal sand glistens
dope death dead dying and jiving drove
her away made her take her laughter and her smiles
and her softness and her midnight sighs — 425

Knight’s poem is meant to be experienced primarily as an exclamatory public utterance. While the speaker of the poem does not address the reader, the narrative logic of the poem’s first stanza, which is also reminiscent of the toast form, assumes a listener, someone like a bartender to listen to the familiar story of how my woman left me and it’s

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all my fault. The first stanza is the hook, the means by which the poet solicits his listener’s attention. And yet the poem’s second stanza doesn’t court sympathy—how could it with all that profanity (“fuck marx and mao fuck fidel and nkrumah”)? Such blasphemy, if anything, demands that the poet be heard regardless of the fact that what he has to say will most likely offend his listener. The poet’s persistence, coupled with the fact that when he performed for others, he always delivered, is one major aspect of Knight’s style; his impassioned speech struck his audiences, particularly the black men for whom he wrote, as contemporary, necessary, and true precisely because such speech did not abstract its truths in order to attend to classist and racist conventions of poetic decorum. Audiences therefore heard Knight’s unambiguous and straightforward speech as both refreshing and authentic.

The straightforwardness of Knight’s “Feeling Fucked/Up” has its roots in a poem authored by Knight’s mentor, Dudley Randall. In a letter to Randall written in early 1973, Knight, who was drying out at a veteran’s hospital in St. Louis and suffering from acute pancreatitis, acknowledged, “Yes, my “feeling fuck[ed]/up” smacks of your ‘Souvenirs,’” and adds, “‘Souvenirs’ still ring[s] in my head!”426 “Souvenirs,” the Randall poem to which Knight is referring, first appeared in Negro Digest and again in Randall’s collaboration with the poet Margaret Danner, Poem Counterpoem, the first book published off Randall’s Detroit-based, independently run, “free, black institution,” Broadside Press.427 The similarities between Knight’s and Randall’s poems are overwhelming; the first stanza of Randall’s poem reads:

My love has left me has gone from me

427. Dudley Randall, Broadside Memories: Poets I have Known (Detroit: Broadside Press, 1975), 27.
and I with no keepsake nothing
not a glove handkerchief lock of hair picture
only the heart remembers

Not unlike the way Dante cannibalizes andrewrites lines of Ovid, “Feeling Fucked/Up” feels and sounds as though the author had deeply internalized the rhythms and the content of his mentor’s “Souvenirs.” However, both speakers possess different attitudes toward the romantic losses they experience. For instance, while Randall in his poem yearns to be reunited with what appears to be a burned-out flame, Knight broods in his poem on the bad feelings being left engenders in him; in turn, these attitudes affect the souvenirs and kinds of remembrances the poets end up claiming in their respective poems. Furthermore, in Randall’s “Souvenirs,” the poet catalogues all the sentimental effects his love has left him without: the glove, the handkerchief, the lock of hair, a picture. Knight, on the other hand, accounts for a list of more intangible items: his love’s laughter, her smiles, her softness, and her sighs. Knight, veering ever closer toward the confessional mode, assumes the blame for his losses as he acknowledges the “dope death dead dying and jiving” on his part that drove his woman away. Since the speaker of Randall’s “Souvenirs” never takes the blame for the romance’s having ended, the poet’s orientation toward loss allows him to indulge a nostalgia not available to the poet of “Feeling Fucked/Up.” In other words, whereas the poet of “Souvenirs” remembers all the ideal and pristine picture-perfect moments shared between himself and his former beloved, the poet of “Feeling Fucked/Up” curses everything that is not his woman, from the clouds, the sky, and the sea to Jesus, Fanon, and freedom; one gathers from Knight’s poem that if the initial circumstances that resulted in the poet’s frustration, his “feeling fucked/up,” will

not be solved or ameliorated by any souvenirs that come by way of remembrance, then better to jettison the remembrances altogether. Throughout Knight’s lifelong appreciation and deep friendship with Randall, Knight’s sense of “feeling fucked/up,” usually the result of a drug or alcohol relapse, would surface time and time again, but his addictions never kept Randall from trying his best to support the poet he believed to possess rare and important talents.429

Gwendolyn Brooks also generously supported Knight in his journey to becoming a published poet, though to a lesser degree than Dudley Randall. While there are varying accounts of who initiated correspondence with whom in the story of how Knight might have become officially acquainted with his “wo-mentor,”430 as he had once called Brooks, their correspondence indicates that the two met as early as 1966 after Brooks traveled from the not so distant city of Chicago, Illinois to Michigan City, Indiana to meet with Knight while he was still in prison.431 Following this first meeting, Brooks would visit Knight on several more occasions so that they could continue discussing the finer points of writing poetry; at some point, during one of these visits, Brooks turned Knight onto haiku. Knight recalls:

She used to come visit me when I was in prison. . . . she just came on her own; she wasn't getting paid for it or anything. And she brought me some books and Japanese haiku. Years later I asked her how come and she said, "it was because you were too wordy in your poems."432

430. Videocassette (Interview with Etheridge Knight in a bar), n.d. Etheridge Knight Papers.
431. “My Sunday, there was one of the richest experiences I have ever had. Coming there was a privilege.” Gwendolyn Brooks to Etheridge Knight, 25 July 1966. Etheridge Knight Papers.
Brooks would eventually agree to write the preface to Knight’s first book, *Poems from Prison*. In it, she writes:

This poetry is a major announcement.

... Since Etheridge Knight is not your stifled *artiste*, there is air in these poems.
And there is blackness, inclusive, possessed and given; freed and terrible and beautiful. 433

Upon learning his parole had been granted after having spent almost eight years in prison, Knight expressed his gratitude to Brooks in a letter, dated Nov 17, 1968: “You’ve been a good friend, and your words have driven away a lot of the shadows in this cell.” 434

Although it is difficult to put into words how such acts of literary stewardship taken on by both Brooks and Randall endowed Knight’s work with the kind of legitimacy that was hard for any emerging poet of color to come by, especially given the fact that Knight was slated to serve a ten to twenty-five year prison sentence and had no academic credentials, nor even a high school diploma to speak of, it is necessary to first explain how the Black Arts Movement as well as the formation of Broadside Press further enabled mentors and “wo-mentors” like Randall and Brooks to support Knight and other emerging Black poets of the late ’60s as well.

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Randall’s correspondence with Knight began in September of 1966 after Randall had accepted three of Knight’s poems for an anthology titled *For Malcolm: Poems on the Life and Death of Malcolm X*, which was to be co-edited by Randall and the poet

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Margaret Burroughs. Knight had decided to submit to *For Malcolm* after he saw the call for poems, most likely in *Negro Digest*, and recognized Randall as the author of the important poem, “Ballad of Birmingham,” written after the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church bombing of 1963. “The Ballad of Birmingham” was also the first broadside to be published off Broadside Press in September 1965. Randall, who was at the time the head librarian of the reference-interloan department through the Wayne County Federated Library System, started Broadside Press out of his home at 12651 Old Mill Place in Detroit, Michigan.\(^{435}\) In his words, the press “began without capital, from the twelve dollars I took out of my paycheck to pay for the first Broadside, and has grown by hunches, intuitions, trials, and error. . . . Since Broadsides, at the time, were the company’s first sole product, I gave it the name Broadside Press.”\(^{436}\) In Melba Joyce Boyd’s indispensable literary biography of Randall titled, *Wrestling With the Muse: Dudley Randall and The Broadside Press*, the author relates that Randall’s interest in publishing books and tapes in addition to broadsides “expanded as a response to the developing Black Arts Movement, a period that cannot be defined by any singular occasion, though the founding of Broadside Press is a major indicator.”\(^{437}\)

\(^{435}\) Thompson, *Dudley Randall*, 241.


To give readers an idea of how fundamental Broadside Press was in the establishment of a new American poetry, according to Boyd, “From 1945 to 1965, only thirty-five poetry books authored by African Americans were published in the United States.” In less than half that time, from 1966 to 1975, Broadside Press had published over fifty. So radical was this feat that the FBI had a “Red File” on Randall, namely because he published through his press poetry that was considered politically subversive.

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439. This number does not include the poetry anthologies edited by African Americans published on Broadside such as Randall’s *Black Poetry: A Supplement to Anthologies which Exclude Black Poets* (Detroit: Broadside Press, 1969), or poetry collections authored by writers who did not identify as African American, such as the Cuban poet Nicolás Guillén, *Tengo*, trans. Richard J. Carr (Detroit: Broadside Press, 1974).
and “contained controversial themes.”\textsuperscript{440} Since “Dudley Randall equals Broadside Press,”\textsuperscript{441} I believe that Randall as an editor, a publisher, a poet, and “a literary caretaker,”\textsuperscript{442} was nothing short of an American literary institution in and of himself: that’s how central his contribution was. Like Knight, however, that contribution has been severely undervalued. Because Randall practically discovered Knight as well as published his first two books (it would have been three had it not been for the financial problems Broadside faced in the late ’70s), it would therefore be unthinkable to tell Knight’s story without also saying something of Broadside’s.

The three Knight poems Randall published in \textit{For Malcolm} include “It was a Funky Deal,” “For Malcolm, A Year After,” and “The Sun Came,” dedicated to Gwendolyn Brooks. These appear in three of the anthology’s four thematically divided sections which were titled “The Life,” “The Death,” “The Rage,” and “The Aftermath.” Other notable poets featured in \textit{For Malcolm} include: Gwendolyn Brooks, Robert Hayden, Clarence Major, LeRoi Jones, and Sonia Sanchez. In the second poem of this sequence, “For Malcolm, A Year After,” Knight writes,

\begin{quote}
Compose for Red a proper verse; 
Adhere to foot and strict iamb; 
Control the burst of angry words 
Or they might boil and break the dam.\textsuperscript{443}
\end{quote}

According to literary scholar Patricia Liggins Hill in her dissertation on the poet, Knight wrote this poem after he questioned a group of inmates about Malcolm X on the one-year anniversary of his assassination; when none of the prisoners could recall the occasion to which Knight was referring, Knight recalls, “It put me uptight. So, I went

\textsuperscript{440} Boyd, \textit{Wrestling With the Muse}, 296.
\textsuperscript{441} Randall, \textit{Broadside Memories}, 28.
\textsuperscript{442} Boyd, \textit{Wrestling With the Muse}, 4.
back to my cell and wrote this poem." Taking a nod perhaps from Randall’s use of the ballad form, Knight reckons here with the anniversary date of Malcolm X’s death while binding himself to Western convention; in employing the traditional English form, however, the poet paradoxically renders the ballad as inadequate under the exasperating social and political circumstances that occasion the writing of the poem.

Of the three Knight poems Randall published in *For Malcolm*, Randall would later affirm, “I liked these poems so much that I asked [Knight] whether he had enough for a whole volume.” Once Randall received Knight’s manuscript, he enthusiastically wrote to Knight in 1967, “Your book is great! I’ll have to beg, borrow, or steal the money to publish it!” That following year, in 1968, the trio of Malcolm poems that Knight had first submitted to Randall would be republished as part of Knight’s debut collection with Broadside, *Poems from Prison*. A recording of Knight reading from these poems was also released through the *Broadside Voices* series in 1968, first as a 5-inch reel-to-reel, and later as a cassette tape. By 1976, Broadside had sold 60 copies of Knight’s tape at five dollars a piece.

In addition to the three poems published in *For Malcolm*, we know Malcolm X was an important figure for Knight because of the extent to which Knight referred to and paraphrased Malcolm’s observations about the relationship between America and its carceral system; as he is quoted in the preface to Knight’s *Black Voices from Prison*, “Don’t be shocked when I say that I was in prison. You’re still in prison. That’s what

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America means: prison."\textsuperscript{448} Almost twenty years after he was released from the Indiana State Penitentiary, Knight would similarly reflect in an interview conducted in 1986, “Being a black male in this country, I still feel, I still am imprisoned in lots of ways just from the racism in the air in this country.”\textsuperscript{449}

Ironically, those feelings of confinement would pursue Knight into his later poems, which he once described, perhaps for lack of better words, as his “post-prison compositions.”\textsuperscript{450} One of these compositions, titled “Various Protestations from Various People,” published in his last collection, \textit{The Essential Etheridge Knight}, reads:

\begin{quote}
Esther say I drink too much.  
Mama say pray don’t think too much.  
My shrink he say I feel too much,  
[ . . . ]  
Regan say I talk about me too much,  
Singing songs ‘bout being free too much.

I say—sing about me being free too much?  
Say sing about me being free too much?\textsuperscript{451}
\end{quote}

In the poem’s last three lines, Knight is “worrying the line” which is to say, he invokes the blues tradition by repeating in this case the third-to-last line with slight variations in order to add emphasis as well as “allow for affective or didactic comment.”\textsuperscript{452} It follows then that the last line in particular seeks to call to our attention the poet’s vexation that he is perceived by some to be free, and thereby singing about being free, when the limitations imposed upon him clearly suggest and thus provoke him to sing otherwise.

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\textsuperscript{448} Knight, \textit{Black Voices from Prison}, 5.  
\textsuperscript{449} Bunge, “Etheridge Knight,” 33.  
\textsuperscript{451} Knight, \textit{The Essential Etheridge Knight}, 104.  
In the introduction to *For Malcolm*, co-editors Randall and Burroughs relate that the idea of putting together an anthology of poems on Malcolm X came about after Margaret Walker read her poem of the same title at the Fisk University Writers’ Conference in Nashville, Tennessee during the Spring of 1966. In a separate published account on the formative years of Broadside Press, Randall adds that whereas “Most conferences have much talk, but little action,” he and Burroughs “decided to inject action into this conference by announcing *[For Malcolm]* at the final session, and offering writers there a concrete vehicle for their poems.” The editors’ decision to announce their intentions to publish such an anthology at the end of the conference proved to be a wise one as it virtually guaranteed they would receive a diversity of poems and perspectives from conference participants of different milieus, generations, and aesthetic traditions.

Much like the poems published in *For Malcolm*, the tenor and tone of the debates and discussions that took place at the 1966 Fisk University Writers’ Conference distinctly reflect the collective frustrations that coincided with the rise of 1960s American Black nationalism. Boyd reports, “the 1966 Writers Conference at Fisk University set the stage for intense ideological debate within the black writing community, as a focus on race identified ‘Black’ as the watchword for the hour.” The central question every writer in attendance at the conference had to ask him and herself was “Are you black first, or are you a writer first?” Randall, who was of the belief that “Black Writers . . . should develop their own media publishing houses” and invest in the larger long-term project

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455. Ibid.
of institution building, found himself “accept[ing] identification as ‘race first.’” Randall would later add, “How else can a black writer write than out of his black experience?” That being said, as “energized by the political climate” of the ’60s as Randall was, he did not always find his opinions to be ideologically one-and-the-same with those of the younger Black writers and students at the conference, especially after he observed the way they regarded other poets of his generation such as Margaret Danner and Gwendolyn Brooks in “the polite but cold way” one regards “the old and conservative.”

In order to understand why the assassination of Malcolm X prompted so many of the poets, writers, scholars, and literary activists in attendance at the 1966 Fisk Writers’ Conference to reconsider their relationship to radical black politics, it is necessary to understand how, in the words of Larry Neal,

Malcolm’s ideas had touched all aspects of contemporary black nationalism: the relationship between Black America and the Third World; the development of a black cultural thrust; the right of oppressed people’s to self-defense and armed struggle; the necessity of maintaining a strong moral force in the black community; the building of autonomous black institutions; and finally, the need for a black theory of social change.

As Malcolm X’s death proved to be “an awesome psychological setback to the nationalists and civil rights radicals,” reflecting on the fallout of this setback, Neal explains,

The established Negro leadership lamented [Malcolm X’s] death, but qualified their lamentations by asserting that he “preached by

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458. Ibid.  
459. Ibid., 129.  
460. Ibid., 130.  
462. Ibid., 26.
the sword, now he has died by the sword.” The militants and the nationalists, on the other hand, felt guilty. They felt that they had not done enough to support Malcolm while he was alive. Hence, they had not protected him, and, somehow, they felt responsible for his assassination.\textsuperscript{463}

The various emotional responses precipitated by the loss of the revolutionary icon, in other words, further highlighted the ideological and generational rift between those who still considered themselves “Negros” and those who were beginning to call themselves “Black” with a capital B.\textsuperscript{464} Knight’s poem, “The Sun Came,” which hinges on the refrain, “The Sun came, Miss Brooks— // And we goofed the whole thing,” suggests that the poem was written from the perspective of the latter category of mourners described by Neal—where Malcolm is the sun, and Gwendolyn Brooks, the poet-prophet who posed the question, “And if sun comes/How shall we greet him?”, Knight sees himself among the guilty militants that had failed to bring about the kind of necessary, revolutionary social change that Brooks alludes to in her poem titled “truth.”\textsuperscript{465}

In contrast with the racial polemic set forth in Neal and Baraka’s \textit{Black Fire} anthology, the editorial priorities of \textit{For Malcolm} only allude to the coexistent and conflicting racial politics of the times; however, at no point do the editors ever “side” with any one politic or aesthetic perspective. By including white and black poets as well as exhibiting “the insight and skill of the older generation of poets” alongside “the militant momentum of the burgeoning Black Arts Movement,” both Randall and Burroughs threw out any ideals of aesthetic or political unity.\textsuperscript{466} Such gestures forecasted

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\textsuperscript{463} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{464} Margo Jefferson notes this cultural shift in her memoir \textit{Negroland: A Memoir} (New York: Pantheon Books, 2015) 35: “By the late sixties, leftist politics and cultural nationalism had given the once-shunned nomenclature ‘black’ a deep and lustrous sheen.” Also see \textit{Black Is...Black Ain’t}, directed by Marlon Riggs (1995; San Francisco, CA: California Newsreel, 2009), DVD.
\textsuperscript{465} Knight, “The Sun Came” in \textit{For Malcolm}, 73 – 74.
\textsuperscript{466} Boyd, \textit{Wrestling with the Muse}, 143.
\end{flushright}
what was soon to become Broadside’s now-celebrated editorial agenda: “to get good black poets published, to produce beautiful books, help create and define the soul of black folk, and to know the joy of discovering new poets.”

As genuine as Randall’s motivations for publishing black poetry may seem, the kind of populism he (and eventually Knight) is sometimes said to have embraced initially struck some certain other cultural nationalists, such as Baraka, to be suspect. When Randall had sent some poems to Baraka and Neal to consider publishing in *Black Fire*, for example, the poems were rejected. By the summer of 1967, Randall confided in a letter to Knight about Baraka, “I’m scared to meet the guy, he’s such a dragon. He’ll probably say I’m not militant enough & a bourgeois.” It seems, however, that Randall would eventually come to terms with the ways he was different as a poet, editor, and publisher from Baraka; having been emboldened by his own editorial experiences, Randall would later proclaim,

> I try to publish a wide variety of poetry . . . I deplore incestuous little cliques where poets of a narrow school or ideology band together, cry themselves up, and deride all others. I believe that in the house of poetry there are many mansions, and that we can enjoy different poets for the variety and uniqueness of their poetry, not because they are all of a sameness.

Emily Bernard explains in her essay, “A Familiar Strangeness: The Spectre of Whiteness in the Harlem Renaissance and the Black Arts Movement,” that the ideological rifts made visible during this period of black literary activism reflected the increasingly popular point of view that “Whether or not you were worthy of the moniker ‘black’ depended on how far at bay you held ‘whiteness.’ Conversely, an immediacy to

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‘whiteness’ compromised the authenticity of your ‘blackness.’” Unfortunately, in the effort to publicly perform one’s contempt for “whitey,” some (which is to say, too many) of the poems to emerge out of the Black aesthetic invoke an anti-whiteness that is also startlingly anti-Semitic. In this way, the tautological idea that “real” or “authentic” Black poets wrote Black, which is to say that they wrote about Black life for Black audiences in a Black style because they were Black, certainly posed its share of problems in addition to empowering people. But “Wherein does Blackness lie?” And furthermore, is there a way to critique certain kinds of Blackness and still be considered Black? Recently published critical anthologies such as SOS—Calling All Black People: A Black Arts Movement Reader as well as New Thoughts on the Black Arts Movement are beginning again to ask these questions as they evaluate the legacies and ideological contradictions of the movement.

One example of the emerging Black aesthetic includes Baraka’s famous poem “Black Art” which rallies, “We want ‘poems that kill.’/Assassin poems, Poems that shoot/guns.” Poet Don L. Lee’s “Awareness,” published in his first book with Broadside, Think Black!, provides yet another example of the kinds of poetics espoused by the Black aesthetic:

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Even as Lee and Baraka were unarguably the most popular poets of the new style, literary scholar David Lionel Smith has observed that the concepts of blackness adopted in such black nationalist writings are “inherently burdened with essentialist, ahistorical entailments.”

While Knight had read and in many respects agreed with the statements, ethics, and poetics of both Lee and Baraka, I am intrigued by the way Knight’s poetry, like that of his mentor’s, manages to resist the more militant style embraced by his peers in order to experiment with other poetic traditions. Among these is confessional poetry.

Knight’s poem “Cop-Out Session” gives one the impression that the poet was of two minds about the genre that “deals really with the ‘I,” as he once put it. While he was intrigued by confessional poetry, he remained doubtful of the mode’s capacity to effectively address and include the audience as part of an extended community that included “the Poet, the Poem, and the People.” “Cop-out Session” may therefore be read as Knight’s attempt to resolve the tension between the singularity of the confessional subject, and the audience-centered, colloquial style that he had cultivated as a toast-teller.

The poem reads:

I done shot dope, been to jail, swilled wine, ripped off sisters, passed bad checks,
[...]

Haven’t you?
In one way or another?

Enybody else wanna cop-out?

478. Knight, Born of a Woman, xiv.
479. Knight, Belly Song, 59.
Rather than confess to an “invisible listener,” Knight enumerates his transgressions to his audience without the somber, guilt-laden affect that we have come to associate with the confessional mode. I am also emphasizing audience here, rather than reader, because the style of the poem, particularly the two rhetorical questions posed at the end, suggests that Knight wrote this particular poem, among several others, so that ideally it would be best experienced in a communal setting, rather than in a printed context. “Cop-out Session” certainly reads as a monologue, though not at all like the kind delivered by Anne Sexton. I also get the distinct impression that Knight’s choice to title the poem “Cop-out Session,” as opposed to “Confessional Poem,” is a sly jibe at the confessional genre—is he mocking the conventions and pretension associated with “putting it out all out there”? Or does the title suggest that the act of confession as a laying bare of “the truth” is in and of itself a cop-out, an aesthetically convenient and lazy way of evading one’s responsibilities as a poet?

Perhaps Knight’s comments before he read “Cop-out Session” at the Minnesota Men’s Conference in 1988 (organized by Robert Bly, another poet and fan of Knight’s) yield some greater insight: “It seems to me [that] in the professing of poetry, in the professing of anything that confessing is an element in professing, and I get leery of somebody who I hear professing all the time and never confess.”

It’s a curious statement, one that presents the idea that a poem can be real – real in so far it can accurately and honestly reflect the socioeconomic, geographical, and autobiographical conditions under which the poet wrote— as opposed to rhetorical (I’m reminded here of

the first stanza of Audre Lorde’s poem, “Power,” where she writes, “The difference between poetry and rhetoric/ is being ready to kill/ yourself/ instead of your children.”). For Knight, employing confession is a way of authenticating the poem, and by association, the poet; confession is a means of proving one’s realness for skeptical and untrusting others.

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Coincident with the rise of confessional poetry and following the assassination of Malcolm X on February 21, 1965 (as well as Baraka’s subsequent relocation from the Greenwich Village to Harlem) was the emergence of the Black Arts Movement. According to Baraka, he and the cohort of artists who moved uptown to establish the Black Arts Repertory Theater School,

linked the common Eurocentric distortion of Black Arts as an evil magic, as a mystic pursuit. A power used to transform reality. We had long understood the twisted racism of Europe and America when referring to Black. That everything Black was bad. But we was Bad, in fact we was trying to get Badder dan Nat. We was trying to get outright “terrible.”

Larry Neal defined the movement in his landmark essay, “The Black Arts Movement,” first published in the summer of 1968, as “the aesthetic and spiritual sister of the Black Power concept.” However, while “it is relative commonplace to briefly define Black Arts as the cultural wing of the Black Power,” as scholar James Smethurst has pointed out, “one could just as easily say that Black Power was the political wing of the Black Arts movement.”

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Notwithstanding, Larry Neal’s essay remains among the most definitive statements of the movement; in it, Neal announces that the Black Arts Movement “envisions an art that speaks directly to the needs and aspirations of Black America. In order to perform this task, the Black Arts Movement proposes a radical reordering of the western cultural aesthetic.”\(^{484}\) In Neal’s proclamation is the foundational idea that the Black Arts Movement is a collective action undertaken by black artists, writers, poets, and dramatists for the sake of creating work directed exclusively to and about black people. In addition, the “radical reordering of the western cultural aesthetic” to which Neal refers reinforces the Black Power program of breaking away from the white, Euroethnic traditions that have continually failed to “confront the contradictions arising out of the Black man’s experience in the racist West.”\(^{485}\)

Among the critical failures alluded to here is the monumental blunder made by the poet and book critic Louis Simpson in his 1963 review of Gwendolyn Brooks’s *Selected Poems* where he writes, “I am not sure it is possible for a Negro to write well without making us aware he is a Negro; on the other hand, if being a Negro is the only subject, the writing is not important.”\(^{486}\) Knight, who had read Simpson’s review while he was incarcerated, was strongly affected by the author’s assertion which maintains: any writing that centers blackness as its primary content and/or subject is excluded from being considered “important” because such a writing is too culturally specific to adequately render “the universal human condition.” So in response, Knight wrote the poems “Apology for Apostasy,” and “On Universalism.” Both would appear in *Poems*

\(^{485}\) Ibid.
By insisting upon the po-ethics that states “your ethics and your aesthetics are one,” as Neal had argued, the poems that came out of the Black Arts Movement resisted what Smethurst has since described as the “‘academic’ textuality promoted by the New Criticism,” with its notion of the poem as a politically neutral, self-contained, aesthetic object. In Knight’s critique of the universalism espoused by the New Criticism, in the ten-line-poem “On Universalism,” he writes in the poem’s second stanza:

No universal laws
Of human misery
Create a common cause
Or common history
That ease black people’s pains
Nor break black people’s chains.

In an interview, Knight relates that he drafted the poem

in response to a lot of poets and scholars, especially academics, who said Black poets weren’t addressing “universal” themes. You know, “Black poets shouldn’t talk about politics or their particular pains. They should address themselves to abstract and universal ideas.” That’s bullshit.

In their refusal to accept the hegemonic literary standards that characterized the height of the New Critical era in the ’40s and ’50s, black poets of the ’60s such as Knight were compelled to write towards what Richard Wright had prophetically termed “The Forms of Things Unknown, which consists of folk utterances, spirituals, blues, work songs, and folklore.” Meanwhile, black critics and editors like Dudley Randall, Stephen Henderson, and Adam David Miller seized the opportunity to feature this new work in

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488. Smethurst, The Black Arts Movement, 94.
489. Knight, Poems from Prison, 25.

![Black Poetry: A Supplement to Anthologies which Exclude Black Poets](image)

Fig. 4. Front cover of *Black Poetry: A Supplement to Anthologies which Exclude Black Poets*, 1969. Image provided courtesy of the Clarke Historical Library.

As “a main tenet of Black Power is the necessity for Black people to define the world on their own terms,” Black Movement artists and scholars found it increasingly necessary to take up the question of the Black Aesthetic. According to “Brother Knight,” as Etheridge is referred to in Neal’s essay,

> Unless the Black artist establishes a “Black aesthetic” he will have no future at all. To accept the white aesthetic is to accept and validate a society that will not allow him to live. The Black artist must create new forms and new values, sing new songs (or purify old ones); and along

with other Black authorities, he must create a new history, new symbols, myths and legends (and purify old ones by fire). And the Black artist, in creating his own aesthetic, must be accountable for it only to the Black people.  

Although Knight was still incarcerated at the time his thoughts on the subject of a Black aesthetic were first published in the January 1968 issue of Negro Digest as part of a survey titled, “Black Writers’ Views on Literary Lions and Values,” reading over some of the responses given by other participants such as Mari Evans, Alice Walker, Robert Hayden, Dudley Randall, and Gwendolyn Brooks’, Knight’s views here tend toward the radical separatist position occupied by Amiri Baraka and Larry Neal, especially by the end of his response when he writes, “the Black Artist who directs his work toward a white audience is guilty of aiding and abetting the enemy.”

By 1971, the foundational text, The Black Aesthetic, edited by Addison Gayle, collected various essays on the subject in order to provide “a corrective—a means of helping black people out of the polluted mainstream of Americanism.” Building upon the survey responses featured in the January 1968 issue of Negro Digest, particularly Gayle’s idea that “The ‘black aesthetic’ has always been a part of the lives of black people. To investigate these lives, and the conditions around them, is to reveal an aesthetic inherent in the soul of black people,” the essays in The Black Aesthetic work against the cultural strangulation endorsed by the school of New Criticism. Though Gayle’s take on the Black aesthetic didn’t necessarily always coincide with those included in his anthology, there does exist an implicit and agreed upon understanding.

493. Ibid., 30.
amongst all of the authors that a Black aesthetic is necessary because of the overwhelming “ignorance about black culture” in American history and scholarship. According to the poet and literary critic James A. Emanuel, this ignorance “combined with the duplicity and hostility in much of the white literary establishment, then, throws upon black America the burden of discovering and preserving its literary culture.”

Even though Knight would continue to support the Black Power ideology at the center of the Black aesthetic, as he grew older, his stance on the issue would waver, but only to the degree that the poet refused to be hemmed in by the particular brand of cultural nationalism exemplified by some of the radical writings published in Neal and Baraka’s Black Fire anthology. As Knight would later state in an interview with Charles Rowell conducted in the late ’70s, “Sure, black poetry is ideological. There are other characteristics that distinguish it.” In the same interview, Knight affirms, “If he is honest, a black artist can’t help directing his art to a black audience.” However, by 1985, Knight would add to his position, “A poet should speak only for himself; the ‘I.’” Much like his mentor, Dudley Randall, who wrote the staggering piece “A Poem is Not a Jukebox” in response to Gwendolyn Brooks’s comment that Randall write about a race riot in Miami rather than the new erotic poems he had been working on, Knight seemed to generally be of the mindset that writing primarily for a black audience did not necessarily require one completely renounce the possibility of a white readership.

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498. Ibid., 191 – 192.
500. Ibid., 972.
The most well received and frequently anthologized poem of Knight’s oeuvre continues to be the early poem “The Idea of Ancestry,” a work that Knight had once observed as belonging to a body of poems that he described as “genealogical.” The poem begins:

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Taped to the wall of my cell are 47 pictures: 47 black faces: my father, mother, grandmothers (1 dead), grandfathers (both dead), brothers, sisters, uncles, aunts, cousins (1st and 2nd), nieces, and nephews. They stare across the space at me sprawling on my bunk. I know their dark eyes, they know mine.

In the following stanzas, the poet then goes onto relate a narrative of his junk troubles; the reader is lead to surmise that it is the poet’s addiction to heroin which has lead him to steal; it does not seem to matter whether it was one or a series of robberies which lands the poet in prison. “The Idea of Ancestry” ends with the poet meditating on these circumstances and the role they play in his confinement; the final stanza reads:

This yr there is a gray stone wall damming my stream, and when the falling leaves stir my genes, I pace my cell or flop on my bunk and stare at 47 black faces across the space. I am all of them, they are all of me, I am me, they are thee, and I have no sons to float in the space between.

According to Knight, the poem was born from one of his “many stays in Solitary Confinement, which is generally known as ‘The Hole.’” Inmates were stripped naked, thrown into a 6 x 6 cell (“the prison within the prison”), and isolated from the general

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504. Ibid., 17.
prison population for an undetermined amount of time as a form of punishment. In Knight’s words, “During the eight years I spent in prison . . . the Hole became as familiar to me as my cell. Prison. Bars. Steel. Silence. Violence.” In one of many accounts he provided of the particular experience in solitary confinement that lead to his writing “The Idea of Ancestry,” Knight recalls:

After being in the Hole for a couple of weeks, not knowing night from day, I begin to lose track of time, the days, the weeks, I become disoriented, out of/touch/with myself, and almost out of breath from the smothering. So I start to re/membering: my grandmothers, grade/school classmates, guys I’d been in the army with, and my Family, most of all . . . I was so disoriented, so desperate to regain a sense of myself, of who I was, and Memory was all I had to draw on. So I started to re/calling: family names, faces; I started to making/up/lines and phrases out-loud, memorizing them, and I started to breathe again. Later, back in my cell, I finished the poem.

The poet’s use of intralinear slashes in this account in addition to those present in the poem reinscribes the psychic, social, and linguistic fragmentation Knight experienced while in solitary for “some thirty or forty days” back into the poetic line. On one side of the slash is Etheridge Knight and on the other is Prisoner 35652. Sometimes, however, that same slash can also be read as a hyphen that conjoins what is typically understood to be two or more discrete objects, such as the poet and his reader, or when he is in solitary confinement, the poet and everyone else. Since Knight consistently expressed throughout his career that the oral aspect of poetry was more important than the textual, these slashes also function as kind of notation for how the reader would ideally hear the work in the absence of the poet’s recitation.

506. Ibid.
507. Ibid.
508. Ibid., 148.
Part of what makes “The Idea of Ancestry,” so powerful is that the “leaping and bucking” drive toward self-preservation, the kinfolk, and poetry is foregrounded by the poet’s confession that it is his “junk” or heroin habit that has landed him in prison far from his family in the first place.\footnote{Knight, Poems from Prison, 17.} According to literary scholar H. Bruce Franklin, “People who have become literary artists because of their imprisonment tend to write in an autobiographical mode. The reason is obvious: it is their own personal experience that had given them both an important message and the motive to communicate it.”\footnote{H. Bruce Franklin, “The Literature of the American Prison,” The Massachusetts Review 18, no. 1 (Spring 1977): 62.} While Knight’s resistance to using more conventional literary terms, such as autobiographical, or confessional, might be encountered as a sign of his general naiveté, disinterest in, and/or suspicion of academic terminology, I believe that the word geneo\textit{logical} aims to get at something more specific than what may be implied by the autobiographical, the confessional, or even the gene\textit{alogical}. Knight’s revised spelling of the term geneo\textit{logical} detaches it from its Western roots in gene\textit{alogy}, the study of race, lineage, and bloodlines; I also understand Knight’s preferred spelling is a way of commenting upon the limiting and inadequate Western definitions of family, kinship, and relation; this interpretation is supported by some preliminary notes Knight kept alongside some early drafts of “The Belly Dance;” in his notes, Knight jots down what he can remember of the beginning of Margaret Walker’s poem, “For My People.”\footnote{Margaret Walker, This is My Century: New and Collected Poems (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2013), 6 – 7.} His handwriting reads:

For my people everywhere
singing their slave songs their dirges,
their blues and jubilees.\footnote{Etheridge Knight Collection, Special Collections and Rare Books, Irwin Library, Butler University.}
Even though Knight neglects to revisit Walker’s poem in later versions of the essay, its presence in his draft notes provides us with some insight as to what Knight may have had in mind when he reflected upon “The Idea of Ancestry,” and what, in addition to solitary confinement, fueled that particular poem’s genesis. The presence of these few lines from Walker’s influential poem suggests that the poems Knight considered to form his geneological body of work represent not just the histories of himself and his blood ancestors—the geneological poems also narrate the histories of those who share in common with Knight a larger social, political, and mythic Black experience. For Knight, Walker (and Randall, and Brooks) are just as much a part of that experience as his “mother,/ 1 grandmother, 2 sisters, 2 aunts,” and all the other living, past, lost, and disappeared relatives enumerated in “The Idea of Ancestry.”

In the published version of “The Belly Dance,” Knight expands upon his particular deployment of the geneological, “I don’t think an audience will very much trust the poet until his or her genesis is revealed. In other words, the poet is obliged to let his or her audience know exactly where he or she is coming from.” Whereas the confessional would seem to dictate that the poet is obliged to let his or her audience know exactly what he or she has done (or even thought about doing) to bring shame upon him or herself and thus merit the confession (as in Knight’s later poem, “Cop-Out Session,” for example) it would seem that the authority of the geneological mode, according to Knight, rests “upon personal, and sometimes collective, history, as that history is revealed by the poet.”

514. Knight, Poems from Prison, 16.
516. Ibid.
concerned with collective history; the poet’s willingness to disclose his or her personal history is what imparts upon the genre its specific intensity. That being said, does the distinction between the autobiographical, the confessional, and the genealogical still hold true if the personal or collective history revealed by the poet is also one that implies or confers shame, as in “The Idea of Ancestry,” a poem born out of the author’s experiences as an addict and a thief?

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By the time Knight was released from prison a few days before Thanksgiving of 1968, he was 37 years old. According to Knight scholar Michael Collins, during the years that followed, “Knight earned a living by ‘poeting,’ as he put it—giving readings, holding workshops, and intermittently securing poet-in-residence positions” at the University of Pittsburgh, University of Hartford, and Lincoln University. However, despite his having occupied these prestigious positions, in an interview with Charles Rowell, editor of Callaloo magazine, conducted sometime in the mid to late 1970s after Knight’s second book Belly Song and Other Poems was published, Knight reminds Rowell,

I am not like you; I don’t have academic credentials. I did not finish high school. I live by poeting. I live from the people. I don’t do anything but poet. Sometimes people attach me to universities. If I don’t poet, then I am a thief because that’s what I was doing before I was poeting. I don’t know anything else to do but hustle or poet.

Knight doesn’t allow Rowell to presume that his blackness, or a common interest in Black poetry is proof of he and Knight’s “shared” condition. I am not like you. Good for Knight for refusing to flatter Rowell by flattening the differences between them.

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517. Collins, Understanding Etheridge Knight, 13.
Among the other poets to have published broadsides in the 1960s with Broadside Press, Knight was something of an outlier as he was the only one who had not attended college prior to 1969 (though in 1990, at age 59, Knight would finally be awarded with an honorary bachelor of arts degree in addition to the title of poet laureate from Martin Center College in Indianapolis where he had both taught and took some courses).\(^{519}\) Having lacked the basic academic credentials, in addition to being an ex-con and a recovering addict, Knight had to find alternative ways to supplement his income. In addition to securing two NEA grants, one in 1972, and another in 1980, as well as a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1974 for $12,000 so he could research Black oral folk poetry in the South, Knight mostly spent his time traveling across the U.S. giving poetry readings. A collection of papers and various Knight ephemera located in the Ward M. Canaday Center at the University of Toledo contains an assortment of promotional flyers and posters from over the years (see fig. 5, 6, 7). The William Henry Smith Memorial Library at the Indiana Historical Society also possesses a small collection of event posters and flyers (see fig. 8 and 9).

\(^{519}\) Thompson, *Dudley Randall*, 35.
Fig. 8. An Afternoon with ETHERIDGE KNIGHT Event Poster, 1990.
Fig. 9. Black Heritage Poetry Series Event Poster, 1990.
These flyers and posters as well as Knight’s archived correspondence with numerous professors and university staff in college English programs from across the country suggests that following his release from prison, the reading fees Knight earned from agreeing to participate in such events furnished him with a relatively consistent source of income over the years. This is not to say that like Anne Sexton, Knight was generously compensated each time an offer was made, but that in order to be able to live off of these public appearances, Knight was constantly on the road, going from state to state in order to establish his reputation as a major poet. Figures 7, 8, and 9 highlight the extent to which Knight’s performance life was entangled with institutional support for Black programming. For example, the text in figure 7 reveals that Knight’s appearance at Wabash College was sponsored by the Malcolm X Institute; the text at the bottom of figure 8 broadcasts that the event with Etheridge Knight is “A project of the Afro-American History Committee.” Figure 9, a poster advertising two separate Knight events scheduled during Black History Month, announces that both readings are part of the library’s Black Heritage Poetry Series. While figures 5 and 6 do not explicitly indicate that the events advertised in them are made possible thanks to similar institutions, initiatives, planning committees, or institutes as the kinds mentioned in figures 7, 8, and 9, the language used by both of these flyers communicates unequivocally: this is a Black event. In figure 6, for instance, the words BLACK POET appear at the top of the flyer in all caps and in bold, as if that fact, rather than Knight, were the main attraction of the event. In figure 5, the designers behind this particular poster chose an altogether different promotional approach; rather than describe or depict Knight as Black, they included a side-profile image of the poet where he appears off-white against a black background.
Right of the image is Knight’s eight-line poem, “The Warden Said to Me the Other Day.” By providing onlookers with a glimpse of Knight via this particular poem, a fairly accurate representation of his major themes can be gleaned. Such promotional materials introduced Knight’s preoccupations to those unfamiliar with his work and encouraged his audiences to arrive to his readings with a racially-conscious mindset.

However, in spite of the career successes Knight had won for himself, he struggled to maintain his sobriety throughout the years. Within less than year of having been released from prison, Knight was already using again. His letter to Dudley Randall written on April 5th, 1970, gives us some insight into the ways his addictions endangered his personal and professional well-being; he writes:

The reason this letter is hard to write is because it is confessional—not confessional in a cop/out sense, but confessional as revealing/laying bare the truth. And, man, revealing the truth about oneself can be terribly painful—especially for a dude like me who for the past eight months has been dealing in a whole lot of lies and deceit. . . .

Dudley, I'm very unhappy. I'm hurting bad, man. I'm hooked—have been for eight months now. Sonia and I are separated—I've blown the one/great/love of my life. . . . I've asked myself a thousand times how I could get hooked again—after having lived in this kind of hell before. On the surface it would seem that I'm some kinda nut, but I am not. Maybe I stayed in prison too long; maybe I didn't really survive like some of the strong ones; maybe the damage done to my insides are irreparable. I came out of prison naive as far as the movement is concerned. I was (still am) ready to give up my life if necessary for my people. I was committed, totally. And, man, I found a whole lot of people bullshitting. That really blew my mind. For some reason I could accept/adjust to that. I also think I got married too soon. After living/looking out/for myself alone for eight years I found it difficult to adjust to a married/family situation. The two problems plus a few minor hang/ups caused me to revert to my old way of solving problems: the needle. That's it, man. I forgot about everything, forgot about love for myself, for my people, for freedom. I stopped writing almost altogether (I couldn't be dishonest enough to write for Black people while living such an unblack life).520

According to Knight scholar Jean Anaporte, who published this letter alongside several others in *Callaloo* some years after Knight’s death, “Knight’s sense of failure in this letter is so thorough and his personal losses so great that, in spite of his optimism each time he returned to a rehab center or hospital, he may have lost confidence that he really could change.” The poems in Knight’s second book with Broadside, *Belly Song and Other Poems*, published in 1973, document the hardships the author faced as he battled both drug and alcohol addiction. While the book is dedicated “To the People of the Sun,” which include Knight’s mother, Belzora, and his second wife, Mary Ellen McAnally, *Belly Song*’s most powerful pieces center themselves in the poet’s relationship with his former wife, Sonia Sanchez, and the perpetual instability his drug use had upon their marriage. Poems like “Upon Your Leaving,” the aforementioned “Feeling Fucked/Up,” and “Another Poem For Me (after recovering from an O.D.)” echo versions of the guilt Knight expresses in his April 5th letter to Randall. “Another Poem for Me” reads:

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what now
what now dumb nigger damn hear dead
what now
now that you won’t dance
behind the pale white doors of death
what now is to be
to be what you wanna be
what you spozed to be
or what white/America wants you to be
[ . . .]

what now dumb nigger damn near dead
where is the correctness
the proper posture
the serious love of living
now that death has fled these quiet corridors
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Among this trio of poems, “Another Poem for Me” stands out mainly because it resembles in its lineation pattern a Sonia Sanchez poem more than it does an Etheridge Knight poem, with the exception of maybe that last stanza; however, it is also worth observing that both Knight and Sanchez used the intralinear slash mark in their poems and correspondence. Still, when I listen to a 1986 recording of Knight reading this poem, it never sounds right. The elongated Southern drawl, the vowels that resonate in and complement poems like “The Idea of Ancestry” or “Belly Song,” seem at odds with the clipped, and what I imagine, percussive diction of “Another Poem for Me.”

While Knight would continue to include Sanchez alongside Brooks, Randall, and Baraka on his list of favorite poets, the likeness may further be explained by the possibility that the poem takes as its starting point the wife’s reaction (or what the poet-husband imagines the wife’s reaction would be) to the poet-husband’s drug overdose. Sanchez confirms that when “Etheridge tore up the finished manuscript” of her second book, *We a BaddDDD People*, “because he was not writing,” and she found herself “on the floor trying to piece together this book,” she “knew it was time to leave.”

In many of the poems in Sanchez’s *We a BaddDDD People*, published through Broadside in 1970, the poet grapples with the bleak reality of her lover’s heroin addiction. As in Knight’s “Another Poem for Me,” the poems in Sanchez’s book that deal with narcotics addiction posit drug abuse as that which is incompatible with love, specifically love for one’s Black self and one’s Black people: revolutionary love. In other words, addiction is not just a personal shortcoming, but a political shortcoming—a counter-revolutionary habit that contradicts the life-affirming intentions and message of

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the Black aesthetic. This belief is especially reflected in Sanchez’s poem, “— answer to yo / question of am i not yo / woman / even if u went on shit again —” where she writes

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blk/
lovers  cannot  live
in wite powder that removes
them from they blk/selves

[ . . . ]

blk /lovers
must live
push against the
devils of this world
against the creeping
witeness of they own minds. 524
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Sanchez’s po-ethics associates the “wite powder” that negates Black lovers’ powers as being one and the same with the “creeping/witeness,” or internalized racism, all Black people must purge themselves of if they wish to be free, if they wish to love. Sanchez’s powerful statement here clarifies the internal conflict Knight mentioned in his letter of April 5th to Dudley Randall where he acknowledges that his addictions have kept him from writing because he “couldn't be dishonest enough to write for Black people while living such an unblack life.” 525

Knight ends his April 5th letter to Randall with a final comment about a poster-sized print of his poem, “For Black Poets who Think of Suicide” which Randall had published in 1969 (the same year John Berryman had published *The Dream Songs* in their entirety): “The posters were boss. It's ironic that I who am gradually committing suicide

should write such a poem.” Note how similar Knight’s poem is to the previously cited Sanchez poem in both its prosody and its subject matter.

Black Poets should live—not leap
From steel bridges (like the white boys do).
Black poets should live—not lay
Their necks on railroad tracks (like the white boys do).
[ . . . ]

Let All Black poets die as Trumpets,
And be buried in the dust of marching feet.

Even though there is a stark contrast in both Sanchez’s and Knight’s style of lineation, reading these two particular poems out loud reveals the extent to which both authors had embraced the Black aesthetic at this point in their careers. Their poems, to use the words of Larry Neal, “make a form that uses the Soul Force of Black culture, its life styles, its rhythms, its energy, and direct that form toward the liberation of Black people.” In other words, by addressing a Black readership on their own terms, both poets were working to remind Black readers, lovers, and poets, that they should, above all, live, live their Blackness. Why Sanchez and Knight felt honor-bound to do so is because “the Black Arts Movement is an ethical movement. Ethical, that is, from the point of view of the oppressed.” In their respective works, Knight and Sanchez appeal to their readers’ desire to survive as well as their revolutionary passion to convince them of the cruel fact that drug use and hustling within the Black community is suicide by indirect means; to give into such an impulse would be akin to renouncing one’s Blackness.

526. Ibid.
527. It is also worth noting the title of Knight’s poem “For Black Poets who Think of Suicide” both precedes and resembles Ntozake Shange’s For Colored Girls who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow is Enuf (New York: Scribner, 1975).
528. Knight, The Essential Etheridge Knight, 52.
As it may have been in vogue for a white, confessional poet like Anne Sexton to publish a work like “Wanting to Die” in 1962 while also casually maintaining “suicide is, after all, the opposite of the poem,”531 I want to stress that despite the thematic, temporal, and occasional stylistic overlap between Knight’s work and that of his confessional peers, Black Arts Movement poets like Knight and Sanchez could not afford to forego their reservations about potentially embracing a confessional mode because to do so would risk contradicting the ethical and ideological ambitions of the Black Arts Movements which maintained “to be free one had to love one’s blackness.”532 In order to perform that radical self-love for their audiences, Black poets writing during this period distanced themselves from the styles, techniques, forms, and terms they associated with the white literary establishment.

Knight’s final comment to Randall about “For Black Poets who Think of Suicide” reflects his own discomfort with the possibility that his continued struggles with drug addiction contradicted the life-affirming message he exhorted in his poem. In a letter to Randall written on August 16, 1970, Knight would explain the reason he could not send Randall the manuscript for his second book of poems was because “to have published Anything while my personal/life was fucked up would have been too much of a contradiction for me to handle. Unlike the White/Western/Aesthetics, I cannot separate the Poet from the poem.”533 Knight’s confession to his publisher reveals the strains of writing autobiographically while Black—a pressure to perform the kind of Blackness in poetry that was not only life affirming, but tried-and-true, authentic, and legit.

532. Lisa Gail Collins and Margo Natalie Crawford, New Thoughts on the Black Arts Movement, 11.
While there are many rhetorical elements to admire in Knight’s poem, like its assertiveness, for example, just that prescription of the verb “should,” so reminiscent of Gwendolyn Brooks in her work, *In the Mecca*, or its poignant refusal to distill the potency of its truths by replicating a familiar poetic Wallace Stevens-esque tendency for abstraction, I am, for the moment, absorbed in the parenthetical refrain *like the white boys do*. As far as I know the only literary white boy to both jump off a steel bridge and lay his neck on a railroad track was none other than John Berryman.  

Without going so far as to suggest that Knight’s comment is some kind of discrete nod or newly discovered reference to Berryman himself, I would like to propose instead that embedded in such parentheticals is Knight’s critique of confessional poetics, specifically the ways in which suffering, suicide, guilt, and madness are associated with (white) poetic “genius.” In his commitment to an art that maintains “one has to move from the ‘‘I,’ subjective, through the verb, to the ‘we,’” Knight distinguishes his deployment of the confessional from those of “the suicide poets,” as he had once referred to them, by asserting his poems were intended to “celebrate life and people and freedom.” To this, one might add, Knight’s commitment to the Black aesthetic forced him to be accountable to discourses of Truth that had less to do with the confessional project, and more to do with the question of “whose vision of the world is finally more meaningful, ours or the white oppressors?” It is no wonder then that Knight invented his own terms to speak of the autobiographical—“the geneological,” as he so put it, in

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534. On March 7, 1931, while Berryman was fourteen years old and a student at South Kent, upon hearing a steam engine approaching, he threw himself onto the train tracks; Berryman was rescued by three classmates. See Haffenden, 46 and Mariani, 24.
536. Videocasette (Interview with EK in a Bar), n.d. Etheridge Knight Papers.
order to put into words the “nuances and inflections and meanings that come of the special conditions of black history. That’s after all, how a language develops—out of a history and an economy.”

Epilogue: Under the Sign of Saturn

When I first set out to write *The Strains of Confessional Poetry*, I remember declaring, “I want to write my own version of Sontag’s *Under the Sign of Saturn.*” It was an audacious statement, even for me. However, beyond remembering that those were my exact words, I am unable to recall what initially prompted me to model my dissertation after this particular collection of Sontag’s essays. Now, after revisiting *Under the Sign of Saturn*, I suspect that the following paragraph from the book’s title essay on Walter Benjamin may have significantly influenced my project:

> The mark of the Saturnine temperament is the self-conscious and unforgiving relation to the self, which can never be taken for granted. The self is a text—it has to be deciphered. (Hence, this is an apt temperament for intellectuals.) The self is a project, something to be built. (Hence, this is an apt temperament for artists and martyrs, those who court “the purity and beauty of a failure,” as Benjamin says of Kafka.) And the process of building a self and its works is always too slow. One is always in arrears to oneself. 539

For those who live under the sign of Saturn, like Benjamin, Sontag, and, I would like to believe, myself, all melancholics, the self is not just a preoccupation, one that merely intrudes upon or gives shape to the novel, the poem, and the essay; the self is *the* novel, *the* poem, *the* essay—the work-in-progress that never gets finished. While Sontag’s description of the melancholic may have strongly influenced my decision to investigate the biographical circumstances under which confessional poets’ fell “in arrears” to themselves, I admire the fact that Sontag never distinguishes, at least in this particular instance, between the textual self (she who is written) and the authorial self (she who writes). Must the textual self and the authorial self always be treated as two distinct

entities, as T. S. Eliot had argued in his essay “Tradition and the Individual Talent”? Is it
always necessary for literary critics to insist upon the distinction between the poet and the
speaker of the poem? I don’t think so, hence my interest in the strains, the excessive
physical, intellectual, and interpersonal exertions confessional poets experienced in their
efforts to build and perform selves while producing work that contradicted Eliot’s theory
of impersonality, which states, “Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape
from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality.”
540
As if poetry or criticism could ever be impersonal, for even when writers aspire to appear
impersonal, as Sontag, I’m sure, often did, a trace of the self always remains.

I am animated by these wayward biographical traces, the bioluminescence that
writers with big personas like Berryman, Sexton, and Knight leave behind as they
endeavored during their lifetimes to project the most elaborate of literary mythologies.
While I have wrestled in this writing to follow Sontag’s mandate that “One cannot use
the life to interpret the work. But one can use the work to interpret the life,”
541
I will say
that it was not until I entered the physical archives of these writers (with the unfortunate
exception being Anne Sexton), and went through their various and often negligible
personal effects, that I was able to grasp for myself what constitutes “the work” of any
one author’s life: the accumulation and subsequent safekeeping of early drafts, unfinished
manuscripts, receipts, bills, contracts, letters, telegrams, photographs, recordings, news
clippings, interviews, children’s drawings, flyers, resumes, syllabi, former student papers,
and more. When I encountered most of these archival ephemera, more often than not, it
yielded impressions rather than new (i.e. publishable) information. For example, much of

541. Sontag, Under the Sign of Saturn, 111.
what I had read in the way of personal correspondence that could be considered of literary consequence was already, for the most part, published elsewhere, as was the case with the letters between John Berryman and his mother, Jill Angel, or Etheridge Knight and his publisher, Dudley Randall.

Nevertheless, handling these various literary and personal effects has provided me with some essential insight into the material, cultural, and socio-economic conditions under which poets like Berryman and Knight worked. It is for these reasons that I have struggled at various points in the writing of this dissertation to differentiate between the life and the work: not because I could not determine or confirm if the references contained in a confessional poem were in fact autobiographical, but because I have chosen to write about these poets with the belief that the self is more than just a defining component of confessional poets’ work—the self that can be treated like a text, “one that has to be deciphered,” as Sontag writes, is, I maintain, the work itself.

Lara Rossana Rodriguez
March 22, 2016
Brooklyn Center, Minnesota
Archives

In addition to the various books, essays, interviews, and texts listed in the bibliography, listed below (in the order in which they appear in the dissertation) are the archives that informed my research.

John Berryman Papers (Mss 43), Literary Manuscripts Collection, University of Minnesota Libraries, Minneapolis.

John Berryman Papers, Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Columbia University Library in the City of New York.

Anne Sexton Papers, 1912-1996, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin.


Gwendolyn Brooks Papers, BANC MSS 2001/83 z, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

Etheridge Knight Collection, Special Collections and Rare Books, Irwin Library, Butler University.

Bibliography


Tracy, Steven C. “A MELUS Interview: Etheridge Knight.” *MELUS* 12, no. 2 (Summer 1985): 7 – 23.


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