MERCHANTS OF PATHOS:
Confessional Poetry, Publicity, and Privacy in Cold-War America.

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ABSTRACT

The relationship between confessional poetry and cold-war culture in America is structurally important to our understanding of ongoing debates over the authenticity of the textual voice in confessional verse. Exploring the work of poets Robert Lowell, John Berryman, Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton, this thesis provides an explanation for the tendency among both readers and critics to conflate the roles of poet and persona in assessments of confessional poetry. It is argued that the confessional poets deliberately manipulated the status of truth in their work to create the illusion of a publicly legitimate, yet authentically private self.

This thesis does not, however, reduce confessional verse to simply poetic artifice. Rather, in the process of conflating poet and persona, the confessional poets fashioned an unprecedentedly complex culture of postmodern poetics. This thesis divides the poetic voice of confessional poetry into three sites of poetics, detailing how each complicates the status of truth in confessional verse.

The first site, the ambiguity of confessional poetics, is characterized by the still-contested definition of confessional poetry and the indeterminate nature of persona in confessional verse. By blurring the distinction between autobiographical fact and poetic fiction, confessional poetry directly participated in national tensions over privacy by questioning the status of truth in acts of apparent revelation. Additionally, by applying rhetoric characteristic of the modern age of publicity, confessional poetry repeatedly advertises itself within the poetic text, acting to further blur the distinction between poet and persona. In the second site, lyric poetry, it is argued that lyric poetry’s long-established definitional connection to music allowed confessional poetry a dynamic relation to voice and sound. It is argued that the confessional poets utilized the inherent audibility of the lyric poem—in both live readings and recorded readings—to create the illusion

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of an authentic authorial event. In the third site, publicity, the role of the confessional poets as public figures is explored.

Situating the themes of confessional poetry inside the larger privacy crisis of the cold-war era, this thesis illustrates the ways in which confessional poetry engaged with social and political tensions between public and private in order to complicate the status of its claims to truth. Noting the broad changes in post-war American culture, combined with an appreciation of the ambiguous status of truth in confessional poetry, this thesis illuminates the important role of confessional poetry in using the relationship between confession, publicity, national security, and privacy, to challenge ideas about the authenticity of poetic voice.
Fig. 1. Anne Sexton, *Poster for Sanders Theater Reading, 7 March 1974* (Photo by Gwendolyn Stewart) rpt. in *Anne Sexton: A Biography* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992; print; iii).
**DECLARATION**

This is to certify that:

i. This thesis comprises only my original work towards the MA.

ii. Due acknowledgement has been made in the text to all other material used.

iii. This thesis is approximately 30 000 words in length, exclusive of figures, bibliographies, and appendices.

Tyne Daile Sumner (2013)
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I would like to acknowledge here the invaluable support and theoretical direction of my supervisors, Professor Deirdre Coleman and Professor Stephanie Trigg. Deirdre and Stephanie listened with enthusiasm as I unpacked the formative concepts of this project and they thereafter helped to guide this thesis towards and into its current state. I would like to thank Stephanie for rummaging through what seemed like a never-ending pile of old cassette tapes—here in The School of Culture and Communication Library at The University of Melbourne—to locate for me a series of original poetry readings by Robert Lowell and Sylvia Plath. I listened to these with astonishment and was consequently moved to write about sound and its intricate connection to lyric verse. I would like to thank Deirdre for her ongoing supervisory brilliance, in particular, the many instances in which her conceptual clarity and extensive academic experience helped to transform my many obscure ruminations over confessional poetry into something useful.

I would like to thank my undergraduate students, who listened intently to my teachings on the poetry of Sylvia Plath. Their questions and speculations helped to inspire my research on confessional poetry and hold me accountable to my ideas. I would also like to thank my good friend and intellectual mentor, Marion Jane Campbell, whose feedback on both my research and post-graduate career have, and always will be, immensely treasured.

This thesis owes a great deal to my Mum and Dad who, although far away, have supported me unconditionally since the first moment it became obvious that I wanted to be an academic.

Finally, I’d like to thank my partner, Tony. At moments when my productivity waned, I was impelled to get back on track on account of his incessant badgering: “When do I get to read it?”
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It was only on completing this thesis that its profoundly paradoxical nature became apparent to me. In the act of evoking confession, every confessional writer, and in particular the four poets with whom this study is concerned, confronts us with the limits of truth. As literary analysts, our natural reaction to this is to insist, as a means of theoretical preservation perhaps, that there never is and never can be direct access to an author. We do not actually know Anne Sexton; we never will know Robert Lowell; and we certainly don’t have access to the real Sylvia Plath. What we do have, however, is their work and it is from the written text that we are able to garner, at least partially, an idea of what the confessional poets might have been like. Thus, in the very act of analysing what these literary figures give us in writing—in their poetry and in other discourses—I have referred to them in ways that contradict my primary aim. That is, I discuss them as accessible, realistic figures. It is for this reason, both as a theoretical safeguard and as an interesting afterthought, that it is necessary to emphasize that I am never actually talking about real people. Or, to summon a term employed by Jacqueline Rose in a preamble much like this one, I am only ever referring to “textual entities.” Far from being a de-romanticisation of the tensions over biographical accuracy that plague studies of the confessional genre, my understanding that the confessional poets can never truly be known only adds to the mode’s allure. To be so close to accessing the real ‘Poet X,’ and yet so far from it, is just one of the many paradoxes that renders the study of poetics both complex and wonderfully engaging.
**ABBREVIATIONS**

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INTRODUCTION

Yet why not say what happened?
Pray for the grace of accuracy
Vermeer gave to the sun’s illumination
stealing like the tide across a map
to his girl solid with yearning.
We are poor passing facts,
warned by that to give
each figure in the photograph
his living name.

(Lowell, “Epilogue” Day by Day 127)¹

When Robert Lowell died of a heart attack in the back of a New York
City taxicab on 12 September 1977, American poetry lost its
epicentre. The lines above, taken from Lowell’s final collection of
poems, Day by Day (1977), “became an ars poetica for a whole generation of poets.
There is a moving truth in these lines, and a genuine integrity.”² As a poet, Lowell was
not always devoted to the pursuit of integrity. His earlier work, epitomized by the
strictly metred verse of Land of Unlikeness (1944) and the formal and dense poetry of
Lord Weary’s Castle (1946), champions its allegiance to New Criticism’s obsession
with formalism, prioritizing ornateness over any claim to biographical accuracy. Yet,
by the time Day by Day appeared only weeks before Lowell’s death, twentieth-century

¹ For a close reading of “Epilogue,” see Sastri 489-491.
² See Kirsch, “In Retrospect.”
American poetry had experienced an astonishing conversion. No longer doctrine was the formal poetry Lowell had almost two decades earlier described as “cooked, marvellously expert” and “laboriously concocted to be tasted and digested by a graduate seminar.”³ Instead, a new form of verse dominated popular and critical discourse, the so-called revelatory poetry of the confessional mode. This had achieved global status through the work of a coterie dedicated to producing what Lowell ingenuously referred to as “raw, huge blood-dripping goblets of unseasoned experience … dished up for midnight listeners.”⁴ As the lines of “Epilogue” intimate, American poetry had become personal:

a snapshot,
lurid, rapid, garish, grouped,
heightened from life,
yet paralyzed by fact. (127)

However, confessional poetry did not pursue revelation for the mere thrill of rebellion. As many writers have recently begun to realize, confessional verse is the vestige of a unique period in American social and political history, offering significant insight into the age that gave rise to it.

In “What Was Confessional Poetry?,” Diane Middlebrook envisions the oeuvre of the confessional poets inside a time capsule destined for the moon. Middlebrook’s time capsule posits confessional poetry as a “cultural icon” of its time, a period of American history marked by startling technological change,

⁴ Ibid.
sustained prosperity, emergent tensions over the rights and privacy of the individual, and an outpouring of theoretical reflection on modernity following the social and political upheavals of World War II (632). In her account of the unexpected popularity of confessional verse, Middlebrook writes:

Answers can be sought in the relevance of the themes of confessional poetry to other areas of culture that had obvious influence on middle-class life at the time: psychoanalysis as a mode of address to post-war existential misery, anticommunism as a pressure on American artists and intellectuals, and television as a solvent of boundaries between public and domestic life. (632)

Certainly, confessional poetry’s themes spoke not only to the individual reader but also to the larger, collective psyche of an American public, both of which were grappling with the significant transformations of post-war society. However, the central preoccupation of confessional poetry was not the disruption of socio-political order. Rather, the confessinals dedicated themselves, through the construction of ostensibly autobiographical lyric verse, to the rejection of New Criticism’s doctrine of Impersonality.⁵ Since the label “confessional” was first applied to Robert Lowell’s Life Studies, an unprecedentedly intimate collection of prose and poetry published in 1959, critics have struggled to define the surge of intimate verse that followed.⁶ Drawing

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⁵ For the foundational text in discussions of New Criticism’s “Impersonal” theory of poetry, see Eliot, “Tradition and the Individual Talent.”

⁶ For literary and historical discussions of confessional poetry, see Altieri; Breslin, J.; Middlebrook, “What Was Confessional Poetry?”, and Rosenthal, The New Poets. For a social perspective, see Breslin. P.; and Kalaidjian. For an interrogation of confessional poetry’s contradictory qualities, see Uroff; and Plath, The Poet Speaks 167-168. For a feminist perspective, see Montefiore; Ostriker; and Juhasz.
attention to itself as a form in a hinterland between intimately private revelations and the public performance of a series of poets, confessional poetry eluded—and still eludes—definition.

At the vanguard of the form’s definitional complexity is a long-standing deliberation over the disjunction between poet and persona. Patricia Parker sardonically outlines this debate:

the fiction of a speaker has been a powerful one in post-Romantic interpretation of the lyric, whether this speaker is assumed to be the poet or that lyric “persona” which the New Critics made a major part of our critical vocabulary, so major indeed that it is often adopted in readings that might otherwise call attention to their quarrels with New Criticism. (17)

Parker’s comment, with its emphasis on the “fiction” generated by the lyric poem, neatly summarizes the theoretical tensions that have pervaded confessional poetry from the start. Instead of joining the dispute over whether confessional poetry is inherently private or public (a revelation of poet or persona), I would like to propose an alternative dialectic. Through their engagement with the tools of publicity that marked the economic boom of post-war America, the confessional poets fashioned an unprecedentedly complex culture of postmodern poetics. By overtly advertising their confessions—both within their poetry and outside of it—confessional poets entered into an intricate feedback loop with the mechanisms of their work’s reception. This

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7 For the New Critical doctrine that insists on a disjunction between poet and persona, see Brower; and Wimsatt. Also valuable is George Wright’s convincing study of literary persona in *The Poet in the Poem* (1960).
required more than a mere public announcement of the authenticity of their confessions. Rather, an elaborate and sustained amalgamation of three key sites of poetics enabled confessional poetry to distort the roles of poet and persona, rendering the authenticity of the textual voice frustratingly—and fascinatingly—ambiguous.

In addressing these concerns, I have limited my assessment of confessional poetry to the work of four poets: Robert Lowell, John Berryman, Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton. In order to emphasize both the heterogeneous nature of their poetics as well as the intimate circuit of cross-fertilization and collaboration within which all four poets operated, this study addresses the poetry of the four writers evenly throughout the three central chapters. Although numerous critics have included additional poets under the ‘confessional’ rubric, my selection of these four reflects my understanding of confessional verse as the product of a number of definitive social conditions that Lowell, Berryman, Plath and Sexton shared. First, all four poets were profoundly invested in the politics of the cold-war era. Their poetry reveals a wider socio-cultural anxiety over the disjunctions between public and private that characterized many responses to cold-war political affairs and the tumultuous social and technological climate of twentieth-century America. Second, they had all become parents prior to producing many of their confessional works, and subsequently subscribed to a system of poetics concerned, at least partially, with the dynamics of the institution of the family. Third, all four poets not only suffered psychological breakdowns and resultant treatment during and after tumultuous early marriages, they also established intimate personal and professional affiliations, evaluating each

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8 Despite my selection of these four poets, it is important to note the influence that W.D. Snodgrass had in formulating the early stages of confessional poetry. Snodgrass’ Heart’s Needle (1959) had a profound effect upon Anne Sexton’s poetic development in particular and is often credited with inaugurating the confessional poetry movement more generally.
other’s work and sharing private experiences in acts of documented companionability. Finally, their poetry mobilizes a first-person speaker, “I,” whose abject pathological self uses the lens of Freudian psychoanalysis to understand both the vicissitudes of family life and the emotional turmoil of personal reflection. These mutually shared conditions constitute an invaluable foundation for grouping these four poets, and an analysis of how their work is illuminated by the three core ideas underpinning this thesis.

Chapter One charts the history and definition of confessional poetry, arguing that the term’s contested nature provides the basis upon which the confessional poets are routinely read incorrectly as ‘biographical.’ In addition to this—and, in many instances, because of it—confessional poetry repeatedly advertises itself within the poetic text. Applying rhetoric typical of the modern age of publicity, the confessional poets blur the distinction between themselves and their poetic speakers through a manufactured textual self-celebritization. John Berryman’s “Dream Song 67” provides an example of this. In opening the poem, Berryman abruptly declares: “I don’t operate often. When I do, / persons take note” (The Dream Songs 74). The intimation—which may for the contemporary critic bring to mind the title of Adam Kirsch’s The Wounded Surgeon, a recent work on confession and transformation in six confessional poets—instantly distorts the relationship between poet and speaker. Immediately, the “I” of the poem is personalized, invested with a consciousness capable of perceiving its own audience. In cleverly arranging a disjunction between

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9 Kirsch takes his title from T.S. Eliot’s image, evoking the “resolve, not to say the heroism, that [the confessional poets] displayed by submitting their most intimate and painful experiences to the objective discipline of art.” In “East Coker” (1940), Eliot writes: “The wounded surgeon plies the steel / That questions the distempered part; / Beneath the bleeding hands we feel / The sharp compassion of the healer’s art.” See Eliot, Four Quartets 18.
the “I” of the poem and the observing “persons,” Berryman subtly demarcates a poet and that poet’s audience, a dichotomous passive-active relationship characteristic of the American age of advertising.\footnote{For this trend, see Fox; and Lear, Fables of Abundance.} Having established the poem as a simultaneously intimate and public demonstration, Berryman goes on to advertise the intimacy of his own confession, writing self-reflexively:

\begin{quote}
I am obliged to perform in complete darkness  
operations of great delicacy  
on my self.  
— Mr Bones, you terrifies me.  
No wonder they didn’t pay you. Will you die?  
— My 
friend, I succeeded. Later. (The Dream Songs 74)
\end{quote}

As exemplified in Berryman’s verse, the confessionals worked towards an aesthetic that relied heavily on the performative conflation of public and private. Many of Berryman’s poems complicate this performance even further, ventriloquising action through a range of invented characters or “named shades” (Donoghue 280). Or, to borrow from Denis Donoghue, “something in Berryman ensured that he would talk straight only by talking out the side of his mouth. He sounds most completely himself when he takes the risk of sounding like someone else” (280). Donoghue’s observation stresses the deliberate ambiguity of not only Berryman’s poetics but also confessional poetry in general, whereby the poet intentionally confounds the relation between his poetry and the events that provoked it, using “minstrel-show voices in preference to
his own” (279). In ways reflective of the performative voices pervading Berryman’s verse, confessional poetry invokes the hysteria of the advertising and entertainment culture that dominated the post-war society from which it arose. In many poems, the vernacular of publicity is employed to create an expectation of dream-fulfilment analogous to Daniel Boorstin’s celebrity “human pseudo-event,” an occasion whereby the “machinery of public information” transforms society’s heroes into celebrities (66). Confessional poetry employs Boorstin’s human pseudo-event in other instances, too. For example, “Dream Song 69” maintains Berryman’s conventional self-commodification while extending the performative conflation of public and private to include characters other than the poem’s primary persona. Comparing a recent romantic obsession with the launch of a new advertising campaign, Berryman invokes the hype and rhetoric of modern publicity:

Love her he doesn’t but the thought he puts
into that young woman
would launch a national product
complete with TV spots & skywriting
outlets in Bonn & Tokyo
I mean it. (The Dream Songs 76)

Berryman was said to have composed “Dream Song 69” while intoxicated in a bar. However, the extent to which the poem’s detailed metaphor works to evoke the phantasmagorical media-hype of 1960s America suggests a technical and aesthetic

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11 For a closer look at the ways in which power is linked to and articulated through the celebrity, see Marshall; and Braudy 450-580.
mastery incompatible with such an anecdote. Supporting this, Kathe Davis notes how the “self as persona” was something that the poet would consciously craft and later perfectly execute (46). Of Berryman’s effort at establishing the illusion of a link between Henry and himself, Davis comments: “he had figured out early that, notwithstanding local dogma, biography constituted an indispensable context for poetry. The same logic that got him to that point would take him past it, through personality and out the far side, but that’s a later story” (46).

While Davis has focused on the ‘Live(s)’ of the poet, emphasizing the singular peculiarities and experiences which comprise a poet’s life story, Lawrence Lipking is more interested in the “collective” practice of the poet, glossed as “the life that all poets share: their vocation as poets” (viii). Lipking applies the “law of diminishing returns” towards an explanation of the trend whereby “for two centuries we have been hearing about the lives of poets … yet the life of the poet—the shape of his life as a poet—has not been exhausted. Indeed, it has hardly been studied” (viii). This contention, to which both Davis and Lipking direct their attention, resides in the ancient disjunction between the poet’s “life” and the poet’s “work.” Thus, Lipking personifies poetic verse: “if the lives of the poets tend to be peripheral to the insides of the poems, the life of the poet [‘his life as a poet’] is often the life of the poem” (viii). For the confessionals, the act of revelation is transmuted into a literary spectacle in which ‘life’ and ‘poem’ become inseparable, aided by the integration of the language of confession with the rhetoric of publicity and hype. Furthermore, Boorstin’s reading of fame designates consumer culture as the source of an enhanced inauthenticity of

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12 For an account of the composition of “Dream Song 69,” see Mariani 343.
public personalities. Such a position is especially rewarding in the case of the confessionals, who required the presence of an audience in order to generate pathos.

Chapter Two explores the way in which confessional poetry appears to be preoccupied with its status as lyric. Many of the tensions that pervade the long history of lyric poetry are reawakened in the confessional verse of post-war America. Notions of the “overheard utterance,” poetic voice, meditation, and emotional release are contested in key confessional texts of the period. Lesley Wheeler cites one of the central tensions of confessional poetry, asserting that “lyric poetry is the literary genre in which authors can seem to be both most intimately present and, ironically, most cut off from historical context” (38). Underpinning confessional poetry’s engagement with Wheeler’s paradox is the issue of voice. As a consequence of its traditional connection to music, lyric poetry has always exhibited a dynamic reliance on voice and sound. The confessional poets mobilized this link to generate an illusionary intimacy, particularly in the context of their live poetry readings. Similarly, the technological revolutions of twentieth-century America spelled new meanings for the concept of voice. Consequently, the confessional poets were able to synthesise lyric poetry’s inclination towards audibility with spectacular transformations in sound technology, all of which contributed to an unprecedented ambiguity in the status of poetic voice.

Beginning in the 1920s, radio’s sudden expansion initiated new methodologies for poetic performance, allowing poets’ recitations to be widely broadcast across the airwaves.\footnote{For a closer look at the growth of radio broadcasting in America see Hilmes, \textit{Hollywood and Broadcasting 47-77}; \textit{Radio Voices}; and \textit{NBC: America’s Network}. For a general discussion of acoustical technologies, see Kahn and Whitehead.} With the dissemination of poetry over the radio, the voices of poets were
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no longer restricted to the universities and public halls of amateur and professional poetry recitals. Instead, the voice of poets such as Sexton and Plath entered private living rooms, paradoxically rendering the public broadcasting of poetry a specifically intimate engagement. Lisa Gitelman’s research on the ways in which media can be conceived of as a historical subject provides a useful background to understanding how the experience of listening to poetry underwent a significant transmutation throughout twentieth-century America. Gitelman charts the move of the new medium of “recorded sound” out of “public places and into private homes” (14). Central to this transition was consumer demand, a dynamic Gitelman holds responsible for the conversion of recorded sound into a mass medium. This conversion restructured the ways in which Americans experienced sound and music, a restructuring which helped to “reorient U.S. social life toward ever-increasing leisure consumption” (Gitelman 15). Confessional poetry’s utilization of the sound technologies of twentieth-century America reincarnated the tensions that pervade lyric poetry — its slippages between public and private. Thus, these sound technologies provided a central component of the publicity feedback loop in which confessional poetry operated.

Finally, Chapter Three argues that the tensions between public and private life that mark America’s tumultuous cold-war years provided the confessional poets with a social, political, cultural, and aesthetic foundation upon which to promote, both within their poetry and outside of it, an ostensible connection between themselves and their poetic personas. Many confessional poems critique specifically American anxieties over the nuclear threats and national security of the cold-war period through
the guise of an intimate, domestically oriented persona. Unprecedented concerns over
the disjunction between public and private are thus played out in confessional verse,
particularly through the ambiguous status of truth in the persona’s seemingly private
confessions. Furthermore, in order to augment their public status, the confessional
poets actively applied the tools of America’s burgeoning marketing culture towards
the generation of their own social mobility. Leo Braudy provides an explanation for
this phenomenon, describing how “the psychologization of public language … has
made self-monitoring … together with the willingness to expose oneself publicly, part
of the definition of fame” (595). Distinguishing between the “imagery of fame” in the
nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Braudy notes the shift in emphasis from a
triumph over the social order to a conquering of an “individual’s own emotional
problems” (595). The specifically therapeutic guise under which confessional poetry
operated meant that even if the confessionals did not experience the achievement of
catharsis, they could still achieve social mobility through the illusion of it. Braudy’s
notion of ‘exposure’ is specifically germane to studies of the confessional school, from
both a literary and sociological standpoint. It can be observed how the confessional
poets operated an expertly managed program of double-exposure, sustaining intimate
revelation in their poetry while concurrently practising self-exposure in the public
realm. Anne Sexton’s acts of self-promotion exemplify this. In an effort to publicize
her poetry reading at Harvard’s Sanders Theatre in March 1974, Sexton fervently
executed a marketing campaign, which emphasized the alluring sexual appeal of her
poetry. In Anne Sexton: A Biography, Diane Middlebrook recounts the incident:
She [Sexton] hired [Bob Clawson] to produce a poster, using the photograph by Gwendolyn Stewart she had wanted Houghton Mifflin to print on the dustjacket of The Death Notebooks … Sexton sent copies of the book to local radio stations, provocatively requesting announcements of the event: “I dare you to read on your station page 31, ‘The Fury of Guitars and Sopranos’ or would you prefer p. 37, ‘The Fury of Cocks’? At any rate, I think both would have a wide appeal in a very sexual, sensual way.” (389)

The growing presence of visual and acoustic media afforded poets such as Sexton the opportunity to fuse together celebrity and visibility. David Haven Blake summarizes this trend, noting how, “in an age that was marked by a dramatic increase in popular culture, confessional poets attracted an extensive audience, and bolstered by their notorious behaviour, they drew significant media attention as well … confessional poetry developed into an unusually participatory form of verse, one in which readers became fans and writers became stars” (717). Fans became implicated in a complex act of double-consumption, devouring intimate confessional verse while consuming the public image of the figures who composed it. In ways comparable to the textual and aesthetic puzzles encoded in confessional verse itself as well as confessional poetry’s engagement with the politics of the lyric, the self-promotion practised by the confessionals forms part of their unique undertaking: the conflation of poet and persona.

Because confessional poetry operates most successfully within the overlapping space between public and private, it eludes many of the pre-war classifications of American subjectivity. By the middle of the twentieth century, America’s intellectual
community had come to accept that the boundaries—both real and perceived—between private and public were no longer secure. Foucault and Habermas are central to this revolution in our thinking about the problematic classification of modernity.\textsuperscript{14}

Common to both thinkers is the issue of subjectivity, in particular, its role in answering a question that pervades much of the anxiety over privacy in cold-war America: in mass societies, how much autonomy does the individual actually possess? As the sanctity of the private sphere increasingly seemed threatened, anxiety began to blur the definition of what had constituted privacy in the first place.

At a very basic level, confessional poetry’s projection of unprecedentedly private revelations into the public realm brought it into direct dialogue with the anxieties over privacy already seeping into collective American discourse. By employing the highly personal themes of madness, depression, illness, alcoholism, suicide, and divorce, the confessional poets actively contributed to the destabilization of the myth of privacy’s sanctity. Deborah Nelson notes that “since the end of the 1950s, the cry ‘the death of privacy’ has rung out from a wide variety of sources: journalism, television, film, literature, law enforcement, philosophy, medical discourse, and more” (\textit{PP xi-xii}). Nelson links the emergence of privacy as a central notion in debates over the nature of modern citizenship with the gradual breakdown of containment from 1959 to 1973,\textsuperscript{15} thereby highlighting a tension that has become increasingly pertinent to studies of the confessional mode. “The problem with privacy,”

\textsuperscript{14} For a valuable consideration of both Foucault and Habermas, see Love.

\textsuperscript{15} “Containment” was a United States policy used during the Cold War to prevent Soviet expansion. U.S. diplomat, George Frost Kennan first articulated the doctrine in a 1946 foreign policy directive. For a detailed analysis of Keenan’s role in the creation of America’s containment policy, see Lukacs, \textit{George F. Kennan and the Origins of Containment}. For an examination of the ways in which the idea of “containment” may be applied to social, political, and literary studies see Nadel; and Ryan.
Nelson states, “is not that we have too little privacy but that we have both too little and too much at the same time” (PP xii). Confessional poetry keenly participated in the apprehensions that accompanied the post-war challenge to privacy’s inviolability. This included anxiety over the disjunction between the self and society; the individual and government; debates regarding domestic ideology; the relative demarcations of literary and mass culture; national security; and disputes over the right to privacy, or indeed what constitutes privacy altogether. As these tensions suggest, the introduction of the concept of privacy into studies of confessional poetry initiates a significant transfer: specifically, the relocation of confessional poetry from the exclusivity of the ‘confessional literature’ genre to a much larger, socio-historical setting. This is not to say that confessional verse should be detached from the long-established inclination towards confession, observable in the works of, for example, St. Augustine, William Wordsworth, Robert Browning, Ezra Pound, and Walt Whitman. Rather, any comprehensive assessment of confessional poetry requires a simultaneous examination of the radical transformations of privacy that characterize twentieth-century America.

The three sites around which this thesis operates provide a dynamic framework in which to examine texts that challenge the classification of confessional verse as either a purely fictive utterance or biographical fact. Confessional poetry’s technical, linguistic conflation of poet and persona, the concentrated engagement of confessional verse with lyric expression, and its interaction with the mechanisms of publicity that define post-war America render it an invaluable site of investigation for the study of poetics—in particular, the authenticity of the textual voice. Confessional poetry also sheds light on the social and economic climate in America following
World War II. Furthermore, the mode’s unique relationship with twentieth-century notions of privacy represents an attractive opportunity for new ways of conceptualizing the ancient and intriguing relationship between public and private.
CHAPTER ONE

SMILE OF ACCOMPLISHMENT: THE CONFLATION OF POET AND PERSONA

CONFESSIONAL POETRY’S CONTESTED DEFINITION

For the rats
have moved in, mostly, and this is for real.

(John Berryman, “Dream Song 7” The Dream Songs 9)

In the opening to “Poetry as Confession,” M.L. Rosenthal invokes the
dramatically reclusive American poet Emily Dickinson, noting that “Dickinson
once called publication ‘the auction of the mind.’” Robert Lowell seems to
regard it more as soul’s therapy. The use of poetry for the most naked kind of
confession grows apace in our day” (154). Undeniably, the two poets present a stark
opposition. In utter contrast to Lowell, the greater part of Dickinson’s work was
heavily edited towards harmoniousness with the conventional poetic tenets of her
period. Moreover, while Dickinson was known for her solitariness and introversion,
Robert Lowell frequently captured public attention through uncouth methods of
personal expression, establishing himself not only as a prominent American poet but
also a controversial public figure. Rosenthal’s comparison of Dickinsonian poetics
with those of Robert Lowell goes further than simple personal difference to draw
attention to the widespread conviction, present especially throughout its formative stages, that confessional poetry was in fact therapeutic.

The point at which a perceived poetic therapeutics intersected with publicity is the point at which confessional poetry promoted the apparent authenticity of its revelations. When Rosenthal described *Life Studies* as not only “soul’s therapy,” but a collection of poetry in which the speaker, who is “unequivocally himself,” presents to the reader a “series of personal confidences, rather shameful, that one is honour-bound not to reveal,” he stressed the emerging disjunction between two previously harmonious endeavours: what poetry was doing and what readers and critics expected poetry to do (“Poetry as Confession” 154). According to the poetic doctrine preceding Lowell’s breakthrough collection, an “honour-bound” poet was required to understand, respect, and adhere to the boundaries of privacy, or so it was assumed. But when the confessional poets began to infuse lyric poetry with unprecedented subject matter, society’s understandings of ‘private’ and ‘public’ experienced a spectacular revolution. Furthermore, confessional poets such as Robert Lowell, John Berryman, Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton were not simply ‘private’ in their work; they were infatuated with the idea of privacy itself.¹

Indeed, the concept of privacy pervades almost all definitions of confessional poetry and represents an invaluable opportunity to examine the critical response to the mode alongside the social and political context that gave rise to it. In a 1962 interview with Peter Orr, Sylvia Plath expressed privacy’s significance to the

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¹ Nelson also notes this obsession in “Beyond Privacy” 280.
revolution of twentieth-century American poetry as initiated by the confessional mode, famously stating:

I've been very excited by what I feel is the new breakthrough that came with, say, Robert Lowell’s *Life Studies*, this intense breakthrough into very serious, very personal, emotional experience which I feel has been partly taboo … These peculiar, private and taboo subjects, I feel, have been explored in recent American poetry. (*The Poet Speaks* 167-168)

As Plath suggests, the ‘Confessional’ thesis is most accurately defined by a shared moment of revolt against the modernist New Critical orthodoxy of poetic impersonality, in which the confessional poets had been schooled (Britzolakis 146). In *The New Poets*, M.L. Rosenthal describes succinctly the primary motivating force for the “breakthrough” that characterized confessional poetry, noting how “the intensity and purity of a realization [became] the measure of poetic sense and success. Thus the alienated sensibility reclaim[ed] the world on its own terms” (17). Furthermore, confessional poetry’s breakthrough cannot be accurately considered without reference to the work of Michel Foucault, arguably the foremost theorist on the concept of confession. Simply put, Foucault asserts that a shift is detectable in the practise of confession whereby it was transformed from a mode of punishment—that is, the confessing criminal observable in his work *Discipline and Punish* (1979)—to a mode of intimate self-expression, a voluntary transferral of private information from one individual to another. It is Foucault’s secondary notion of confession that has become
both the dominant conception today and the framework within which confessional poetry is situated.

Certainly, confessional verse was stylistically unlike previous lyric poetry and the unique artistic and domestic setting from which it arose has been widely discussed by commentators. The feature of confessional poetry that most overtly interests critics, however, is its content. Diane Middlebrook suggests that, as a group, the confessonals viewed the tensions and vicissitudes of family life through the lens of Freudian psychoanalysis, a factor that largely explains their predisposition towards certain themes (WWCP 636). Despite ongoing discord over the biographical accuracy of confessional poetry, critics have arrived at consensus regarding the mode’s themes. Middlebrook summarizes these themes aptly, noting how “confessional poetry investigates the pressures on the family as an institution regulating middle-class life, primarily through the agency of the mother. Its principal themes are divorce, sexual infidelity, childhood neglect, and the mental disorders that follow from deep emotional wounds received in early life” (WWCP 636). The need to ascribe a ‘real life’ owner to these themes is, however, the point at which consensus falls apart.

Somewhat paradoxically, then, even those who have outright rejected outright Rosenthal’s concept of “confessional poetry” have joined him in unfairly simplifying the confessional thesis by underestimating its complexity as an aesthetic and culturally reflexive form. Shortly after Rosenthal introduced his term “confessional poetry,” Donald Davie offered “poetry of witness” in 1966 and in 1969 Ralph J. Mills declared American poetry to have not a “persona” but rather a notable “personal
A year later, aligning Robert Penn Warren’s poetry with the impulses of the confessional mode, Monroe Spears called Rosenthal’s classification “open or confessional or naked,” suggesting that the mode was marked by a “candor and directness of address to the reader” undetectable in previous poetries (348). Lawrence Lerner’s essay “What Is Confessional Poetry?” (1987) takes the process of redefinition even further, asserting that confessional poetry is an unachievable form since, “if the poet is telling a story, taking on the persona of someone clearly not himself, offering a formal address to a public figure or a virtue, or turning the world upside down in savage indignation, he is not doing anything that even looks like confessing” (46).

Lerner’s assessment seems to rest on the belief that the term ‘confession’ is too broad to apply to a specific mode, but even if this was feasible, it would be impossible to distinguish confessional verse from lyric poetry more generally. Continuing the relentless pursuit for more appropriate terms for Rosenthal’s widely disparaged definition, Helen Vendler renamed this poetry “the Freudian lyric” in 1995, rejecting the term confessional completely on account of there being “no sin to confess” (The Given and the Made 50; 49). “The aim of the Freudian lyric,” Vendler argues, “is primarily analytic, not confessional” (50). Such a description, while encapsulating the very real connections between the work of these poets and the mid-twentieth-century rubric of psychoanalysis, is probably far too specific and ignores the many inroads that confessional poetry makes on mythology, cold-war politics and issues of the domestic. Conversely, Thomas Travisano’s replacement of the term confessional with

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2 See Davie 6; and Mills 1. Williamson makes a similar claim in his preference of the term “personal” over Rosenthal’s “confessional” in Introspection and Contemporary Poetry.

3 For an example of this, see Gill’s assessment of Sexton’s poem “Hurry Up Please, It’s Time,” where she notes the poem’s “critical dialogue with Eliot’s The Waste Land” 41.
“self-exploratory” in 1999 is too general, and to this extent fails to take account of the work of poets beyond the four who interest him (66).

Finally, Samuel Maio, in his book *Creating Another Self* (2005), presents a similar, although perhaps somewhat problematic alternative. Differentiating between three unique forms, each of which he categorizes more generally as “Personal poetry,” Maio identifies: The Confessional Mode, The Persona Mode, and the Self-Effacing Mode. For Maio, what distinguishes The Confessional Mode from its two related counterparts is the thematic exclusivity of the “I” contained by the poem. “This ‘I’ is the sincere voice of the poet (intended or not),” states Maio, “one used as the primary instrument in presenting the poem” (24). This explicit claim for the ultimate sincerity of the poem’s “I” is, however, contradicted by Maio’s later claim that “the poet who writes in the confessional mode of voice attempts to present the ‘I’ as the self he or she wishes to define by the poem” (24).

Perhaps Jacqueline Rose summarizes best the reason why the ongoing attempt to define confessional poetry has, to date, been so fascinating and problematic. Using Sylvia Plath as an exemplar—the confessional poet around whom there is, indubitably, the greatest cultural fascination—Rose critiques the almost hysterical forms of psychic investment which lie, “barely concealed behind the processes through which … Western literary culture evaluates itself” (1). She writes:

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4 Travisano bases this replacement on Diane Middlebrook’s notion of childhood trauma, in which the definition of confessional poetry focuses on “divorce, sexual infidelity, childhood neglect, and the mental disorders that follow from deep emotional wounds received in early life.” See Middlebrook, *WWCP* 636.

5 These four are: Elizabeth Bishop, John Berryman, Randall Jarrell, and Robert Lowell.
[I]f I do not ... pass judgement on the issue of Plath’s pathology, it is because I do not believe we can take writing as unproblematic evidence of the psychological condition or attributes of the one who writes. Commentaries on Plath give us the measure of this difficulty, precisely in so far as they treat the texts as the person and they disagree so strongly as to what these texts reveal. (4)

Indeed, the existence of an exorbitant number of Plath biographies, each of which claims with confidence to deliver the ‘real Sylvia Plath,’ supports Rose’s assertion. Yet notwithstanding biography, literary estates, and posthumously published materials, the essential source of a critical insistence on connecting the ‘life’ with the ‘work’ derives from the poetry.

In order to demonstrate the conditions under which both critics and readers have tended mistakenly to conflate the roles of poet and persona in their readings of confessional poetry, it is necessary to consider some of the waning definitions of confessional poetry. One of the earliest available, A.R. Jones’ attempt in 1965 to redefine confessional verse as “naked ego” is influenced strongly by New Criticism, conceptualizing confessional poetry less as a genre or mode than as an “orthodoxy” in which a persona, the “I” of the poem, resides. This “I” experiences continual development and is “clearly related, intimately and painfully, to the poet’s autobiography” (14-15). In “Necessity and Freedom,” Jones notes the way in which, “as a direct result of Robert Lowell’s example, American poetry [is] moving towards

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6 For the key Plath biographies, see Butscher; Wagner-Martin; Stevenson, Bitter Fame; Rose; Middlebrook, Her Husband; and Malcolm, The Silent Woman.
an acceptance of the dramatic monologue as the predominant poetic mode” (14).

Emphasizing the exceptionally raw quality of the new poetic form, Jones noted:

It is a dramatic monologue in which the *persona* is not treated dramatically, as a mask, that is, in the manner of Browning’s *Dramatis Personae*, but is projected lyrically, as in Whitman’s *Song of Myself* or in Pound’s *Pisan Cantos*. In other words, although the poem’s style and method is unmistakably dramatic, the *persona* is naked ego involved in a very personal world and with particular, private experiences. (14)

As early then as 1965—intelligibly demonstrated in Jones’ use of the expression “naked ego”—the roots of a dangerously presumptive critical perspective are detected and exposed. With their foundation in the standard Freudian paradigm, the collection of theories which focused predominantly on confessional poetry’s “therapeutic” or “healing” qualities has contributed not only to the tainted label, but also to the damaging obfuscation of the extent to which the confessionals consciously and pragmatically crafted their poetry, personalities, and personas in the service of the conflation of poet and persona. In what could best be described as an act of humble resignation, M.L. Rosenthal, writing in 1967, had already begun to digest the potentially destructive consequences of the term, stating of his earlier application of the label:

The term ‘confessional poetry’ came naturally to my mind when I reviewed Robert Lowell’s *Life Studies* in 1959, and perhaps it came to the minds of others just as naturally. Whoever invented it, it was a term both helpful and too limited, and very possibly
the conception of a confessional school has by now done a certain amount of damage. (*The New Poets* 25)

One measure of the “damage” cited by Rosenthal is the insidious linking of confessional poetry and biography. Although his assessment gives us valuable insight into the literary and scientific climate of 1950s America, it is nevertheless a model instance of overemphasis in terms of confessional poetry’s connection to the biographical facts of the poets from whom it derived. Employing the mode of psychoanalysis, Jones notes how the “private world into which the reader is drawn has established, in Lowell and his followers, something like a confessional orthodoxy in so far as the *persona* adopts the attitudes of a patient on the analyst’s couch, revealing, often in images of violence and fantasy, a sick alienation” (14). Many of the confessional poets—Anne Sexton is the primary example here—sought the “analyst’s couch” at various stages throughout their careers, contributing to the acknowledged stereotype of the confessional poet as a victim of mental illness, alcoholism, and in many cases suicide. The immediacy, however, with which critics connected Berryman’s childhood trauma or Lowell’s manic depression, for example, with the particulars of their respective poetry produced chaos for future attempts to define the confessional genre.\(^7\) Whether or not this was the intention, criticism forced confessional poetry into a corner, leaving it unable to shake the body of theory which labelled it as a performative, solipsistic self-indulgence; a branding many—including, at times, the confessional poets themselves—viewed with disdain. John Berryman blatantly expressed this contempt at several points throughout his career. When asked

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\(^7\) For a further example of how the term has been overstated, see Phillips 16-17.
by an interviewer in 1970 how he reacted to being called a “confessional poet,” Berryman replied, “With rage and contempt! Next question” (Writers at Work 299). When further pressed to comment on the term “confessional,” he stated: “The word doesn’t mean anything. I understand confession 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” (Writers at Work 299). Berryman’s comments call attention to the particularly ‘therapeutic’ guise under which the term “confessional” was interpreted, by poets and readers as well as by critics.

Stephen K. Hoffman’s “therapeutic fallacy” describes succinctly the potentially hazardous amplification of confessional poetry’s Freudian associations, as practiced by numerous theorists. The source of the “therapeutic fallacy,” argues Hoffman, is the “presumption that the confessional manages to exorcise his private demons through his work” (706).8 In addition to diagnosing the confessinals with irrevocable solipsism, the presumption Hoffman describes has further implications for the extent to which the confessional poets practiced a tightly operated network of artistic cross-fertilization. This approach also obscures the extent to which these writers explored issues of social and political obligation throughout their poetry. The most marked victim of the “therapeutic fallacy” is British critic and close friend of Sylvia Plath, Al Alvarez, who applied the term “extremist poetry” to the work of the confessinals in his seminal study of suicide, The Savage God (1972). In an essay entitled “Beyond All This Fiddle” (1965) and, more extensively, in The Savage God, Alvarez interrogates what he perceives to be the psychosomatic, pathological link between the apparently

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8 This idea has been expressed prior to Hoffman’s claims. See Bowen; and Phillips.
solipsistic purging undertaken by the confessionals, and the high incidence of suicide among them. The climax of Alvarez’s engagement with this critical perspective resides in his posthumous tribute to Sylvia Plath for the BBC’s *Third Programme*, very shortly after Plath’s death in 1963. In the tribute Alvarez stated:

> The achievement of her [Plath’s] final style is to make poetry and death inseparable. The one could not exist without the other. And this is right. In a curious way, the poems read as if they were written posthumously … Poetry of this order is a murderous art. (“Sylvia Plath” 67)

By 1966, however, it had become clear that this remark had caused some confusion. Alvarez’s essay “Sylvia Plath,” in which he affixes a postscript to a transcription of this original BBC tribute to Plath represents another example of the ominous consequences of establishing a direct link of Plath’s poetic motifs with her actual suicide. The essay reveals Alvarez’s calculated reformulation of the very impressions he inserted into discussion years earlier. In the postscript of his prior dedication to Plath, Alvarez notes, “I was **not** in any sense meaning to imply that breakdown or suicide is a validation of what I now call Extremist poetry. No amount of personal horror will make a good poet out of a bad one” (67). Yet further into the appendage Alvarez writes, “the very source of her [Plath’s] creative energy was, it turned out, her self-destructiveness … So, though death itself may have been a side-issue, it was also an unavoidable risk in writing her kind of poem” (68). Alvarez’s theoretical vacillations were most recently highlighted in his work, *The Writer’s Voice* (2005), which is recycled from three lectures he delivered at the New York Public Library in
2002. Of the text, one reviewer noted: “Alvarez looks back on his own myth-making as a regrettable overstatement that allowed others to ignore the complex texture of Plath’s work in favour of a crude version of her life story” (Heawood 31). Indeed, Alvarez’s severe conflation of the “tragic biography” and “the poetry” seems to indicate that even the most astute, socially-connected critic may fall victim to the temptation to read prescriptively the many self-destructive motifs detectable in confessional poetry, a tendency Jonathan Heawood has described as “the tension between his [Alvarez’s] interest in the words on the page, and the life off the page.”

These theoretical vacillations considered, Middlebrook presents what I believe to be the most accurate and careful definition of confessional poetry to date. “A confessional poem,” she states, “contains a first-person speaker, ‘I,’ and always seems to refer to a real person in whose actual life real episodes have occurred that cause actual pain, all represented in the poem” (WWCP 636). Middlebrook’s use of the phrase “seems to refer” precludes the theory that directly connects confessional poetry’s “real episodes” with its poets. Her use of “seems to refer” operates along similar lines to Maio’s suggestion that the confessional poet “attempts” to present the ‘I’ as the self he or she wishes to convince readers is the source of the poem.

A misperception of the extent to which confession may be used for self-healing is not the only basis upon which the confessional poets were able to conflate poet with persona. Equally significant is the degree to which metaphorical thinking, or more precisely theoretical directions in criticism, influences the identification,

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9 For a more positive assessment of The Savage God, see Wilner.

10 In Sincerity’s Shadow, Deborah Forbes makes a similar albeit problematic point. Throughout her work Forbes refers to “so-called confessional poetry” and places the term in quotation marks, yet does not elaborate on why she treats the label with such objection.
analysis, and writing of poetry. By metaphorical thinking, I refer predominantly to the theory espoused by M.H. Abrams in his work *The Mirror and the Lamp* (1953), in which he champions the vital role of metaphorical models in the writing, reading, and interpretation of literature. Although Abrams’ text is concerned largely with constructing a metaphor to contrast the pre-Romantic, mimetic view of literature with the artist-oriented understanding succeeding it, *The Mirror and the Lamp* is useful for thinking about the interplay between confessional poetry and biography. Describing what he calls the “expressive theory” of literature, Abrams notes the nineteenth-century reorientation of literary criticism from the understanding of a work of literature as pure imitation to “the exploitation of literature as an index to personality” (23). This method of literary analysis is, for Abrams, highly literalized in so far as “the work ceases then to be regarded as primarily a reflection of nature, actual or improved; the mirror held up to nature becomes transparent and yields the reader insights into the mind and heart of the poet himself” (23). Reminiscent of the kinds of “fictional utterances” that are explored in Chapter Two’s examination of lyric poetry, Abrams’ disjunction between the artist’s imitation of nature and her personal, undistorted translation of it requires a process contingent upon the feelings and operations of the poet’s mind. Abrams summarises the central tendency of the expressive theory thus:

A work of art is essentially the internal made external, resulting from a creative process operating under the impulse of feeling, and embodying the combined product of the poet’s perceptions, thoughts, and feelings. The primary source and subject matter of a poem, therefore, are the attributes and actions of the poet’s own mind. (22)
For Abrams, the unfortunate outcome of this insistence on the artist’s unmediated expression of feeling or thought is, at a very basic level, the tendency for critics to champion context at the expense of content. Immediately, the first consideration of a poem is not ‘Is it true to nature?’, as the Romantics may have asked, but ‘Is it true? Does it accurately expose the thoughts and feelings of the poet who we know wrote it?’ Accustomed to this dialectic, Alvarez exhibited no hesitation in criticizing the later trend, stating:

So what you get is a lot of clever people who aren’t really interested in the texts, bring all this stuff into it, about which they can talk in a very arcane way. You have this Never Never Land construct, gender studies, psychoanalysis, sociology, history.\(^{11}\)

The “Never Never Land” summoned up by Alvarez is the theoretical setting from which *The Savage God*, was born, as well as the collection of criticism which labelled Sylvia Plath and her fellow confessional poets as “extremists,” writers who “set out deliberately to confront their demons in the cellars of the unconscious and made art out of the mayhem that followed” (Alvarez, *The Writer’s Voice* 109). As such, a focus on the authenticity of the poet’s declarations inevitably necessitated a focus on the authenticity of the textual voice. Or, to borrow again from Abrams, “the element of diction, especially figures of speech, becomes primary; and the burning question is, whether these are the natural utterance of emotion and imagination or the deliberate aping of poetic conventions” (*The Mirror and the Lamp* 23).

\(^{11}\) See Shields 26.
The authenticity of a poet’s utterance is of as much interest to the biographer as it is to the critic. Furthermore, it is through biography that we are able to witness perhaps the epitome of Alvarez’s ‘mysterious land,’ a place where the text—the poem in the case of the confessional—is read literally, biographically. Janet Malcolm has written lengthily on this process, channelling the literary biographer toward an examination of how exactly the ‘Myth of Sylvia Plath’ acquired its unparalleled vigour. Malcolm’s *The Silent Woman* interrogates inventively the intersection between confessional poetry, publicity, and the task of the literary biographer. Consulting—and sometimes silencing—the many voices that have together built the notorious ‘Plath Archive,’ Malcolm reveals the various ingeniously crafted personae behind the seemingly exponential rise of ‘Sylvia Plath’ mythology. Malcolm’s study holds particular allure for understanding confessional poetry because of its disjunctions between literary personalities and people in real life. The fundamental difference between literary characters and real people, Malcolm once asserted, is that “literary characters are drawn with much broader and blunter strokes … their preternatural vividness derives from their unambiguous fixity and consistency” (*The Journalist & The Murderer* 122-123). The temptation, then, to transcribe the traits of a literary personality onto the real subject of a literary biography presents a precarious trap for the biographer. Moreover, this process of extrapolation necessitates a closing of the slippery gap between ‘fact’ and ‘fiction’ in the confessional address. This conflation can be witnessed, for example, in the immediacy with which critics drew parallels between Plath’s last, posthumously published work *Ariel* and her suicide in 1963. Many of the readings of Plath’s “Edge,” for example, emphasized its apparently
prophetic qualities. The poem seemed to stretch out Plath’s suicide, with “each little / Pitcher of milk, now empty”:

Her dead

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

Flows in the scrolls of her toga,
Her bare

Feet seem to be saying:
We have come so far, it is over. (Collected Poems 272)

“Edge,” critics concurred, could almost have been written after Plath’s death, so accurately did it describe what she had done. Whether Plath anticipated this reception or not, the overall effect of the discursive interaction between poet, reader, critic and biographer is so far removed from what the poet may have originally intended that it becomes impossible—insensible even—to trace the origins of poetic truth and meaning. Janet Malcolm summarizes this conundrum neatly in a retort to Ted Hughes’ letter of April 1989 to the Independent. After a particularly stinging article had tarnished his reputation, Hughes austerely wrote: “I hope each of us owns the facts to his or her own life.” Responding, Malcolm argued, “but, of course, as everyone knows who has ever heard a piece of gossip, we do not ‘own’ the facts of our lives at all. The ownership passes out of our hands at birth, at the moment we are first observed”

12 Alkalay-Gut provides an example of the directly opposite stance to this when she states of Anne Sexton’s poetry: “The usual paths into her poetry just don’t seem to lead anywhere else than herself” 51.
While this presents an alibi for the ultimately manipulative function of the biographer, Malcolm’s proposition undermines the extent to which the poet herself (and here I mean all poets) is involved in this process of “observation.” If Plath is a myth—and it is fair to say that she is—then it cannot be denied that she played some role, perhaps the largest role, in crafting her own mythology. The idea implicit in Malcolm’s retort to Hughes appears to be that literary celebrities are created by means of an inevitable commodification process, after which they are ‘sold off’ to the public. It is reasonable to assert that, in the case of the confessional poets, the instigator of this exchange, the “merchant,” is the poet.

**Truth and How to Avoid It: The Ambiguity of Confessional Poetics**

It’s a very easy thing to say, “All poets lie.” It depends on what you want to call the truth, you see.

*(Sexton, NES 75)*

A subtle negotiation between ‘fact’ and ‘fiction’ is the process by which the confessional poets were able to instigate the marketing of their literary personas. But what exactly about this mediation generates public interest? Deborah Nelson’s interrogation of the relationship between confessional poetry and constitutional privacy doctrine[^13] offers some insight into the way in which a mid-twentieth century

[^13]: By this, Nelson refers to the repackaging of privacy as a constitutional right during the Cold War. She states: “The Supreme Court’s shift toward embracing a constitutionally guaranteed right to privacy correlates with the sudden emergence of privacy as an object of intense anxiety, scrutiny, investigation, and exploration in mid-1960s American culture.” See Nelson, “Reinventing Privacy” *PP* 1-41.
redefinition of privacy produced unprecedented interest in the value of confession. Of the borderline state established by confessional poetry between reality and “fictive sentences,” Nelson notes how voluntary confession offers a “conceptual double bind, claiming the value of the private self while simultaneously destroying the privacy that made it possible” (PP 19). The factual accuracy of an author’s collection of poetry is obviously of interest to the biographer, but for the literary critic the thrilling task is the one of peering through the apparently biographical connections between author and text to the shimmering layer beneath: mythology. Robert Lowell was no stranger to the scrupulous self-mythologizing practised by the confessionals, claiming of Life Studies in a Paris Review interview of 1961 that, “there’s a good deal of tinkering with fact, [if] the reader was to believe he was getting the real Robert Lowell” (“The Art of Poetry: Robert Lowell” 57). Affirmations such as Lowell’s—and there are many—reveal a clearly premeditated manipulation of the reader’s, the critic’s, conception of the import of truth in the confessional poem. This manipulation, in the service of advancing the allure of the literary persona, seeks to locate for the reader a convincing point between crafted mythology and fact revelation. For the poem to sustain (or at least accrue) interest, the achievement of this halfway position is essential for generating at least some belief in the utterances belonging to the lyrical “I” in order for an autobiographical poem to have any effect on its readership.

Because he is claiming to write autobiographically, Lowell, like the other confessionals, cannot entirely manufacture the principal facts of his life. By “principal facts” I refer to those things we can with certainty know as well as those things that constitute the essentially non-affecting, objective data shared by all human beings: age,
colleges attended, dental records, and so on. Whether or not these pieces of biographical data are inserted accurately into the poetry is a puzzle that besets the biographer. For the critic, however, the assignment is to ascertain the extent to which language—the craft of the poem—is deployed to create the illusion of biographical intimacy. Anne Sexton provides an example of the facetiousness with which the confessional poets responded to this process of poetics. In an interview for American Poets in 1973, Al Poulin posed to Sexton a question that strikes directly to the core of confessional poetics: “If it is confession,” he asked, “what are you confessing?” (NES 133). In an ostensibly bold evasion of her interviewer’s attempt to explain confessional poetics with empiricism, Sexton replied:

It’s a difficult label, “confessional,” because I’ll often confess to things that never happened. As I once said to someone, if I did all the things I confess to, there would not be time to write a poem. So, you know, I mean I’ll often just assume the first person and it’s someone else’s story. It’s just very amenable to me to kind of climb into that persona and tell their story. (NES 133-134)

Although their ambiguous and often teasing interview rejoinders do little to clarify the definition of “confessional poetry,” the informal commentary of Sexton, Plath, Lowell, Berryman and their fellow confessionals does provide a valuable insight into the particular methodology of their self-mythologizing. Marjorie Perloff’s claim that the confessional poet “begins with one established convention—the projection of the romantic lyrical ‘I’—and fuses the romantic ‘poetry of experience’ with the metonymic mode perfected by the great novelists of the late nineteenth century,” echoes many of the remarks by the confessionals selected for this thesis (“Realism and
the Confessional Mode of Robert Lowell” 487). The confessional poem typically follows the romantic inclination towards a cyclic pattern: moving from present to past and back again in an imitation of the poet’s journey towards self-understanding. Simultaneously, however, the poems of Sexton, Plath, Lowell, and Berryman employ a vernacular that relies almost entirely on an anti-Romantic insistence on factual specificity. Thus for Perloff, to create the impression of biographical intimacy the confessional poet must harmoniously sustain the projection of a romantic, meditating lyric “I” and the appeal to detail that marks the great realistic novels of the late nineteenth century. Explicit illustrations of this technique can be found in the poems of almost all the great confessionals, marking a style James Merrill described as the “illusion of a True Confession” (2).14

The extent to which the confessional poets eagerly participated in this mystification is something that has not yet been thoroughly examined.15 Anne Sexton’s poetic assignment, illuminated most explicitly in the many transcripts of her frank and often scandalous interviews, hints at the way in which the confessional poets were keenly aware of the analytical minefield in which confessional poetry found itself. Sexton’s poetry persistently alludes to a conscious and often deviously premeditated codification of reality, a technique she frequently endorsed when questioned in interviews. In one of her earliest poems, “An Obsessive Combination of

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14 A leading confessional poet himself, Merrill coined this expression in a 1968 interview for Contemporary Literature, stating: “Confessional poetry … is a literary convention like any other, the problem being to make it sound as if it were true.” The underlying idea here of course is that the actual facts of a poet’s experience are ultimately irrelevant, so long as he provides the illusion of a real confession.

15 One example of a study that has produced noteworthy reflections is the Poetry Society of America’s 2011 event, “Beyond Tribute: Anne Sexton Revisited.” For a summary of the findings, see Trinidad.
Ontological Inscape, Trickery and Love,” the poet demonstrates the formative stages of what would later develop into an obsessive fixation on the duplicity of words and phrases, a fascination she brought to fruition in her later poetry. In a poem of 1959, published in the same year as Lowell’s Life Studies, Sexton writes that she is “[b]usy, with an idea for a code.” She continues:

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

(Selected Poems of Anne Sexton 4)

In this poem Sexton establishes an unusual claim to ownership at the same time that she mocks the very idea of possessing the poem. The poem is, on the one hand, “as if it were a star” she “touched,” and yet it never really existed in the first place. Thus, she hints at a certain aesthetic fraudulence that can be detected in many of her confessional works. Advertising her craft as a formulaic game of ‘cat and mouse’ between poet and reader, poet and biographer, Sexton demonstrates a reflexively ambiguous poetic process. In a discussion of 1967 for American Poets, she famously entertained William Heyen and Al Poulin with the story of Ralph Mills’
misunderstanding of her “dead brother.” Joyfully recalling her encounter with Mills, Sexton commented how, upon meeting him, she had declared: “Ralph, I had no brother, but then didn’t we all have brothers who died in that war?” She continued:

But I write my brother, and of course he believes it. I mean, why not? Why shouldn’t he? But I was just telling him, incidentally, there was no brother. So that kind of … I should say “Excuse me, folks, but no brother,” but that would kind of ruin the poem. (NES 136)

In “Said the Poet to the Analyst,” Sexton heightens her insistence on the capacity for the confessional poem to reveal all and nothing at the same time. Returning to the subject of “words,” she notes: “My business is words / Words are like labels, or coins, or better, like swarming bees.” The poem continues:

I confess I am only broken by the sources of things;
as if words were counted like dead bees in the attic,
unbuckled from their yellow eyes and their dry wings.
I must always forget how one word is able to pick
out another, to manner another, until I have got
something I might have said…
but did not. (To Bedlam and Part Way Back 17)

The final lines of the stanza, animated by a teasing ellipsis, suspend the reader’s supposed gullibility before casually dismissing it with an abrupt ending. The poem’s next line not only reinforces the ultimate accountability of the confessional verse to its
claims to fact, but positions the reader directly as the consumer of the aesthetic façade, stating:

Your business is watching my words. But I admit nothing. (*To Bedlam and Part Way Back* 17)

Although Sexton’s remarks—in both her poetry and interviews—read like an exploitation of the critical community’s attempt to define and classify an elusive poetic form, her appreciation of the disjunction between clinical therapy and poetry was something she regarded seriously. In a discussion entitled “Craft Interview with Anne Sexton,” for the *New York Quarterly*, Sexton authoritatively and famously notes: “You don’t solve problems in writing. They’re still there. I heard psychiatrists say, ‘See, you’ve forgiven your father. There it is in your poem.’ But I haven’t forgiven my father. I just wrote that I did” (21-22). John Berryman maintained a conviction similar to this, stating of the protagonist of *The Dream Songs*, in an interview with Peter Stitt in 1970:

Henry both is and is not me, obviously. We touch at certain points. But I am an actual human being; he is nothing but a series of conceptions – my conceptions. I brush my teeth; unless I say so somewhere in the poem – I forget whether I do or not – he doesn’t brush his teeth. He only does what I make him do. If I have succeeded in making him believable, he performs all kinds of other actions besides those named in the poem, but the reader has to make them up. (*Writers at Work* 309)
The system of poetics described by Berryman is strangely ventriloquistic; the poet ascribes Henry a performative agency while simultaneously asserting the ultimate primacy of the author’s direction: “He only does what I make him do.” Such an explanation conjures up the image of a rehearsed form of puppetry, where Berryman plays the role of the puppeteer who is both omnipresent yet mysteriously missing from the action. More importantly however, the poet achieves ambiguity. Whatever Berryman’s commentary may or may not instil in a reader’s mind, the effect is always, at least partially, obscure — a mingling of the comparative roles of poet and persona.

Anne Sexton’s meditation upon the relationship shared by truth and poetry neatly reflects the style I have just delineated. On a number of occasions, Sexton made clear her belief that poetic truth is not “just factual,” declaring, for example, that she was trying to accomplish “a feeling of authenticity” by filling her poetry with details as if “piling stones one on top of the other” (Middlebrook, “Becoming Anne Sexton” 8; Sexton, “With Harry Moore” 51). Similarly, in an interview with Patricia Marx, originally published in the Hudson Review in 1966, Sexton provides another characteristically imprecise response. When asked if she were more “truthful” in her poetry than “to herself,” she instantly complicates the status of “truth,” replying “Yes, I think so.” Sexton continues:

That’s what I’m hunting for when I’m working away there in the poem. I’m hunting for the truth. It might be a kind of poetic truth, and not just a factual one, because behind everything that happens to you, every act, there is another truth, a secret life. (34)
What Sexton here calls “a kind of poetic truth” is possibly an attempt to describe the phenomenon that Abrams anticipated and Perloff later explained: a poetic process that mythologizes the private life of the poet through an elaborate fusion of the affecting self-discovery of a lyric “I” with the complex manipulation of realistic convention. Or, as Alan Williamson describes the process, in reviewing the many likely dimensions to Robert Lowell’s confessional verse:

Is Lowell to be valued chiefly as a traditional poet who has incorporated the immense social and living richness of the realistic novel into his work; or do his political commitments, his concern with mental states, and the rhetorical energy of his earlier and most recent poetry mark him rather as a visionary romantic; in short, Tolstoy or Rimbaud? (334)

Perloff later gave this process a name, describing Robert Lowell’s work as “documentary” verse in her influential *The Poetic Art of Robert Lowell*, where she re-evaluated the poet’s entire oeuvre (94). Perloff’s classification attracted stern criticism, which drew attention to the need to consider the range of subjective experience in not only Lowell’s poetry but the school of confessional poetry as a whole. In one review, Bernard Duffey argued that Perloff’s description of confessional poetry as “documentary” positions the genre as “one in fact rooted in a ‘realistic’ feeling for poetry that is more fully attached to conditions of setting and circumstance, themselves centring on the poet’s person as may be, than it is to lyrical or other subjective experience in its own right” (415). Whether they agree with the label “documentary” or not, the range of responses to Perloff’s redefinition of confessional poetry reflect the impulse present in Abrams’ work to establish a distinction between
two types of poetry: that which seeks to imitate various aspects of the universe and that through which an emphasis is placed on “the relation of art to the artists, rather than to external nature, or to the audience, or to the internal requirements of the work itself” (Abrams 3).

Yet, even as it becomes possible to recognize in some critics a genuine attempt to avoid the overemphasis of authorial intent synonymous with studies of confessional poetry, instances of unequivocal connection between the ‘work’ and the ‘life’ still number highly. Robert Lowell sought to conclude his 1969 collection *Notebook 1967-1968* (Revised and expanded as *Notebook*, 1970) with an overt denial of his work’s biographical authenticity, stating in “Afterthought”:

>[A]s my title intends, the poems in this book are written as one poem, intuitive in arrangement, but not a pile or sequence of related material. It is less an almanac than the story of my life. Many events turn up, many others of equal or greater personal reality do not. This is not my private lash, or confession, or a puritan’s too literal pornographic honesty, glad to share secret embarrassment and triumph. The time is summer, an autumn, a winter, a spring, another summer. (*Notebook* 262)

However, less than a year later Perloff openly refuted Lowell’s thorough addendum, stating of the poems in *Notebook*:

>[F]or here, ten years after *Life Studies*, are poems about Lowell’s precise sensations during the Pentagon March of 1967, his idyllic romance during a brief stay at Harvard, his ambivalent feelings toward Allen Tate and Randall Jarrell, and his reactions to too much liquor.
Read as a whole, the new book is, despite Lowell’s disclaimer in the “Afterthought,” an autobiographical sequence in which one year in the life of Robert Lowell is recaptured. (“Realism and the Confessional Mode of Robert Lowell” 471)

The example of a discrepancy so drastic as that between Perloff’s and Lowell’s assessment of Notebook presents an interesting challenge for poetic criticism. The question, it seems, becomes not ‘Who is more convincing, poet or critic?’ but rather, ‘Who has the last word?’ The famously incessant interchange between Ted Hughes, his sister Olwyn and the biographical literature surrounding Sylvia Plath represents perhaps a heightened example of this debate. And yet, despite the years of disputation endured by the Plath Estate, Plath’s approach to her art only ever classified it as just that, art. A year before her death, speaking to Peter Orr, she ruminated on the formal, crafted nature of her poetry, stating:

I must say I cannot sympathise with these cries from the heart that are informed by nothing except a needle or a knife, or whatever it is. I believe that one should be able to control and manipulate experiences, even the most terrifying, like madness, being tortured, this sort of experience, and one should be able to manipulate these experiences with an informed and an intelligent mind. (The Poet Speaks 169)

16 This idea is best represented by the range of commentary immediately following the release of Birthday Letters (1998), which used a discourse comparable to that of the marketing and review of blockbuster films. Reviewers adopted a rhetoric that relied on ‘silence,’ ‘secrecy,’ and a typically Hollywood binary which classified Hughes as a villain and Plath as a victim. See Moseley; Wagner, Ariel’s Gift, and “Poet Laureate Breaks Decades of Silence”; Gray; Kakutani; Kroll; Lyall; Motion; and Stothard.
I would like to propose that, summed up in this remark, is the single notion that drives perhaps most interest in and contention over confessional poetry. The idea that a poet may be capable of controlling and manipulating personal experience has been, for the most part, something that readers and critics have known to be entirely possible, yet preferred to overlook. Our natural inclination is to accept the confessional poem as a genuine act of revelation; an inclination that we believe renders us resistant to the manipulative powers of the poet. Thus in our denial of the artist’s—the poet’s—role as conspirator, we fall into the very trap which has been set for us. Consequently, it is necessary to attempt to find a way out of this labyrinthine interchange by resorting to new ways of thinking about and classifying confessional verse as a definable poetic. The title of Stephen K. Hoffman's article “Impersonal Personalism: The Making of a Confessional Poetic” (1978) represents a clear attempt to hybridize two previously competing arenas of criticism. Furthermore, Hoffman’s designation appears to avoid, as others have not, the dubious quest for less offensive replacements for Rosenthal’s widely disparaged “confessional poetry.” His argument is this:

[C]onfessional poetry is a phenomenon that synthesizes the inclination to personalism and consciousness building of the nineteenth century with the elaborate masking techniques and objectifications of the twentieth, a phenomenon which, under the veneer of self-absorption unprecedented even among the Romantics, makes notable inroads into myth and archetype, as well as social, political and cultural historiography characteristic of high modernism. (688)
Hoffman’s use of “veneer” in producing this description is of notable import. Used to refer to both the process of inlaying finer support materials in a productive construction of something more sizeable and the superficiality of something that, from a particular perspective maintains the appearance of value and yet is fundamentally without depth, “veneer” appropriately complicates the “personalism” discernable in the confessional poetic. Furthermore, Hoffman’s definition of confessional poetry betrays a meticulous appreciation of the period from which the mode surfaced, drawing together the influences of the problematic “war years” extending from the late 1930s when Delmore Schwartz published his pivotal *In Dreams Begin Responsibilities* (1938), through to the troubled era of the Vietnam war, in which Lowell’s *Notebook* (1970) sits, arguably the last significant confessional work (Hoffman 688). The poetic synthesis described by Hoffman, between that of a masked and almost insidious inclusion of personal detail and a connection, however implicit, to the tumultuous post-war period of the 1950s and 1960s in America is fundamental to the kinds of ruthless self-promotion and self-mythologizing that are detectable in the poetry, correspondence, behaviours, and actions of the poets of the confessional school.
CHAPTER TWO

A NIGHTINGALE’S VOCATION: CONFESSIONAL POETRY AND THE LYRIC

THE OVERHEARD UTTERANCE

Is it the Lyric that most displeaseth?

(Sidney, An Apology for Poetry 118)

The notion of poetic authenticity has divided poets and their readers since Horace’s claim in The Odes to be the first poet of Rome: “Me the first Bard, who urg’d with Sacred Fire, / Tun’d a Greek Measure to a Roman Lyre” (III.30.14-15). After the advent of the confessional school of poetry in the 1950s, and then throughout the later part of the twentieth century, the period in which art-school graduate Hedwig Gorski coined the term “performance poet,” the concept of poetic authenticity has adapted and evolved, yet its precise classification remains as elusive as ever.1 Today, the denotation of lyric poetry brings with it an established body of sound technologies, performance practices, and a set of poetics geared specifically towards interrogating the boundaries, and indeed the possibilities, of sincerity. A description by Peter Middleton illuminates the most commonly held understanding of what poetic authenticity might look and sound like today. He writes: “A person stands alone in front of an audience, holding a text

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1 In the early 1980s, Gorski began broadcasting live poetry by radio from Austin, Texas, with the accompaniment of a jazz band called East of Eden. For an account, see Wheeler 172.
and speaking in an odd voice, too regular to be conversation, too intimate and too lacking in orotundity to be a speech or a lecture, too rough and personal to be theater” (“The Contemporary Poetry Reading” 262). What renders this account valuable is not necessarily its anecdotal function in describing contemporary poetic performance practices, but rather its navigation of the many assumptions that underpin discourses surrounding the concepts of lyric poetry, intimacy, sincerity, persona, privacy, and confession. All strongly linked and yet highly contested sites, these ideas return again and again to the question of authenticity. Is there a way to quantitatively measure poetic authenticity? Do some poetic practices lend themselves more towards the revelation of truth than others? Even if a poet is telling the truth, how can we ever know for certain? Because this movement towards objective, precise measurement is both ill-advised and ultimately impossible, the question must be relinquished in favour of a more productive method of poetics analysis. To turn more specifically to confessional poetry, then, the ideas of sincerity and intimacy have become tethered to the relentless pursuit of biographical fact. However, rather than attempting to quantify the sincerity of confessional verse, an assessment of the dynamic and influential nature of the lyric form provides—at least as a starting point—an explanation for the tendency towards the conflation of poet and persona in assessments of confessional poetry.

Today, the term ‘lyric’ has come to be associated with the words of a song. This connection with musicality is the vestige of an ancient time; the word derives from the Greek lyrikos (“singing to the lyre”), where a lyre would be played to the accompaniment of sung verse. However, although it carries a traditional relation to melody, the lyric—an arrangement that has no sound—is not music. Susan Stewart
posits the perceived audibility of the lyric as such: “[U]nless we are listening to a
spontaneous composition of lyric, we are always recalling sound with only some
regard to an originating auditory experience” (29). Stewart goes on to state that “the
sound recalled in lyric is not abstract, not a succession of tones without prior referents;
rather the sound recalled is the sound of human speech.” Consequently, and because
we can never fully reconstruct the auditory conditions of a poem’s germination, our
recalling of it, whether we intend it or not, will always incorporate some element of
imagination. It is the lyric’s inextricable remnants of song, along with the form’s
inclination towards performance, which necessitate, in almost all accounts of lyric
poetry, an insistence on the presence of a listening, observing ‘other.’

Despite its obscure lineage, the lyric can be defined by a number of consistent
characteristics: it is typified by brevity, promotes the essence of a performance, utilizes
a first-person speaker or persona, and provides an outlet for personal emotion.
Acceptance of these four qualities is common to most lyric theory; however, the lyric
has also undergone dramatic transformation. Various definitions of lyric mirror the
many stages of its evolution. According to Deborah Nelson, its principal
transformation came in the “epistemological and ontological shift that occurred after
the revolutions in France and the United States at the end of the eighteenth century”
(PP xvi). The product of this revolution still predominates today, consisting almost
exclusively of an emphasis on the “meditative” form of lyric, which has “increasingly
[come] to stand in for the lyric as a whole” (Nelson, PP xvi). The solitary, meditative

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2 For the disjunction between structural accounts of prosody and performative accounts, see
Hollander.

3 Or, to quote John Stallworthy, who complicates this idea even further: “A poem is a composition
written for performance by the human voice.” As Stallworthy’s remark suggests, the lyric is always a
written form, however, its fruition arrives only with its oral declaration. See Stallworthy 2028.
figure evoked by Shelley’s depiction of the ‘passerine’ poet in “A Defence of Poetry” demonstrates this unreserved investment in meditation:

A poet is a nightingale, who sits in darkness and sings to cheer its own solitude with sweet sounds; his auditors are as men entranced by the melody of an unseen musician, who feel that they are moved and softened, yet know not whence or why. (512)

Although the passage sustains Nelson’s notion of the lyric poet’s introspection, Shelley’s anthropomorphized nightingale nevertheless reveals one of lyric poetry’s most vexing definitional problems. The description of a speaker (the self-cheering poet) who is paradoxically both unaccompanied and perceived by an entranced group of “auditors,” begs an inescapable question: is the compositional activity of lyric poetry inherently private, or is it public? Certainly, the idea of an “unseen musician” is not without its exponents. In “What is Poetry?” John Stuart Mill presents poetry as an introspective utterance that is not defined by audience. Notably ardent in his observations about the ultimate privacy of lyric poetic expression, Mill defines the nature of this utterance by means of a distinction between poetry and eloquence:

Poetry and eloquence are both alike the expression or uttering forth of feeling. But … we should say that eloquence is heard, poetry is overheard. Eloquence supposes an audience; the peculiarity of poetry appears to us to lie in the poet’s utter unconsciousness of a listener. Poetry is feeling confessing itself to itself, in moments of solitude … Poetry, accordingly, is the
natural fruit of solitude and meditation; eloquence, of intercourse with the world. (12-13)\(^4\)

Northrop Frye went on to modulate Mill’s terms, demarcating what could perhaps be appropriately called ‘the necessity of overhearing.’ Reinforcing the influence of Mill’s description, Frye states that “the basis of generic distinctions in literature appears to be the radical of presentation” and that the lyric is “pre-eminently the utterance that is overheard” (249). Frye further claims that the “lyric poet normally pretends to be talking to himself or to someone else” (249).

W.R. Johnson, who gives three categories for examining lyric pronouns, further complicates discussion of the presence of an overhearing ‘other.’ Emphasising what he calls the “wonderful impossibility” of unanimously defining the lyric, Johnson states a series of designations: the “I-You” poem, in which the poet “addresses or pretends to address his thoughts and feelings to another person”; a second category comprising T.S. Eliot’s meditative poem, in which the poet addresses himself or no one in particular; and finally, “the poem cast as dialogue, dramatic monologue, or straight narrative,” whereby the poet is absent entirely, presenting instead a voice or series of voices without directly interfering in the presentation.\(^5\) Other critics have rejected the relevance of the poet altogether, rendering the intersubjectivity of the poem entirely dependent on a reader’s individual engagement with the text. Herbert Tucker provides a possible explanation for this, arguing that the

\(^4\) For significant responses to Mill’s “overheard utterance,” see W.R. Johnson; Cameron; and Culler, The Pursuit of Signs. For a historical perspective, see Waters 1-17. For important commentaries of the role of “address” in lyric, see Burr; and Keniston 9.

\(^5\) Johnson reads Tertullian’s meditation on the peacock as a reminder of the “problem of lyric or the problem of genre in general.” See W.R. Johnson, The Idea of Lyric 2.
oral convention in poetry is so powerful that we infer a speaking voice even though we are consciously interpreting words on the page. The ‘inference’ espoused by Tucker is elaborated by Jonathan Culler who states that “when we overhear an utterance that engages our attention, what we characteristically do is to imagine or reconstruct a context: identifying a tone of voice, we infer the posture, situation, intention, concerns and attitudes of a speaker” (“The Modern Lyric” 295).

Studies of lyric poetry’s inherent audibility have re-emerged in recent years, recalling the need to privilege voice and sound as key elements of a genre whose traditional definition was cemented in music. As Robert Von Hallberg has noted, “lyric authority is inextricable from its sister act, music: Euterpe, the muse of lyric poetry, needs a flute; Terpsichore, the muse of choral poetry, a lyre. Diverse forms of musicality are attractive to poets, but no poet can afford to tap only lightly the musical resources of language” (Lyric Powers 7). However, while these vacillations point to the important literary and social shifts through which the lyric has journeyed, almost all modern accounts of lyric speech are profoundly influenced by Mill’s conception of the “overheard” utterance. Consequently, the lyric has come to be associated with un-mediation or un-interruption, concepts with which the lyric performers of Ancient Greece were likely unfamiliar.

Charting this evolution from the lyric’s mediated, adjudicated classical antiquity through to the heightened intimacy associated with both confessional and lyric poetry initiates a number of questions concerning not only the motive/s of the poetic speaker, but also the relative preconceptions of the listening subject. Does the poet intend to be overheard or is she ambivalent about the presence of the inquisitive auditor? Does the listener suppose the lyric poet to be sincere, or does he suspend
belief in exchange for the thoughts and confessions of a speaker who acts in character? Is the poet absent from presentation altogether? These questions, along with a host of others, almost always return to the issue of sincerity, a concept that is inherently problematic and problematized even further in confessional poetry. The dynamic, ambiguous, and intrinsically personal nature of the lyric address provides an exemplary site from which a poet may contest the boundaries between public and private, fact and fiction, and challenge even further the already complex notions of sincerity, authenticity, and truth.

**The Speaker’s Sacred Fiction**

Any attempt at delimiting the apparent poetic authenticity of a confessional work compels consideration of the problematic notions of sincerity and truth. The tyranny of the term “confession,” however, has produced in readers and critics a forgoing of the complexity and ultimate significance of these notions in favour of the ruthless pursuit of biographical fact. The confessional poets were acutely aware of the disjunction between biography and literary discourse. In a poem entitled “With Caroline at the Air Terminal” from his 1973 collection, *The Dolphin*, Robert Lowell wrote: “Everything is real until it’s published” (72). Denoting a similar sentiment, in an interview with Barbara Kevles in 1968, Anne Sexton remarked:

> Many of my poems are true, line by line, altering a few facts to get the story at its heart ... Each poem has its own truth ... But then, poetic truth is not necessarily autobiographical. It is truth that goes beyond the immediate self, another life. I don’t adhere to
literal facts all the time; I make them up whenever needed. Concrete examples give a verisimilitude. (NES 103)

Yet despite the prevalence of deliberately equivocal positions such as these, studies of confessional poetry continue to be plagued by reductive readings of the relation between a poet and that poet’s fictional utterances. What is it about confessional poetry, then, that produces this kind of textual interpretation? Surely the attempt by readers to garner unified and cohesive meaning through a methodical synthesis of textual analysis and biographic interpretation goes beyond the mere desire to know facts about respective poets. Furthermore, even readers who have not been privy to the poets’ extra-textual commentary about the uncertainty of their claims to fact still have access to the poems, which are themselves inherently ambiguous about their own poetic authenticity. Perhaps the most effective way, therefore, to approach the various assessments of poetic authenticity in confessional verse is to first explore the central notions with which the pursuit of biographical fact is associated. Moreover, the overlapping of these complex ideas explains to a large extent how the lyric form encourages and facilitates the problematic search for biographical fact in confessional verse.

Although they are frequently used interchangeably, the concepts of truth and sincerity are markedly dissimilar concepts. In regard to sincerity, I would like to suggest that placing the term into the study of poetics instantly distorts any coherent outline we might be able to make of the term. Herbert Read supports this claim, suggesting that the concept of sincerity no longer exists as an aesthetic value but
survives instead as a moral one, and that this is the sense in which we should apply it to confessional writing. Read asserts:

All art is artifice, and therefore no work of art is sincere. Once we become conscious of a feeling and attempt to make a corresponding form, we are engaged in an activity which, far from being sincere, is prepared to moderate the feeling to fit the form. The artist’s feeling for form is stronger than a formless feeling. (18)

Thus for Read, the crafted nature of poetry—or rather, poetry as art—precludes any capacity for sincerity. Even confessional verse, which makes an unconcealed attempt to break free from the stylistically rigid conventions of Modernist poetry, is still confined to a system of poetic tradition and deliberate technique that disallows an absolute sincerity. Furthermore, outside the restraints of Read’s model, the concept of sincerity still carries a problematic denotation. Critics have thus far failed to find an adequate response to the perennial question of, to use Henri Peyre’s terms, “whether the survival of literature is compatible with the pursuit of sincerity” (1). Does sincerity really matter? And, can it be logically measured? A delegitimization of these two questions together with sincerity’s place in poetry overall is espoused by Deborah Forbes who asserts that “statements insisting upon their own honesty must be treated with suspicion” (4). For Forbes, “no statement is made without at least an implied listener, a social context that influences its making; human feelings and perceptions are so fluid and fleeting that it is impossible to give any true static account of them” (4). As Forbes’ account suggests, even the poet who intends to be sincere still faces the distorting effects of language and the disparities of interpretation that inevitably
derive from attempts to secure poetic meaning. Applying the rhetoric of sincerity to confessional poetry specifically, Donald Davie’s reflections in his 1966 article “Sincerity and Poetry” are even more severe than Forbes’ in their denunciation of sincerity’s relevance to poetry. Advocating the “rule” of New Criticism which maintains that “the ‘I’ in a poem is never immediately and directly the poet; that the poet-in-his-poem is always distinct from, and must never be confounded with, the poet-outside-his-poem, the poet as historically recorded between birthdate and date of death,” Davie asserts that the corollary enquiry of “Is the poet sincere?” is “always an impertinent and illegitimate question” (4). For Davie, applying the question of sincerity to the judgement of poetry serves to both undermine poetry’s “hard-won autonomy” and messily compound the public life of the author with his private life, erroneously rendering the “adventitious information of the gossip-columnist” significant in constructing the meaning of what is essentially nothing more than a public utterance. He caustically writes:

And woe betide the poet whose life, when the gossip-columnist-reviewer goes to work on it, does not reveal fornication and adulteries, drug-addictions, alcoholism, and spells in mental homes. “What?” the reviewer exclaims, “when it appears that your poems have cost you so little, when the writing of them has apparently disorganized your life hardly at all, can you expect me to give them as much attention as the poems of Miss X here, whose vocation drove her last week to suicide?” (5)

Arguably the most influential text on the problematic nature of sincerity, Lionel Trilling’s *Sincerity and Authenticity* (1972) crystallizes many of the ideas put forward
by Read, Forbes, and Davie whilst simultaneously, and most importantly, suggesting that the term sincerity is perhaps best not wholly defined. Espousing a classification of sincerity as “the congruence between feeling and avowal,” Trilling repeats the connection Davie makes between the removal of sincerity from critical discourse with the declaration of the primacy of the artist over the person (4). Trilling writes that the “devaluation of sincerity is bound up in an essential although paradoxical way” with the claim that writers “were not persons or selves, they were artists, by which they meant that they were exactly not, in the phrase with which Wordsworth began his definition of the poet, men speaking to men” (5).

To turn to the notion of truth, Louise Gluck’s commentary in “Against Sincerity” reminds us of the similarly problematic nature of the concept for the study of poetry. For Gluck, “in part the tendency to connect the idea of truth with the idea of honesty is a form of anxiety. There is, unfortunately, no test for truth. That is, in part, why artists suffer” (27). So how, then, do we define truth within the study of poetry? And perhaps more importantly, if as Gluck suggests, there is no test for truth, then why bother assessing the notion in the first place? An assessment of truth’s antithesis, or rather its poetic opposite, reveals a great deal about how this concept works in relation to confessional poetics. In A *Glossary of Literary Terms*, M.H. Abrams and Geoffrey Harpham include as a single entry the terms “fiction” and “truth” in order to call attention to the longstanding entanglement of these two terms within the study of literature. In justification of their compound entry, they argue:

Both philosophers and literary critics have concerned themselves with the logical analysis of the types of sentences that constitute a fictional text, and especially with the question of their truth, or
what is sometimes called their “truth-value”—that is, whether, or in just what way, they are subject to the criterion of truth or falsity. (128)

The term “fictional sentences” arose from this somewhat problematic compound entry and has itself endured immense deliberation. In their attempt to delineate the characteristics of a “fictional sentence,” critics fall into one of three groups. First, those who argue for the relative ‘otherworldliness’ of the “fictional sentence,” emphasizing the disjunction between the ‘special world’ created by the author and the ‘real world’ to which the author’s creation is only analogous. Abrams explores the origin of this position in The Mirror and the Lamp, where he notes how the eighteenth-century dismissal of mimesis led to the “replacement of the metaphor of the poem as imitation, a ‘mirror of nature,’ by that of the poem as heterocosm, ‘a second nature’ created by the poet in an act analogous to God’s creation of the world” (272-285). The result of this transformation, argues Abrams, was the separation of “supernatural poetry” entirely from the principle of imitation; that is, from any accountability to the empirical world. By the end of the nineteenth century, this view had become the dominant aesthetic theory, despite a vestigial belief in the connection between the innate order of God’s creation and the order expressed in art. The nineteenth century saw a dramatic dismissal of this correlation, resulting in the overriding view of “the poem as heterocosm” that marks the middle of the twentieth century (Abrams 272). “This is the concept,” states Abrams, “at the heart of much of

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6 For a further discussion of this idea, see Phelan.

7 Also, for Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s nineteenth-century distinction between poetry and science, see the explanation put forward by Engell and Bate in Coleridge’s Biographia Literaria viii.
MERCHANTS OF PATHOS: CHAPTER TWO

the ‘new criticism,’ that poetic statement and poetic truth are utterly diverse from scientific statement and scientific truth, in that a poem is an object-in-itself” (272). This view holds a poem to be “a self-contained universe of discourse” which we cannot require to be true to nature but only “true to itself” (272). Other critics have held to the expression “pseudostatement” in explaining the form taken by fiction. A term invented by the British critic I.A. Richards in _Science and Poetry_ (1926), “pseudostatement” encapsulates Richards’ attempt to determine the unique instance of ‘truth’ detectable in poetry and fiction. Richards differentiates between pseudostatements and referential, scientific language as such:

A pseudostatement is a form of words which is justified entirely by its effect in releasing or organizing our impulses and attitudes … a statement, on the other hand, is justified by its truth, i.e., its correspondence, in a highly technical sense, with the fact to which it points. (60)

Thus, for Richards, the defining feature of a pseudostatement is its connection to emotion which itself—for the purposes of his argument—cannot be ordered “by true statements alone” (60). Although both these theories have provided significant insight into the function of the fiction writer and, indeed, the function of the fiction reader, criticism has for the most part returned to Philip Sidney’s assertion in _An Apology for Poetry_ (1595) that the poet “nothing affirms, and therefore never lieth. For, as I take it, to lie is to affirm that to be true which is false” (123-124). Sidney’s proposal rests on the premise that, as Geoffrey Shepherd neatly summarizes in an introduction to the
text, “the poet is no liar, because he does not affirm. The poet makes no claim that his propositions are true” (72). Both the clarification put forward by Shepherd and the currently acknowledged version of this view suggest the existence of an understanding, implicitly shared between the author and reader of a work of fiction, that only assertions of fact are subject to the standard of truth or falsity to which nonfictional discourse is subject.

An apparent extension of all these ideas exists in the attempt by other theorists to categorize a form of address beyond the single “fictional sentence.” Barbara Herrnstein Smith, who represents the vanguard of this conception, coined the term “natural discourse” to encapsulate “all utterances—trivial or sublime, ill-wrought or eloquent, true or false, scientific or passionate—that can be taken as someone’s saying something, somewhere, sometime, that is, as the verbal acts of real persons on particular occasions in response to particular sets of circumstances” (15). For Smith, the “fictive utterance” can be appropriately applied to all categories of literary work (drama, novels, poems, etc.) since these are all essentially imitations, or fictive representations, of various sorts of nonfictional or “historical” utterance; namely, “natural discourse” (8). Smith’s discussion becomes particularly pertinent to an examination of lyric poetry and, more specifically, the confessional school when she establishes connections between the various genres of literary art and the specific types of discourse they ostensibly represent. A consideration of individual literary genres—for example, dramatic poems, tales, odes, lyrics—and their subsequent stimulus—for example, dialogues, anecdotes, public speeches and private declarations—leads Smith to the conclusion that “lyric poems typically represent personal utterances” (8). What can be deduced from this, therefore, is that since a
poem is a fictional representation of a personal utterance, the specificities with which a reader is likely to be concerned are largely to do with the poem’s author. Jonathan Culler has also noted this connection, stating of Smith’s assertion that the interpretation of a poem becomes, in large measure, “a process of working out, from the textual evidence and from our knowledge of speakers, the nature of the speaker’s attitudes” (The Pursuit of Signs 39). But a poet like Sylvia Plath renders hugely ineffectual such an act of extrapolation. The many utterances presented in her poems, letters, journals, novels, correspondence, and interviews comprise a minefield of inconsistency, “each one contradicting as much as complementing the others, each one no less true for the disparity which relates them and sets them apart” (Rose 4). Jacqueline Rose links Plath’s obsessive questioning of her own subjectivity to the model of indirect representation that Freud held responsible for our efforts to locate ourselves in the acts of language and speech. According to this model, the poet’s utterance can never exist in its entirety because the unconscious only ever grants its speaker a fraction of all the available information. Thus, for Rose, what Plath presents us with is “not only the difference of writing from the person who produces it, but also the division internal to language, the difference of writing from itself” (5).

A reasonable condensation of these ideas might be, then, that poetry—especially lyric poetry—may be defined as that which is permanently fixed between two antipodal functions of language: representation and presentation. This is consistent with the idea explored by Paul de Man in his influential essay on the work of Michael Riffaterre and Hans Robert Jauss. In “Lyrical Voice in Contemporary Theory,” de Man writes: “the principle of intelligibility, in lyric poetry, depends on the phenomenalization of the poetic voice. Our claim to understand a lyric text coincides
with the actualization of a speaking voice, be it (monologically) that of the poet or (dialogically) that of the exchange that takes place between author and reader in the process of comprehension” (55). Although de Man is concerned, in ways comparable to Abrams and Smith, with the fictive tactics essential to the creation of an illusion of voice, he nevertheless prioritizes the aesthetic strategies employed by all lyric poets. “No matter what approach is taken,” he states, “it is essential that the status of the voice not be reduced to a mere figure of speech or play of the letter, for this would deprive it of the attribute of aesthetic presence that determines the hermeneutics of the lyric” (56). Thus a tension seems to pervade almost all lyric theory between the ultimate persuasiveness of the ‘phenomenalized’ poetic voice and the need to appreciate a poem’s formal and crafted aestheticism in order to address its hermeneutics adequately. Or, to return to the definition put forward by Abrams and Harpham, the conundrum involves the reader’s acknowledgement of the need to prevent the powerful ‘oral’ function of the lyric from obscuring its ultimate “truth value.”

The basis upon which readers and critics have fallen victim to this obfuscation is, of course, in the tendency to read lyric poetry biographically. In Persons and Things (2008), Barbara Johnson cites the problem inherent in lyric poetry’s attempt to give access to the poet’s living voice, noting how “the pedagogy of lyric poetry is constantly insisting (and readers are constantly forgetting) that the “I” in a poem should be called the “speaker” or the “persona,” and should not be conflated with the biographical author” (15). Somewhat paradoxically, however, Johnson undermines the poem’s textual presence, noting how “common wisdom says the ‘real’ poem is spoken” (14). “This means,” notes Johnson, “that understanding the poem and
hearing (or overhearing) the voice go together, and that the poem should not ultimately be up to something that cannot be assumed by a voice, a living speaker, a human mind” (14).

As convincing—and at times confusing—as many of these conjectures are, there remains the dilemma of discrete reader reception, an ultimately impenetrable field of interpretation that exists entirely within the mind of each individual who encounters a confessional text. Thus, as a final consideration of why readers of confessional poetry have tended to, again and again, conflate poet with persona, I would suggest that the simple restoration of the first person, “I,” to the center of the poem is perhaps the most influential factor in the process of reception. The placement of the speaking “I” at the core of the poem means that, first, the poet’s private self becomes both the speaker and the subject; second, that the poem begins to address the reader directly, and finally, that the persona developed by the poem becomes involved in an act of intimacy, as if the reader is known to the speaking “I.” The following lines, taken from a poem by each of the four confessional with whom this study is concerned, illustrate the influence of the unswerving, dominant, and ultimately illusory first person “I”:

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.
(Robert Lowell, “Skunk Hour” Life Studies 62)

I have gone out, a possessed witch,
haunting the black air, braver at night;
dreaming evil, I have done my hitch
(Anne Sexton, “Her Kind” To Bedlam and Part Way Back 21)

I am, outside. Incredible panic rules.
People are blowing and beating each other without mercy.
Drinks are boiling. Iced
drinks are boiling.
(John Berryman, “Dream Song 46” The Dream Songs 50)

It is more natural to me, lying down.
Then the sky and I are in open conversation,
And I shall be useful when I lie down finally:
Then the trees may touch me for once, and the flowers have
time for me.
(Sylvia Plath, “I Am Vertical” Crossing the Water 12)

The textual presence on the page of the speaking “I” is, of course, commanding;
peppered through lines of verse, it stands out and demands an attentive auditor. Yet
there is also something arcane, perhaps even metaphysical, about the influence of the
intimate first-person speaker. To use Deborah Nelson’s explication of the effect of the
speaking “I,” it can be seen that the lyric is the poetic form in which “we witness the
exhilaration—and perhaps also the terror—of autonomy and self-sovereignty,” an
authorial act which induces in us a sense of fascination akin to that which possesses
the star-struck fan (PP xvi). Thus, in the act of being mesmerised by the confessing “I,”
we implicitly develop a hunger for veraciousness; consciously or unconsciously, we
desire to connect the real, living poet with his or her aesthetic and ideological sacred
fiction.
In an interview with David Dillon in 1977, American poet Richard Hugo remarked: “Voice is usually something that grows out of stance. It has to do with how strong a person’s urge is to reject the self and to create another self in its place” (110). Voice, as almost every definition of the term attests, is the speaker of the poem. However, the marvel of voice, even in relation to personal or confessional poetry, is that it does not necessarily equate with the poet. Elaborating upon the idea of a necessary ‘rejection of self,’ Hugo notes that a number of theories regarding poetic composition, such as “Keats’s informing and filling another body, Eliot’s idea of escaping the personality, Valéry’s idea of creating a superior self, Yeats’s notion of the mask, [and] Auden’s idea of becoming someone else for the duration of the poem,” have at their core “an assumption that the self as found, as given, is inadequate and has to be rejected” (111). Numerous critics have emphasized the rejection of self as a necessary prerequisite for the creation of poetic voice, noting the way in which the use of an “I” persona necessarily results in the translation of “the sincere into the partially authentic” (Maio 3). This is not, of course, to suggest that the denial of a direct connection between voice and poet constitutes a subscription to the New Critical doctrine of impersonality, a dictum T.S. Eliot explains in “Tradition and the Individual Talent” as such:

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. But, of course, only those who have personality
and emotions know what it means to want to escape from these things. (21)

Rather, voice—the captivating “I” of the poem—makes possible the distinction between personal poets such as the confessional quartet of Lowell, Berryman, Sexton, and Plath, and the writers of the New Critical generation, including Eliot himself at the vanguard together with American poet Allen Tate and fellow writers and critics John Crowe Ransom, Cleanth Brooks, and Robert Penn Warren.8 The basis for this comparison is the same as that which is responsible for much of the taint of the confessional label, namely the attempt by critics and readers to measure the essentially unmeasurable — “the personal element” informing the poem.9

Recently, Lesley Wheeler has given new complexity to this contention. She notes that, while the principal understanding of voice is in connection to poetry’s reliance on sound, “voice is also a metaphor for originality, personality, and the illusion of authorial presence within printed poetry” (3). At the core of Wheeler’s enquiry is the question of why American poetry after Word War II has continued to be preoccupied with the idea of voice, despite the term’s continually problematic definition. For Wheeler, voice’s “fascinating excess of connotations” not only marks significant challenges to how lyric poetry is defined, but also accounts for the new complications of voice for “twentieth and twenty-first century poets and their audiences because of changing sound technologies and their profound influence on

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8 For the most important texts on the New Critical perspective, see Ransom, “Criticism. Inc.” and The New Criticism; Wimsatt and Beardsley, “The Intentional Fallacy” and “The Affective Fallacy”; Warren, “Pure and Impure Poetry”; Tate, “Miss Emily and the Bibliographer”; and Brooks, The Well Wrought Urn.

9 For an elaboration of this paradox, see Mills, R.J., “Creation’s Very Self” in Cry of the Human 1-47.
U.S. culture” (2). The 1920s and 1930s in America saw poetry’s aural reception undergo dramatic transformation as the nation experienced unprecedented developments in acoustical technologies, including the booming popularity of radio. As Wheeler suggests, the popularization of radio significantly influenced the soundscape of American culture, acting, in part, as a precursor to the notion of poetry reading as we now understand it. This transformation hinged largely on radio’s modification of the relationship between the notions of personal and impersonal; or rather, I would like to suggest, modifications to what readers and listeners of poetry held to be the meaning of “presence.”

In examining what could be meant by “presence,” Steve McCaffery has distinguished between two scenarios for voice in poetry. The first, derived from the thinking of Jacques Derrida, presents voice as a “primal identity, culturally empowered to define the property of person” (163). For McCaffery, “[t]his is a phenomenological voice that serves in its self evidence as the unquestionable guarantee of presence – when heard and understood through its communication of intelligible sounds this voice is named conscience” (163). The other voice—a form that is by turns heterological and rebellious—requires its central drive to be “persistently away from presence” (163). Such is the division between McCaffery’s two ‘voices’ that the first, with its total absence of life outside its own utterance, represents more closely the voice of a poem; while the second, characterized by an

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10 Furthermore, Wheeler divides voice’s connotations into two useful categories: textual voices, which refers to voice as a metaphor employed by poets and critics in and about works in print, and voiced texts, which include poems recited, read aloud, performed by authors, actors, students, and others.

11 For Derrida’s original explication of this, see Of Grammatology 20.
appetite for escapism, sits at the opposite end of the spectrum to pure “presence.” The artistic and technological development of a new ‘poetics of presence’ coincided suggestively with the transpositional nature of the confessional poet’s ‘live confession,’ working, as Paula Salvio suggests, “to enlist the sororial and fraternal sympathies of the listener so as to exonerate the sinner and, in turn, efface the differences between them” (30). Anne Sexton often appealed to the intimacy inherent in the live-reading process, openly admitting to a self-reflexive failure to “leave sin alone”\(^\text{12}\) in her use of the stage to seek “an appeal before a trial of angels.”\(^\text{13}\) An increased emphasis on the presence of the poet, as opposed to demonstrations of vocal dexterity or mastery of content, not only acted to subvert the high modernist insistence on impersonality, it worked to create the illusion of an authentic authorial event. As Wheeler suggests, the poet subsumed the poetry, as the emphasis on personality became a subconscious attempt to combat the grasp that new distancing technologies had attained over American culture (12). This phenomenon—that is, the substitution of a literal, historical self for a literary self as the voice of the poem—necessitates, in the case of the confessional poets, an appreciation that voiced texts are equally significant as textual voices.

However, unlike the printed poem, which in most instances brings with it the implicit veneration ascribed to published books, the live poetry reading does not always present the most convenient object of study. Such is the nature of live reading that its atmosphere, an ultimately intangible experience, becomes equally influential—if not more influential—than the content of the poetry being enunciated.

\(^{12}\) See, NES 105.

\(^{13}\) Taken from Sexton’s Lecture notes at Colgate University, HRHRC. Sexton held the Crawshaw Chair in Literature at Colgate University from May-June, 1972. Quoted in Salvio 30.
Factors such as the clothing worn by the event’s speakers, the length and dimensions of the room in which the reading is held, and an endless series of other significant yet paradoxically incalculable factors become a guiding factor in audiences’ responses to a reading. Thus, although the live reading can be recorded, either audibly and/or visually, it is an innately ephemeral event. Nevertheless, as suggested by the various anecdotes, correspondence, biographical material, literary criticism, media reports, interviews, and personal reflections catalogued in this study, poetry performance practices from the confessionals still afford a valuable site of investigation.  

Recently Charles Bernstein has directed criticism at the audible aspects of modern poetry, asking in his edited collection, *Close Listening* (1998), What can the poetry reading do that other live performance media cannot? (11). Somewhat ironically for Bernstein, this question calls attention not to the things that the poetry reading achieves, but rather, to its lack of compelling performativity. Comparing the spectacle of the poetry reading with Jerzy Grotowski’s “poor theatre,” Bernstein establishes a case for the “profoundly anti-performative nature of the poetry reading,” noting its lack of “spectacle, drama, and dynamic range” (10). The observation echoes that of Wheeler in so far as it sets the unembellished intimacy of the poetry reading against the hype and sophistication of the mass mediatised, distant, televised world of mid twentieth-century publicity (Wheeler 12). The anti-spectaclized poetry reading, it can be argued, existed in performative contrast to the heightened and glamorized

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14 A number of recent books have done much to render the context of modern poetry audible. For important works, see Severin; Middleton, *Distant Reading*; Rubin; Morris; Bernstein; and Schweighauser. For an assessment of audible contexts in earlier periods, see Picker; and Prins. Finally, see Stewart; and Kahn and Whitehead for considerations of radio, spoken poetry, and the avant-garde.

15 For Grotowski’s concept of “poor theatre,” see Grotowski 15-25.
immediacy of twentieth-century America’s booming public culture. Consequently, the voice of the poet came to stand in for a theatricality that was perceived to be largely absent. Bernstein describes the mechanics of the anti-expressivist poetry reading as such:

Explicit value is placed almost exclusively on the acoustic production of a single unaccompanied speaking voice, with all other theatrical elements being placed, in most cases, out of frame. The solo voice so starkly framed can come to seem virtually disembodied in an uncanny, even hypnotic way. (10)

The exclusively framed “solo voice” described here operates within the same framework as the voices that exist through radio. Jed Rasula’s distinction between “listening” and “hearing” is useful in forging this connection. For Rasula, to hear is a “physiological accident” while the act of listening requires a “physiological posture culturally disposed” (233). Thus, the precise act of tuning into a radio station is directly analogous to the “attunement” required in the work of listening, a process in which the listener must locate “that space along the spectrum with the least noise, the greatest clarity of sound, what’s called ‘definition’” (Rasula 233).16 Ultimately, then, the lack of visual spectacle—a dynamic which, for theatre, creates the illusion of a distance between viewer and viewed—works to transform ever so delicately the connection between performer and spectator; sound has the effect of connecting

16 However, Rasula notes a paradox inherent in this analogy. He offers the likely scenario whereby “the static has reached parity with the signal, and that you are yourself the source of much of what you understand to be happening ‘out there’ … To hear is simply to receive and register what’s given; to listen is to correct and displace it. To listen is to simultaneously attend to what is present and what is absent.” See Rasula 233.
speaker and listener. Or, as Peter Middleton has suggested in “The Contemporary Poetry Reading,” “the listener is made aware of the illocutionary force of the utterances in ways that cannot always be signalled by written linguistic markers” (268). Thus, while speaking the words aloud, the reader of poetry instigates a transient act of ownership; for the duration of the reading, the words “become words to which the reader lends a life” (Middleton 268). It stands to reason, then, that when a poem exists as a heard performance, its meaning differs from that of the traditional printed form. For Bernstein, this process has powerful transcendental consequences insofar as “rather than looking at the poem—at the words on a page—we may enter into it, perhaps get lost, perhaps to lose ourselves, our (nonmetrical) ‘footing’ with one another” (11). Sexton expertly perceived this latent acoustical potential in her own work, adopting in her 1966 collection Live or Die, a loose versification geared specifically towards the artistic goal of performance poetry. In poems such as “Flee on Your Donkey,” “Consorting with Angels,” and “Wanting to Die,” she appears to have partly relinquished her allegiance to the formal craft inherited from her progenitor, Robert Lowell, focusing instead on poetry’s richness as a spoken art.

17 Middleton’s support for this stance connects the “ordinary act of speaking in conversation” with the “individuality of the speaker,” the first being an index for the latter. The physical presence of the speaker, therefore, acts as their “warrant” for their ownership of and relevance to “a specific body, point of view, and history.” All of these things are, of course, amplified when the speaker of the poem is the author, in which instance the poetry reading acts doubly, as presentation of the poem and an overt presentation of authorship. Or, for Middleton, “the reader of poetry performs authorship.” See Middleton 268.

18 Many reviewers of Live or Die were quick to note an apparent looseness of versification in the work, suggesting the absence in of formal effects that were evident in Sexton’s earlier poetry as evidence of unprecedented self-absorption. See Carruth, who notes of the collection: “Some poems wander a little; they are unstructured, they start up, flag, then start again, or slip into references too private for us to understand” 698. See also, Boyers 63; and Dickey 133-134.

19 See Kaplan 272, who notes: “Inasmuch as the poetry is written for the ear, the pattern of the verse on the page is not at all important. Radio poets, therefore, have developed what may be called
Diane Middlebrook recalls this development, noting how, “increasingly, the medium [Sexton] worked in was the voice, and she strove to transfer feeling into word association as her fingers played over the typewriter keys, setting words to emotional rhythms” (AS 272). The result of Sexton’s ‘behind the scenes’ work saw the compositional act of writing poetry become a stage-oriented pursuit, in which the lyric poem could be conceived of chiefly as monologue.20 Or, as Middlebrook has speculated, “what nonplussed poetry reviewers when they encountered [the poems] between the covers of a book might not have surprised them in a published script for performance, with voice cues and pauses added” (AS 273). Charles Bernstein has scripted the influential quality of the vocalized poem literally, stating:

PERformance readily allows FOR stressing (“promoting”) unstressed syllables, including prepositions, articles, and conjunctions – creating syncopated rhythms, which, once heard are then carried over by readers into their own reading of the text. (15)

Like a detailed script for poetic performance, Bernstein’s account stresses the powerful intentionality of the acoustical poetry act. This practice has not, however, been endorsed by all critics. Michel Deguy, for instance, finds the preparedness of the spoken poem vexing, expressing an aversion to the “technical conditions involved” in the “possible staging of an ‘act’” (71). For Deguy, maintaining the integrity of the written poem is indispensable, requiring a separation of the original text from the

illuminated or poetic prose, a form which appears as prose on paper but strikes the ear with the tension and cadence of poetry.”

20 Further evidence of this exists in the success of Sexton’s chamber rock group ‘Her Kind,’ which added music to her poetry. See Middlebook, AS 286-287; 303-306; 319; 330; and 345.
“festival moment, the regulated, preconceived moment of a vociferal act, itself operating within the field of a whole complex of technological apparatus … the microphone, the recording session, the sound conditions for the audience on a given evening” (71).

The “technological apparatus” denounced by Deguy forms the very foundation of the intimacy charade practiced by the confessional poets. The array of illusionary tactics available to the live reading process allowed poets to shrewdly waive the formalist approach that had dominated readings in previous decades. In its place appeared a performance-oriented form of reading; or, to borrow again from Bernstein, the poetry reading became “a style of acting that frames performance in terms of characters, personality, setting, gesture, development, or drama, even though these may be extrinsic to the text at hand” (11). Anne Sexton’s biographers have written convincingly about her inclination towards “acting” her live poetry readings through the application of a preselected, rehearsed routine. Of Sexton’s performance at poetry readings, Middlebrook notes:

On stage she projected a commanding, confident, glamorous physical presence; from her husky voice issued a hint of vulnerability, reinforced throughout the reading by rehearsed breaks and catches. (AS 273)

Sexton was notably aware of the publicity potential of a well-crafted reading, boasting of the repeated showings of her NET poetry-reading film throughout 1967, “Channel

21 For further discussion, see Wojahn 270.
2 is rerunning me like an advertisement.””22 Anecdotes such as this, and indeed there are a great many, point not only to the classification of the poetry reading as its own genre,23 but also to the tensions which have long pervaded the concept of poetic voice. Somewhat paradoxically, then, the poetry reading acts as a spectacle in which the poet’s spoken voice competes with the written poetic voice that he or she has previously constructed; that is, “the ‘acting’ takes precedence over letting the words speak for themselves or worse, eloquence compromises, not to say eclipses, the ragged music of the poem” (Bernstein 11). There are a number of—notably vehement—critiques against audience-oriented performance techniques.24 Perhaps the strongest, John Frederick Nims’ invocation of Anthony Trollope’s *Barchester Towers*, likens the poetry reading to the greatest “hardship … inflicted on mankind.”25 He states:

No one but a visiting poet can revel in platitudes, truisms, and untruisms, and yet receive, as his undisputed privilege, the same respectful demeanour as though words of impassioned eloquence, or persuasive logic, fell from his lips … [Y]ou must excuse me, my insufficient young poet, if I yawn over your imperfect sentences, your repeated phrases, your false pathos, your drawlings and denouncings, your humming and hawing, your oh-ing and ah-ing.26

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22 Anne Sexton to Mrs Willard P. Fuller, 31 May 1967, Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center at the University of Texas in Austin. Quoted in Middlebrook, *AS* 273.

23 For an examination of the poet’s public talk as a genre, see Perelman 201-202.

24 Denise Levertov offers an important rejection of these ideas, suggesting that a poet can in no way corrupt the reading of a poem by adding personality to it because the poet’s personality and the personality presented in the poem are the same. Thus, the poet’s voice will “clarify, not distort.” See Levertov 53.

25 Quoted in Hall 71.

26 Ibid. For Trollope’s original text, see *Barchester Towers* 46.
Similarly, Donald Hall has written that the experience of language performed “is frequently violated,” and that the institution of the poetry reading is dangerous for both the poet and the poetry (76).\textsuperscript{27} Critiques such as those of Nims and Hall derive, in almost all cases, from the poetry readings’ often ‘vaudevillian’\textsuperscript{28} quality, symptomatic of which is a poet’s metamorphosis from writer to rehearsed actor. Thus emerges the disconcerting situation in which “writers have become well known not because of the value of their work, but because they’re good performers,” able to use “methods of delivery and gimmickry that owe more to show-biz than to literature” (Wojahn 268). Indeed, if cunningly executed “gimmickry” enhances the poet’s capacity to increase the poetry reading’s entertainment value, then the seemingly premeditated poetic bacchanalia practiced by the confessionalists places them squarely in the middle of the charade. David Wojahn’s account of his adolescent experience at an American poetry reading evokes precisely the kinds of wild pretence that marked readings by the confessional poets. He writes:

The year, I think, is 1969, and I am waiting in the theatre of the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis to hear a poet I’ve never heard of, Robert Lowell, read from his work to an audience that’s filled the small auditorium to capacity … The wait for the reading to begin is interminable … But finally, after someone’s lengthy and hyperbolic introduction, Lowell stands at the podium and begins.

\textsuperscript{27} John Glassco makes a similar argument for a large poetry reading held in Toronto in 1968. He laments the “naïve listener’s belief that he is getting ‘closer’ to a poem by hearing it from the poet himself” and that performance distorts the experience and meaning of a poem because “the educated inward ear can do more with the rhythms, vowels, syncopations and stresses of any poem than an amateur human voice can hope to do.” See Glassco 57-58.

\textsuperscript{28} Donald Justice called poetry readings “a kind of vaudeville.” Quoted in Wojahn 268.
I remember little about the reading. I remember that Lowell seemed almost too tall for the podium, and read with his shoulders slightly hunched, his suit rumpled. His demeanour seemed magisterial and dishevelled, the way I’d expect a poet’s to be. At some point in the reading a man a few rows ahead of me, bespectacled, bearded, and obviously drunk, stood up during one of Lowell’s introductions to a poem and shouted, “‘Quaker Graveyard in Nantucket,’ Cal! Read ‘The Quaker Graveyard in Nantucket’!” The ushers descended upon the man—whom I later found out was another poet, John Berryman—and remained standing nearby him for the rest of the reading. (265)

The account reveals not only the discernable cross-collaboration and mutual provocation practiced by the confessionals but also the dynamic that has, to date, been much more difficult to chart: their penchant, as a cohort, for a reckless lifestyle.

Although lyric poetry’s intrinsic audibility has been comprehensively surveyed in periods prior to the confessional movement,29 it is worth examining briefly the influence that sound technologies have had in the period following the twentieth century. Furthermore, many contemporary invocations of poetry’s “voice” represent a heightening of the conflation of poet and persona and perhaps, therefore, an example of confessional poetry’s illusion of biographical intimacy at its most extreme. The 2001 publication entitled Poetry Speaks: Hear Great Poets Read Their Work from Tennyson to Plath, facilitated the mass market’s first ever exposure to an anthology of work that was as dedicated to the spoken word as it was to the written text. For each

29 Yopie Prins’ “Voice Inverse” is an important instance of this. Centring his work on the numerous configurations of voice in Victorian poetry, Prins notes the way in which “Victorian poems circulated as ‘acoustic devices’ for the mediation of voice, preceding and perhaps even predicting the sound reproduction technologies that emerged in the course of the nineteenth century.” See Prins 44.
poet featured, the compendium provides an audio track of poetry readings, biographical information, recording details and, where possible, photographs. Charles Osgood, who narrates the anthology’s audio component, provides an introduction to the CD:

We think of poetry as words on a page. But spoken poetry, which preceded written language, is where a poem comes alive. The rhythms, inflections, and intonations in the voice of a poet create an immediate impact. The poet’s voice gives power, shape, and passion to the poet’s words.

Osgood’s insistence on the affecting quality of the poet’s “voice” overtly attempts to connect the reader of the verse, the poet, with the “the poet’s words.” The overall effect, therefore, of productions like *Poetry Speaks* is the marked preservation of the poet’s ‘humanness.’ Poetic texts previously isolated, or rendered marginal by scholarship may, through the medium of mechanical sound reproduction, undergo a commercial, and perhaps critical, renaissance. Such was the sentiment conveyed by a sound collection released just over a decade ago. In 2003, the *New York Times* ran an article headlined “In the Master’s Voice, Old Books Live Again,” which reviewed *The Spoken Word*, a two-compact disk set of voice recordings by various English authors. The caption read: “Authors as actors: Virginia Woolf, A.A. Milne and Alfred Lord Tennyson … are among the writers who can be heard reading from their works, sometimes dramatically, on CD’s from the British Library.” The review notes how, “in the age of talk shows and national publicity tours, it’s easy to see that every writer has

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30 Quoted in Prins 48.
at least two voices — the one on the page and the one that comes out of his mouth” (James 2003). Indeed, the selling point for a collection as performatively ‘authentic’ as *The Spoken Word* resides almost entirely in its seeming ability to demystify—for both readers and listeners—the notion of poetic voice. “Writers who seemed beyond our reach,” writes the reviewer, “are suddenly in our ears, revealing the often startling distance between their voices and the ones we image while reading” (James 41). Such an idea anticipates Wheeler, who notes how the proliferation of acoustic technologies may have “prompted the poetry reading as we now understand it: the poet herself reading aloud or reciting a series of her own works. Oral performers of the very best skill and talent became audible to everyone over mass media, while presence was a rarer commodity” (12).

Epitomized in the glamorization of the sketchy recordings by Robert Browning and Alfred Tennyson, such CD collections have been criticised for their tendency to regard authors’ recordings as authoritative. In another review of *The Spoken Word*, Bernard Richards employs the term “phonographic fallacy” to warn against the often faux authoritativeness of writers’ recordings. Although Richards concedes that readers may find invaluable validation in “hearing writers, especially poets, performing their own works” since one is able to hear “where the stresses go on words” and “how they [the poets] thought the words should sound,” he remains critical of the fact that recordings of writers are often taken as the definitive voicing of the text (12–13). This was, for the most part, the intention of Thomas A. Edison when called the phonograph in 1878 an invention “which brings its possibilities within the range of the speculative imaginations of all thinking people, as well as to the almost universal applicability of the foundation principle, namely, the gathering up and
retaining of sounds hitherto fugitive, and their reproduction at will” (527). Mark Twain differed, siding instead with Richards on the ultimate unreliability of the recorded text. After attempting in 1891 to dictate his novel *The American Claimant* into a phonograph, Twain became adamant that the device was a “corrupting demon” that could “mock and betray” authors just as easily as it might “delight and affirm those recording their voice.” ³¹ Here Twain was no doubt referring to the phonograph’s obvious inadequacies, many of which would be eliminated in the gramophone, its ultimate successor and device-of-choice by modernists such as T.S. Eliot, Virginia Woolf and James Joyce. These criticisms also shed light on a much wider anxiety, generated by not only the phonograph but by recorded sound in general. As John M. Picker has suggested, “endless repetition of a disembodied voice had the potential to distort even the most benign speech into a monotonous rant that sounded diabolical, perhaps even terrifying” (769). Picker even recalls the account of an audience member who, upon hearing one of the first demonstrations of the machine famously remarked: “It sounds more like the devil every time” (769). ³²

Victorian audiences no doubt had difficulty processing the concept of recorded sound. Not only were they bewildered by the discovery that an abstract metaphor (voice) could be relayed by technology, they were troubled by the unprecedented mechanization of the gap between speaker and voice, a theatrical act that had previously been performed only by the ventriloquist. For Victorian listeners, what was previously understood to be an inextricable connection between voice and

³¹ Quoted in Picker 769.

³² From Robert Conot’s *A Streak of Luck* (1979) 109. Steven Connor’s *Dumbstruck* is a valuable text in thinking about various responses to the “disembodied voice.” Connor notes that the “rapid naturalization of the technologically mediated voice” produced “a loss of a kind, namely the loss of the voice.” See Connor 411.
identity unravelled with exposure to the newly mobile, phonographic reincarnation of voice. Both recorders and listeners of voice were preoccupied with the menacing potential of the ‘playback process’ that was itself characterized by the inherent risk of improper application. Common to Victorian, twentieth-century, and contemporary audiences of recorded voice, however, is a factor inherent in all sound reception that illuminates—and, I would go too far as to say almost entirely explains—the insidious conflation of the poet and his or her work. The misappropriation of Alfred Lord Tennyson’s 1890 wax cylinder recording of his poem “The Charge of the Light Brigade” predates the foremost problem inherent to not only the phonograph, but also the gramophone, the radio, and later, contemporary digital sound technology. Published in London’s *Examiner* on 9 December 1854, Tennyson’s poem was originally written as a retelling of British involvement in the Crimean War and was later recorded in an attempt to raise funds for those afflicted by the conflict. While the written poem may have been fundamental in immortalizing British bravery at a time when the nation’s citizens were overtly opposed to the war effort, the account, as heard through the crackling transmission of the author’s voice, produced in listeners a strikingly different result. Whether he intended it or not, Tennyson’s recording brought about a radical shift in the listener’s focus: from the powerful content of the poem to that of the author reading it aloud. Those exposed to the barely comprehensible recording were stunned, not so much by its powerful reflection on the Crimean War but rather by the novelty of hearing Tennyson’s voice reciting his own words, a marvel Picker describes as an “illumination of the way technology can influence technique in the work of a pivotal literary figure” (770). In the case of one of Robert Browning’s 1889 recitations for the newly invented phonograph, the poet was
so ironically distracted by the possibilities of recorded sounds that he was unable to complete the act of dictation effectively, bewailing:

I am terribly sorry, but I can’t remember me [sic] own verses: but one thing which I shall remember all my life is, the astonishing sensation produced upon me by your wonderful invention.\textsuperscript{33}

There is, then, an unfortunate illogicality in the utility of recorded voice, namely the canonization of the medium (and, in most cases, the author) over the message. This contradiction was further heightened with the advent of radio. Unlike the near-incomprehensible acoustics conveyed by the phonograph and gramophone, the radio established a new benchmark for recording technologies in America, improving radically upon the standard of noise reproduction available in the late nineteenth century. As Lesley Wheeler, Eric Barnouw, Susan Smulyan and others document, however, network radio in twentieth-century America was also marked by an astonishing capacity for illusion. Using the career and works of American lyrical poet Edna St. Vincent Millay as her example, Wheeler deconstructs the illusionary paradox inherent in the similarity of broadcast poetry to print media. Essentially, although the speaking body is entirely absent, radio distributes a reconstituted version of presence through voice. For Wheeler, the “Air” comprises a “medium for uncanny meetings; the broadcast voice enables an unlikely intimacy despite physical distance” (39). Millay’s innovations, which helped shape both live and broadcast readings in the 1920s and 1930s, recognized that radio possesses, “an inherent likeness to the printed

\textsuperscript{33} For the misquotation, see Woolford and Karlin 239; and Hancher and Moore 25-26.
lyric poem—a medium similarly haunted by impossible presence” (Wheeler 39). Poets such as Millay were able to capitalize on the intimacy inherent in radio-voiced poetry, scaling down their trained voices for domestic spaces and seeking, as Wheeler suggests, “a tone that mediated between publicity and privacy” (47).

But what, then, is so problematic about the sensation of presence produced by the broadcast poem? Radio listeners, of course, are acutely aware of the absence of the speaker’s actual physical body and, in many instances, are vigilant to recall the recorded nature of voicings of poetry over the radio. Yet the illusion of intimacy produced by the broadcast text has long been recognized as a troubling and complicated phenomenon. David Goodman’s book *Radio’s Civic Ambition* (2011) stresses radio’s capacity to breach and obscure public/private divisions. Goodman notes how “radio allowed outside voices to enter the home, to speak to people as they relaxed” (91). Thus, radio’s unique ability to speak to a mass audience, “but in small groups, in living rooms all over the nation,” distorted public understandings of intimacy, bringing with it anxieties over the infiltrating effects of propaganda, commercial and political agendas and, perhaps most importantly, the concept of sincerity as a whole (Goodman D 91).

It was not only poets, however, who embraced

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34 Roland Barthes’ notion of the absent author represents a crucial turning point in this conception. In “The Death of the Author” (1977), Barthes promotes the separation of a literary work from its author, in order to interpret it properly. Methods of criticism that rely on components of an author’s identity, according to Barthes, are empirically flawed, insofar as they allow an author’s context and personal attitudes to dictate the meaning of the work. For Barthes: “To give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing.” See Barthes 147.

35 Charles Warner, for example, strongly attests to this, declaring: “Radio is arguably the most intimate medium.” See Warner 389.

36 Wheeler also notes this phenomenon, noting how “network radio shuts down the instant feedback loop between poet and audience, but it can reach many more people at a greater physical distance than live readings.” See Wheeler 41.
the ways in which radio was capable of manufacturing intimate immediacy in the face of distance and the explicit intervention of machinery. As Susan Smulyan documents in *Selling Radio* (1994), advertisers were quick to utilize the persuasiveness inherent in radio’s intimacy, making use of a personal or intimate voice to sell products through the establishment of manufactured veracity. To this end, promoters of radio advertising applied rhetoric that rendered broadcasting “fabulous” and “fantastic,” speaking of “radio’s ‘invisible’ audience; how radio magically allowed the advertiser to become a guest in a consumer’s home” (Smulyan 77). Sincerity, therefore, became a selling-tool, in terms of both the rhetoric applied to advertised consumer goods and the intimate and persuasive nature of the broadcast voice. Thus, while at first, the worlds of the confessional poem and the broadcast-advertised product may seem antithetical, the meticulous and intentionally fabricated sincerity present in both creates a golden opportunity for poets to further their façade of biographical authenticity via radio. Historian Jackson Lears provides an analysis of twentieth-century marketing methodology that reflects with startling accuracy the system of confessional poetics borne out by this thesis. Lears remarks:

Sincerity required that the advertisement be seamless, that its artifice be concealed, that it seem straightforward and honest. For advertising men, as for other “impression managers,” truth was insufficient and sometimes irrelevant. The important job was, in the words of the leading trade journal Printers Ink, “making the Truth ‘Sound True.’” Sincerity had become at once a moral

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37 For further connections between truth, advertising, intimacy, and radio, see Marchland 108-110; and Pope 218-220.
The complex task of making a poem ‘sound true’ was something with which the confessional poets were openly preoccupied. Robert Lowell, in an interview in 1961 with Frederick Seidel, echoes Lears’ terms when he says of his poetic process: “I’ve invented facts and changed things, and the whole balance of the poem was something invented. So there’s a lot of artistry … in the poems” (71). The confessional poem, then, when broadcast over the radio’s deceptively intimate airways, represents an instance of heightened illusion: the “artistry” of the poem itself combines with the artistry inherent in the audible intimacy of broadcasting. Or as Herman Hettinger has noted of radio: “It is a dramatic medium, not only because of its intimacy and directness, but because it represented communication by the oldest means known — the human voice” (3). Contrasting the textual with the audible, Hettinger comments of radio: “It possesses all the emotional appeal and persuasiveness of voice. This gives it a power which cold print cannot equal” (3). As these and other declarations of radio’s persuasive and intimate nature suggest, broadcasting technology not only substantiated a revolution in conceptions of the relationship between public and private life, it also facilitated a greater sensitivity toward sound and intonation, allowing poets to heighten even further their claims to poetic truthfulness.39

Milton A. Kaplan summarizes neatly the apparent outcome of a unique synthesis between the increasingly commercial function of radio in twentieth-

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38 Also, for an assessment of the ‘Truth in Advertising Movement’ of the Progressive era, see Pope 226.

39 See Goodman. N 93; and Matheson 62.
century America and the intentionally crafted intimacy of lyric poetry’s use of the medium. “Almost imperceptibly,” he states, “a body of literature is developing that promises to restore to the poet the dignity and the power of the ancient bard” (270). Despite writing no less than a decade before the ground-breaking 1959 publication of both Robert Lowell’s *Life Studies* and W.D. Snodgrass’s *Heart’s Needle*, Kaplan’s observations predict the revolutionary trend that radio facilitated for lyric poetry, “a renaissance” that granted the poet “an audience he had despaired of ever reaching” (270). Kaplan’s rationalization of the popularity of radio-broadcast poetry predates that of many modern and contemporary theorists of acoustical technologies.  

He writes:

> It may seem strange that an important body of literature for so popular a medium as radio is written in poetry, a form that any English teacher or publisher can testify is notoriously unpopular. Yet poetry is a natural form for the radio because intrinsically it has the aural appeal needed for effective broadcasting. Its compression and power of suggestion express much in few words, a quality urgently needed in radio where no time must be wasted. (271)

In a piece for *Poetry* magazine, published roughly ten years after Kaplan’s reflections on the usefulness of radio to lyric verse, Sidney Corman shrewdly celebrated the advantages of the twentieth-century marriage of the worlds of radio

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40 For examples, see Morris; Kittler; and Kahn and Whitehead. See also, Neil Strauss’s *Radiotext(e)*, which explores the theoretical implications of radio as a socially-involved text.
and poetry. “What few poets seem to realize,” he noted, “is that radio is their best potential outlet these days. It puts the stress rightly on the spoken word, tests the imagination of writers and listener alike, revives the need for the oral-aural commitment in verse, and permits the largest possible audience to experience the poem” (212). Corman, who experimented extensively with oral poetry and made a steady habit of recording improvised poems on tape, succumbed to an overwhelming desire in his mid-twenties to “foment a poetic community” (Faas & Trombacco 70). The result of his ambition was the creation of This is Poetry, a series of weekly broadcasts from WMEX (1510kc.) in Boston. This unparalleled program, which ran successfully for over three years, welcomed the fifteen-minute reading of modern verse by writers such as Richard Eberhart, John Crowe Ransom, Katherine Hoskins, Theodore Roethke, Allan Curnow, Richard Wilbur, John Ciardi and Allan Curnow. In addition to forging a series of friendships that would later form the foundation of modern American verse, This is Poetry implicitly introduced the newly technologized American public to the vital power of poetry’s oral qualities. “It is amazing, too, to me,” stated Corman of the reading of poetry over the radio, “how much comes clear in the final delivery, that necessary interpretation of the whole and its nuances, that is otherwise often overlooked” (213). What emerges from these and other instances of poetry’s audible existence is a detectable fissure in the act of making the poem ‘sound true,’ to repeat the concept espoused by Lears. Compositionally, the confessional poets were able to make their poems sound factual; however, as the various examples employed here attest, they were also capable of a much more insidious, literal sounding: the poem departed from the page.
CHAPTER THREE

HUMBOLDT’S GRAND PLAN: CONFESSIONAL POETRY’S ENGAGEMENT WITH PUBLICITY

PRIVACY, CONFESSIONAL POETRY, AND POPULAR CULTURE

Liz Taylor is getting Eddie Fisher away from Debbie Reynolds who appears cherubic, round-faced, wronged, in pincurls and house robe – Mike Todd barely cold. How odd these events affect one so. Why? Analogies?

(Plath, The Journals of Sylvia Plath 420)

The confessional poets have never been thought of as overtly political. Any college student is likely to recall that Sylvia Plath committed suicide, Anne Sexton wrote about her daughters, and perhaps that John Berryman’s The Dream Songs is about a character named Henry. However, common to all confessional verse is the insistence on an autobiographical first person, whose opposition to conformity is intricately bound up with the tumultuous cold-war years of twentieth-century America, a period marked by technological growth, tensions over international security, the emergence of psychoanalysis as a discourse of post-war distress, and anticommunism as the pervasive doctrine of American social and artistic life. There was also the problem of surveillance, which manifested not only in America’s psychosocial reorganization of the division between public and private but also in a nationwide declaration of the sanctity—and superiority—of the family home. The ideological rhetoric of cold-
war politics focused on the ‘home’ and the ‘family,’ insisting that “the ‘model’ home, with a male breadwinner and a full-time female homemaker, adorned with a wide array of consumer goods, represented the essence of American freedom” (Tyler May 16). Parallel to this hypothetical were real and significant changes in the consumption patterns of American households. In the decade following World War II, the household appliance and furnishing purchases of American families climbed by over 200 per cent, reflecting the United States’ position as the world’s most productive economy.¹ Inspired not only by advertising but also by a general national ethos that claimed “More is Better,” wage-earning families embraced suburban life, the majority purchasing expensive domestic appliances for the very first time. Perhaps most importantly, the 1950s saw the rise of the housewife as America’s primary consumer, a figure whose purchasing power reflected the period between 1945 and 1960 when “gross annual advertising expenditures quadrupled” and items such as “automobiles replaced packaged goods and cigarettes as the most heavily advertised product” (Sivulka 240).² The famous “Kitchen Debate” between Vice-President Richard Nixon and Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev exemplifies the intense obsession with high-quality consumer goods and the powerful domestic ideologies that underpinned post-war America’s social and political approach to the atomic age.³ Ultimately, the Cold War rescripted America’s understanding of the domestic realm, emphasizing its significance as a secure space free from the

¹ See Denison and Jean-Pierre; Patterson 312; Coontz 24-25; Cohen “From Town to Shopping Center”; Seligman 108; and Nickles.

² For an examination of the rhetoric, images, and mythologies of American advertising in relation to Plath, see Bryant.

³ For a summary of this ‘debate,’ see Tyler May16-18.
intrusions into private life that had become synonymous with threats to America’s
democratic liberty. Yet, as the themes of confessional poetry suggest, the family
home could also be a menacing channel for, and source of, personal expression.
Speaking from within the home, confessional poets inverted America’s obsession
with domestic surveillance, revealing the paradoxical and often frightening double-
bind generated by an overemphasis on security. Sylvia Plath’s “A Secret” mocks the
illusionary power of secrecy, sarcastically questioning the status of information
whose worth exists only as far as it is publicly inaccessible. She writes:

A secret! A secret!
How superior.
You are blue and huge, a traffic policeman,
Holding up one palm — (Ariel 21)

The outlandishly blue, phantasmagorical policeman depicted in this first stanza sets
the poem’s tone as a peculiarly hallucinatory, dreamlike witch-hunt for the truth,
subscribing to a style of Plath’s poems that, as Rosenthal describes, “make a weirdly
incantatory black magic against unspecified persons and situations” (The New Poets
88). In ways comparable to many of Plath’s later poems, “A Secret” interrogates the
methods and motives of a controlled, dystopian world, calling attention to the
nightmarish reality of comprehensive administration and governance. It becomes
unclear, as the confession unfolds, who is repenting, as the identity of the ‘I’ assumes
perhaps greater secrecy than the ‘secret’ itself. Yet despite this blurring of accuser and
penitent, guilty and guiltless, the vehemence of the confession remains intact.
Confession becomes bodily, an act of adornment, as the secret is transcribed through a machine that prints directly onto the skin of the accused:

A difference between us?
I have one eye, you have two.
The secret is stamped on you,
Faint, undulant watermark.

Will it show in the black detector?
Will it come out
Wavery, indelible, true
Through the African giraffe in its Edeny greenery,

The Moroccan hippopotamus?
They stare from a square, stiff frill.
They are for export,
One a fool, the other a fool. (Ariel 21)

As Sarah Churchwell has noted, “‘A Secret’ is, implicitly, about revealing secrets, about, as it were, publishing them: the eponymous secret, in its very nature, seeks disclosure” (106-107). It is difficult of course to repudiate the biographical quality of the poem; it is almost certainly motivated in part by Ted Hughes’s affair with Assia Wevill, a traumatic period in Plath’s life around which several of her poems revolve. Biographical context aside, however, “A Secret” remains one of Plath’s most ambiguous and cryptic poems; the lines, “Will it show in the black detector? / Will it come out” are a teasing reminder of the difficulty of locating the poem’s ultimate meaning. Yet, despite the “morbid secretiveness” that prevents a clear and immediate reading of the poem, when placed alongside Plath’s other surveillance-focused poetry
“A Secret” presents an intriguing reflection upon its turbulent twentieth-century context (Rosenthal, “Poets of the Dangerous Way” 61). Written in 1962, poems such as “The Other,” “Eavesdropper,” “Words Heard, by Accident over the Phone,” “The Detective,” “The Courage of Shutting-Up,” “The Jailer,” and “The Secret” not only illustrate Plath’s personal preoccupation with surveillance, they also reflect the hugely controversial stance that confessional poetry took in relation to post-World War II government policy. Of this intriguing group of later poems, Christina Britzolakis remarks:

These ‘weird’ scenarios recycle key motifs of Gothic popular culture, drawing on cinematic as well as literary texts, to probe the nightmarish underside of the Cold War suburban dream of normality. Their satirical target, like that of many contemporary thrillers and horror films, is the stifling family-centred and ethnocentric conformity of the 1950s small-town idyll. (143)

“The Secret” takes the purified, surreal rhetoric of the ‘ideal’ suburban existence, with its model couple, perfect home and stash of hyper-commercial women’s magazines, and mockingly distorts it towards a horrifying outcome. The African animals printed over a child’s bed-quilt come to life and become terrified: “They stare from a square, stiff frill. / They are for export.” Nothing in the once sacred family home is either safe or competent: “One a fool, the other a fool” (Ariel 21).

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4 Deborah Nelson also notes the way in which many of these poems place an emphasis on the body as a means of investigating the rhetoric of privacy. Through their incorporation of policemen, surgeons, judges, priests, and psychoanalysts, these poems place confession within the context of external pressures on individual privacy, an anxiety intimately tied to post-WWII government policy. See Nelson, “Beyond Privacy” 284.
The dreamlike policeman that haunts “The Secret” appears again in “The Other,” where Plath links surveillance and confession, emphasizing that the former must always result in the latter. “The Other” reveals the outpouring of speculation, or suspicion, that surfaces in resistance to being watched. Plath writes:

Smilingly, blue lightning
Assumes, like a meathook, the burden of his parts.

The police love you, you confess everything.
Bright hair, shoe-black, old plastic, (Ariel 41)

The poem presents a succession of surreal yet associated images: interrogation, assumption, crime, detection, surveillance and confession, intertwining the roles of interrogator and interrogated so as to distort the division between the two. As Deborah Nelson has written, in response to the surveillance-fuelled fury of “The Other,” “there may be no crime to confess to … but it does not matter; everything—“bright hair, shoe-black, old plastic”—constitutes evidence of a crime, everything contributes to the confession” (PP 81). Reverting to the role of ‘watched’ as opposed to ‘watching,’ Plath questions:

Is my life so intriguing?
Is it for this you widen your eye-rings?

Is it for this the air motes depart?
They are not air motes, they are corpuscles. (Ariel 41)
These lines, though characteristically sardonic, reveal the terrorizing results of over-surveillance, where “eye-rings” spy and “motes depart,” yet they know not what for or why; surveillance for surveillance’s sake becomes the overriding principle. This sentiment also resonates in “Eavesdropper,” where the government-led initiative of ‘good-neighbourliness’ becomes a gruesome act of undercover work. Beneath the surveillance of the “big blue eye” the citizens of “Eavesdropper” become

cow people
Trundling their udders home
To the electric milker, the wifey, the big blue eye

(Collected Poems 261)

In Plath’s dystopian narrative of surveillance, the all-powerful eye of the observer “melts the skin” of its people, turning them into “gray tallow, from bone and bone.” The effect is nauseating, the poem’s “schizophrenic perspective … producing a quasi-Brechtian alienation effect, confronting the reading with a world locked into the frozen grimace of cliché” (Britzolakis 145).

Anne Sexton’s poetry, though perhaps less obviously sensitive to surveillance, treads a similar path to Plath’s work in terms of its resistance to the rhetoric of America’s idealized suburban home. In Sexton’s verse, the institution of the home is rendered a paradoxical space, incapable of security due to the fallibility of mass-produced privacy, yet not ever entirely public in its own right. In Sexton’s poetry, the home is always conceived of as ‘misrepresented’ by the cold-war political propaganda that advertised it as the pinnacle of American democratic confidence. Poems such as “Housewife,” “Self in 1958,” “Man and Wife: to Speke of Woe that Is in Marriage,”
“For John Who Begs Me Not to Enquire Further,” “Live,” and “Unknown Girl in the Maternity Ward” figure both the ultimate impossibility of privacy and the various myths that plague the concept of ‘the suburban.’ One of Sexton’s shorter poems, “Housewife,” transforms the woman, literally, into a house, marking a direct connection between the invasion of domestic security and a raid upon personal, bodily privacy. The fusing of “house” and “wife” in the poem’s title leads to the house becoming a living, breathing woman:

Some women marry houses.
It’s another kind of skin; it has a heart,
a mouth, a liver and bowel movements.
The walls are permanent and pink.
See how she sits on her knees all day,
faithfully washing herself down.
Men enter by force, drawn back like Jonah
into their fleshy mothers.
A woman is her mother.
That’s the main thing. (All My Pretty Ones 48)

The ‘house’ depicted in the poem, while accessible by the public—“Men enter by force”—is also a form of prison: “See how she sits on her knees all day, / faithfully washing herself down.” The home’s caretaker, the woman who paradoxically is also the home, is both protected and exploited by the “permanent and pink” walls of her own suburban space. Nelson summarizes this contention, noting how “this disconnection of the woman from public discourse was one of the results of marking the threshold of the home as the border between public and private and then

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5 Deborah Nelson’s discussion of “Housewife” is perhaps the most insightful to date. See PP96.
idealizing privacy” (PP 98). Ultimately—and in so far as my reading of “Housewife” renders it, at least partially, satirical—Sexton’s poem works to belittle the entire concept of nation-wide internal security. The incestuous undertone, marked by a disturbing image of sexual engagement between a man, his wife and mother, coupled with the removal of the housewife’s personal and domestic autonomy—“A woman is her mother”—reduces the home to a mere playpen, a juvenile resting-place where mothers and their children are deprived of their privacy by a fleetingly invasive, omnipresent “Jonah” (Nelson, PP96-97).

As all these poems illustrate, Plath and Sexton wrote about the home from within the home, developing a formula that marks the most characteristic confessional poems, namely the location of “the pressure in family life, specifically in the relations of parents and children” (Middlebrook, WWCP 635). Importantly, this preoccupation with confessional poetry reflected a much wider socio-political anxiety, one perhaps best expressed by J. Edgar Hoover in a speech to new graduates at St. Johns University in Brooklyn in 1942 where he stated: “The home is the first line of defense of our Democracy … When the home is destroyed, everything in our civilization crashes to its doom” (555). Hoover’s speech, aptly entitled “A Nation’s Call to Duty: Preserve the American Home,” summarized the intense focus on security that marked the American government’s post-war effort to identify and remove communists from American public life.6 Three years later, under the leadership of Hoover, the FBI established the Custodial Detention Index, a list of

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6 Fred J. Cook’s The FBI Nobody Knows (1964) was a best-selling account of Hoover and the FBI, and a controversial attempt to link debates over widespread surveillance in America with cold-war anticommunism.
Merchant of Pathos: Chapter Three

those to be arrested and detained in the event of an attack by the Soviet Union. Above all else, Hoover believed that the key to national security lay in the institution of the family, the inexorable foundation of which was the family home, epitomizing American culture’s insistence on privacy.

There was, however, another revolution occurring alongside America’s adoption of the home as an ideological site of refuge. Interests in privacy were not only confined to the political investment in the home as an emblem of democratic liberty. The nationwide psychosocial experimentation with and exposure to the rhetoric of intimacy also figured a dramatic overhaul in America’s understanding of the boundaries of privacy. The concept of ‘confession’ was central to this demand, so much so that the term endured significant ontological shifts alongside the social and political movements of the cold-war period. In the years immediately preceding the emergence of confessional poetry as a recognized form, Senator Joseph McCarthy’s publicized insistence on communist infiltration into the State Department ascribed to the word “confession” a powerful political significance, linking “insurgent, inadequate, or deviant sexuality with Communism” (Britzolakis 150). By the second half of the twentieth century, writing in defense of privacy had become widespread. The more venerated texts of the period insisted on the autonomy of the self as a regulator of privacy; the individual should only confess on his or her terms. At the commencement of the 1950s almost no literature existed, either popular or academic, about privacy as either a political doctrine or cultural ideology. However, the emergence of Samuel Dash’s The Eavesdroppers in 1959 set the precedent for what

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7 For Hoover’s description of this index, see Gentry 213.

8 See Nelson, PP xiv; and Inness.
would later become a surge of texts that addressed privacy in sociological terms as a topic requiring both national and personal consideration. Listed sequentially, the titles of the texts that followed read like a well-put-together anti-communist propaganda pamphlet: Robert Kennedy’s *The Enemy Within* (1960); Morris Ernst’s *Privacy: The Right to Be Let Alone* (1962); Myron Brenton’s *The Privacy Invaders* (1964); Fred Cook’s *The FBI Nobody Knows* (1964); Alan Westin’s *Privacy and Freedom* (1967); and Robert Ellis Smith’s *Privacy: How to Protect What’s Left of It* (1979). All published within the space of only two decades, these books represent only a snapshot of the nation’s sudden and intense focus on the ominous nature of America’s new surveillance society, adhering to a general and frightening consensus that “the loss of privacy necessarily implies the surrender of freedom” (Kasper 74). At the vanguard of twentieth-century literary reflections upon cold-war internal security was Vance Packard, whose collection of popular texts reveal a career geared specifically towards awakening the American public to the various invasions, big and small, that were inexorably linked to cold war anticommunism.⁹

An assessment of this anxiety-fuelled period, however, is incomplete without reference to the powerful and pervasive effect of America’s booming technologies. The post-war surge in the nation’s technology industries can be most conveniently charted along two axes: the corporate realm and popular culture. William Doreski links the corporatization of modes of communication in 1950s America with the growth of new forms of media, noting how by the middle of the twentieth century “public discourse … belong[ed] entirely to the mass media, particularly electronic

media, and would include only the voices of those who could penetrate or manipulate a genre of discourse that thrives on overcommunication” (75). What connects the seemingly disjunct worlds of corporations and popular culture is the particularly American phenomenon of advertising, a force that found its vocation, especially during the cold-war period, in the dramatic growth of television. The arrival of regular commercial television network programming in America by the early 1950s played a significant role in dissolving the tensions between public and private life that had become a serious national preoccupation. In her assessment of television’s post-world war two political motivations, Lynn Spigel notes how “as a medium that promised to bring the world inside the home, television played a key role in mediating the relationship between public and private spheres” (“White Flight” 50). Marketed as a new domestic device that would strengthen family ties among, predominantly, white middle-class families, television acted to propagate its large-scale agenda of goods-advertising while maintaining the illusion of social and cultural intimacy; the emergence of the term “family room” in the post-war period eponymously illustrates the ideology which aligned household spaces with family togetherness (Spigel, Make Room for TV 39). In this sense, television not only acted to marshal public opposition to communism during the cold war, it also helped to mobilize the onset of consumer society, often through a productive synthesis of familiar, ‘everyday’ domesticity with advertising and politically-motivated material. In “What Was Confessional Poetry?,”

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10 On this point also see Fusfeld 2-4

11 For a discussion of television’s relation to cold-war politics, see MacDonald; Shain; and, Barnouw, Tube of Plenty 112, 213.

12 Stuart Ewen’s Captains of Consciousness (1976) provides an important assessment of the arrival of television entertainment and consumerism in American life after Word War II.
Diane Middlebrook identifies a link between programs that gained mass audiences and those which presented comic representations of the exigencies of family life. “Their plots,” notes Middlebrook of shows such as *The Honeymooners*, *I Love Lucy* and *Father Knows Best*, “deployed extreme stereotypes of the American Mom in the home … [l]ike confessional poetry, the fifties sit-com was a showcase for anxiety about what a later age would label ‘gender maladjustment’: women farcically pushing male dominance to the point of collapse, until put back in their place” (647). Of the gender dynamic in *I Love Lucy*, for example, Thomas Doherty notes how “[i]n episode after episode, Lucy’s will to power deflated Ricky’s faux machismo. No wonder feminist critics have embraced *I Love Lucy* as a concave window into the blinkered options of the 1950s female” (49). Or, as Stuart Ewen has suggested of the connections between 1950s mass consumption and shows such as *Honeymooners*, in these ‘working-class’ comedies, “were it not for the middle-class-minded wives—loyal consumers—the working men could hardly make it through the day” (209). As these examples suggest, the arrival of “confessional poetry” coincided serendipitously with the popularization of television in America. Such an agreement was intensified by the growing interest in confession more generally, contributing to publicists’ realization that “the more intimate a star’s confession, the more widely his or her image could be disseminated” (Kendall 38).

John Berryman’s poetry conflates many of these tensions, presenting an example of confessional poetry’s inclination towards the creation of a deliberately confused, yet cynical and reflective persona whose engagement with the mechanisms
of post-war American society is both riddled with an arcane sense of vulnerability yet able to capitalize on his surroundings. “Dream Song 66,” for example, exemplifies Berryman’s investment in the media-circuit. The poem presents thoughts as a slippery meditation on the acoustical immediacy of the media by lucidly cataloguing the major news events of the week alongside an intimate internal dialogue. “A Buddhist, doused in the street, serenely burned,” jerks his way syntactically into place beside:

The Secretary of State for War,
winking it over, screwed a redhaired whore.
Monsignor Capovilla mourned. What a week.
A journalism doggy took a leak

against absconding coon. (The Dream Songs 73)

The poem’s abrupt apposition of news events mimics the expeditious arrangement of actual news broadcasting, in which a medley of information is assembled towards a dual function: part education, part entertainment. Following the poem’s heightened news broadcast comes a poignant reinforcement of the shattering ambivalence that permeates much of Berryman’s work. Turning from an explication of the week’s key events, the poet questions:

How feel a fellow then when he arrive
in fame but lost? but affable, top-shelf.
Quelle sad semaine.
He hardly know his selving. (‘that a man’)
Henry grew hot, got laid, felt bad, survived
(‘should always reproach himself’. (The Dream Songs 73)
“Dream Song 66” places the protagonist’s (Henry’s) uncertainty about the status of his own fame inside the churning publicity circuit that facilitated its construction. Henry, a gregarious philanderer who ‘grows hot, gets laid, feels bad, and survives,’ is also a remorseful “fellow … when he arrive[s] in fame but lost.” Berryman’s own troubled life, expressed through a voice that was “by turns nerve-racked and sportive” and “an amalgam, first of other poets but later of [his] various selves” mirrors the emotional discordance detectable in Henry (Ellmann and O’Clair 910).

As these examples illustrate, television, as both a symbolic device—the public inside the private home—and a literal mechanism—the ‘box’ around which the American family could bond—both scripted and participated in post-war understandings of privacy. Similarly, the home, as the Cold War’s most symbolically important channel for creating an ethos of national security, was fundamental in outlining the boundaries of privacy in the tumultuous years following World War II. However, despite sharing an equivalent investment in tensions between public and private, confessional poetry was able to resist and invert public assumptions about the sanctity of the home. By doing so, poets such as Plath, Sexton, Lowell and Berryman were able to engage closely with and eventually undermine the foundations of cold-war discourse constructed out of privacy. The “sphere of psychosocial formation” that existed in the middle-class home’s “bedrooms, bathroom, staircases, and kitchens” provided a foundation from which the confessionals could participate in “the concerns with social hygiene that inflected popular culture” (Middlebrook, WWCP 647).
In poetic response to these tensions, Robert Lowell’s poetry operates at perhaps the most intriguing junction of all the confessionalists. As Adam Beardsworth has suggested, despite Lowell’s distinctive “insular, even narcissistic aesthetic,” his key confessional poems reveal that “he sought expression of atomic anxiety through the figure of the abject pathological self” in so far as “his subjective autobiographic style allowed him to express an implicit dissent that evaded the surveillance of increasingly repressive state policies” (96-97). Simultaneously, Lowell’s poetry situates its wider cultural crises inside the framework of his own family, “consistently viewing [experience] as neither merely personal, nor merely history” (Hoffman D. 132). The “I” of his poetry, therefore, negotiates an alluring status that is situated halfway between addressing the anxieties and concerns of a post-war American collective consciousness and appealing to the manufactured intimacy that characterizes confessional poetry. In “Memories of West Street and Lepke” Lowell presents a domestic lifestyle that is both sedated and anxious, characterized by morbid infantilization, as the poem’s speaker studies his experience as a conscientious objector during World War II:

Only teaching on Tuesdays, book-worming
in pajamas fresh from the washer each morning,
I hog a whole house on Boston’s
‘hardly passionate Marlborough Street’,
where even the man
scavenging filth in the back alley trash cans,
has two children, a beach wagon, a helpmate,
and is a ‘young Republican’.
I have a nine month’s daughter,
young enough to be my granddaughter.
Like the sun she rises in her flame-flamingo infants’ wear.

These are the tranquillized Fifties,
and I am forty. (Life Studies 57)

This passage is arguably the nucleus of Life Studies and, at a stretch, it perhaps forms the nucleus of Lowell’s career. The opening of the poem—a sequence William Doreski has described as “a kind of post-war L’Allegro”—contrasts the idealized representative American with the social and political shortcomings of his own affluent, mid-century reality (76). A blurring of the boundaries between public and private comes to realization in, of all things, Lowell’s contrast of pajamas. The speaker’s pajamas, “fresh from the washer each morning” appear absurd, pathetic alongside the rising “flame-flamingo” garment exhibited by his daughter, “young enough to be [a] granddaughter.” Here, Lowell conflates an assessment of the self-deprecat ing ethos of an individual grasping for vitality in a disconcerting, maladjusted world, with the blithe liveliness of a child. Similarly, the calm, social confidence and access to leisure afforded by “book-worming” and “whole house” hogging are simultaneously numbing, the speaker conceding a state of tranquilization identical to that of his era.

Unlike the scores of early critics who connected Life Studies inextricably with Lowell, reducing the poems, as Daniel G. Hoffman did, to a mere study of Lowell’s “own family,” Richard Fein’s assessment of the poet connects the poems of Life Studies, first and foremost, to the social and political chaos of the 1950s (130). Of the state of national life revealed in “Memories of West Street and Lepke,” Fein notes:
At the end of the poem, we come across the mentally tough slogan “agonizing reappraisal,” a phrase that during the tenure of Secretary of State John Foster Dulles in the Eisenhower years of mental vapidity was used to describe a supposedly painful rethinking of American foreign policy. In employing the phrase himself, Lowell not only indicates how *Life Studies* grew out of the atmosphere of the 1950s, but uses his own plight to rescue the phrase from its fate as a political cliché. At the same time, he ambiguously connects himself to the deceptive language of the time. (*Robert Lowell* 61)

The ‘ambiguity’ described by Fein situates Lowell’s poems, especially those written during the Eisenhower years, on the fringes of satire, from where he consistently parodies and subverts cold-war discourse yet circumvents political accountability through the guise of personal confession. “Fall 1961,” Lowell’s foremost poem of the Kennedy years, blurs public discourse with the intricacies of family life in order to appropriate the political rhetoric surrounding the tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union over above-ground nuclear explosions during November 1961. Contextually, the poem was situated amidst one of the greatest outpourings of print media hyperbole experienced throughout the cold-war period, yet its poetic outlook is individual and reflexive. Ironically, it delivers a far more disturbing depiction of the threat of nuclear warfare than any journalistic endeavour:

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13 For further commentary on this point, see Fein “Family and History in Life Studies” 273.

14 Lowell was a keen supporter of Kennedy. For the specificities of this support, see Alvarez, “A Talk with Robert Lowell” 99-108; and Axelrod.

15 Throughout 1961, the majority of *New York Times* headlines were concerned with the resumption of nuclear testing, rendering the issue both prolific and heightened in the gaze of most Americans.
Back and forth, back and forth
goes the tock, tock, tock
of the orange, bland, ambassadorial
face of the moon
on the grandfather clock.

All autumn, the chafe and jar
of nuclear war;
we have talked our extinction to death.
I swim like a minnow
behind my studio window.

Our end drifts nearer,
the moon lifts,
radiant with terror.
The state
is a diver under a glass bell.

A father’s no shield
for his child.
We are like a lot of wild
spiders crying together,
but without tears. *(For The Union Dead 11)*

The speaker, paddling back and forth “like a minnow” behind the glass of his private
studio, imitates the “state,” which similarly hovers inside its glass covering, able to see
out yet compelled by force to stay in. The poem’s powerfully dissenting tone requires
little elaboration. The danger-seeking state, submerged under a glass bell, is held
fundamentally responsible for the risk of nuclear drift; the line “our end drifts near”
plays into an anxious and obsessive public discourse about the dangers of nuclear
explosion. Set in the months following the Bay of Pigs invasion, the famous U-2 incident, the start of the Space Race, widespread anxiety over the assumed “missile gap,” and a global nuclear arms race, “Fall 1961” deliberately exploits an already menacing public anxiety about the possibility of imminent annihilation.16

Yet Lowell’s political dissent falls under the rubric of confessional poetry and thus neatly evades literary censorship. Careful to overlap public rhetoric with the language of domestic, private life, the poem mocks the language of America’s wartime victory narrative through the obscuring lens of an abject, self-deprecating father figure: “A father’s no shield / for his child.” Significantly, the poem concludes with lines that caused outrage amongst many readers when the poem was published. Lowell’s assertion: “We are like a lot of wild / spiders crying together, / but without tears” provides one of the most disturbing images of post-war America, the lines suggesting a state of histrionics in which the nation, whilst never actually under direct threat of nuclear attack, reacted as though it were. Furthermore, as Josh Schneiderman points out, the spider metaphor is also important in and of itself. Spiders are solitary creatures. The image parodies the illusion of America as an impenetrable cohesive force, presenting the nation instead as “an indistinguishable mass of preterits,” a “confused swarm of crawling insects too terrified to emote,” joined only by the perceived threat of nuclear destruction (Schneiderman 69; Sarwar 126). Yet for all the subversive weight behind these seemingly methodically crafted lines, the spider image derives not from public discourse or from the poet’s personal aesthetic but rather from domestic speech: the lines are direct quotations from

16 For an account of how these events were depicted on network television, see Barnouw, Tube of Plenty 290-298. Or, for a general account of cold-war tensions as depicted on television, see Kackman.
Lowell’s four-year-old daughter and effortlessly interlaced into the politically-charged rhetoric of the poem.

CONFESSION SELLS: THE ART OF SELF-PROMOTION

Our business is everybody’s business, should anybody wish to make it so.

(Malcolm, The Silent Woman 8)

I have used the first section of this chapter to establish a case for the social, political and historical uniqueness of the period in which the confessional poets wrote. However, the assertion that confessional poetry acts to blur the distinction between poet and persona also requires an assessment of the ways in which the confessional poets as public figures actively and reflexively engaged with their distinctive twentieth-century environment. Chapter One explored the role of the poetry itself in this interaction, yet there is also a need to turn attention to the performance and conduct of the confessional poets as ‘people’; or more precisely, their self-promotion off the page.

At the vanguard of confessional poetry’s engagement with publicity was John Berryman who persistently sketched explicit connections between the intimacy of the confessional poem and the promotional quality inherent in public forms of verse. Although he was not as hotly pursued by fans and critics as Plath and Sexton were, or as celebrated as Robert Lowell and W.D. Snodgrass, Berryman demonstrated a keen insight into the increasingly mediatized reputation of the poet in post-war American
society. In particular he was acutely aware of the poet’s role in transfiguring the previously obscure poetic voice towards promulgation.

In an interview in 1970 for the *Writers at Work* series, Berryman summarizes his impression of the artist’s vocation, stating: “The artist is extremely lucky who is presented with the worst possible ordeal which will not actually kill him. At that point, he’s in business” (322). Although the assertion validates the lifestyle choices of many of Berryman’s fellow confessional poets, his own life story does not quite match its premise. Nevertheless, the poet’s tumultuous life symbolized the recklessness that has become synonymous with the twentieth-century confessional poet. The elegist of his generation of fellow poet-teachers, Berryman exhausted his faculties on ambition, alcohol, drugs and depression, making himself over into what Gerald Dawe has described as a “talismanic figure, representative of a literary culture that in the decade following his death also passed away” (74). Dawe argues for the contemporaneity of the confessional enterprise, suggesting that Berryman and his fellow poets perhaps have more in common with today’s ‘popular culture’ than would have seemed possible ten or fifteen years ago. In his 1975 Pulitzer Prize winning *roman à clef* novel, *Humboldt’s Gift*, Saul Bellow—a close friend of both John Berryman and fellow confessional poet Delmore Schwartz—uses the role of the poet to critique an increasingly commoditized mid-century American culture. Anticipating the wider cultural links built by America between celebrity and the tragic deaths of middle-aged poets, Bellow employs a distinction between the careers of two writers, Von

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17 Berryman killed himself on the morning of January 7, 1972 by jumping from the Washington Avenue Bridge in Minneapolis, Minnesota onto the bank of the Mississippi River.
Humboldt Fleisher and Charlie Citrine, the former a version of Bellow himself. In contrast with the commercial success of Citrine, Humboldt dies tragically, wearied by his attempt to edify American society through art. Charlie Citrine appreciates the significance of the protagonist’s death, stating emphatically:

*The Times* was much stirred by Humboldt’s death and gave him a double-column spaced. The photograph was large. For after all Humboldt did what poets in crass America are supposed to do … He plowed himself under. Okay. So did Edgar Allan Poe, picked out of the Baltimore gutter … And poor John Berryman jumping from a bridge. For some reason this awfulness is peculiarly appreciated by business and technological America. The country is proud of its dead poets. (117-118)

Both sufferers of alcoholism and mental illness, particularly towards the end of their lives, Berryman and Schwartz are evoked in the “talismanic” posthumous fame that Bellow affords Humboldt. Sylvia Plath is also conjured here, her unexpected, dramatic death resulted in an unprecedented fetishizing of the connection between celebrity, publicity, and poetry.

Attempts to explain the source of this fetishizing, for the most part, have tended to cling to the biographical particulars of the poets around whom the fascination has accrued. The experiences of both critics and confessional poets provide illuminating evidence of this. Critic Lawrence Dessner chronicles his personal

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18 Or, for a comparison between Bellow and Lowell, see Gallagher.

19 See Stevenson’s “Plath, Sylvia, Bishop, Elizabeth and the Romantic Iconography of the Mind” where Stevenson links Plath’s hysteria to that of an entire American generation, focusing on the tragic end of her life, and the subsequent romanticisation of it.
entanglement in a “putative confusion of fact with fiction,” professing his place among the admiring readers of Sexton who were “following her work as it appeared in eight slender volumes” and “could not help but follow as well the story of her life” (135). Confirming his place in the slippery overlap between fan and critic, Dessner notes how, in the aftermath of this spectatorship, “we [Sexton’s fans] comforted ourselves with the one plump volume of poems and the lovingly edited Letters, both with their newly public revelations of the private life. It was not—it is not—easy to separate the facts from the fictions, the person from the poetry” (135). Denise Levertov has also reflected on this trend, declaring in an essay on Anne Sexton: “if the public is greedy, the critics, at their worst, are positively ghoulish, or at the least, irresponsible” (57). The remark relays Levertov’s indignation at the audacity of a local columnist who, in a memorial eulogy, drew a direct link between Sexton’s art and her “pain,” writing of the poet:

The manner of her death is at once frightening and fascinating to those who responded to her poetry, sharing as they do many of the same fears and insecurities she articulated so well. Her death awakens those fears and insecurities, the way some of her poems did, it raises them up from where they hide, buried by ordinary, everyday things. (57)

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20 Levertov justifies her enraged response to this glorification, stating: “It is irresponsible because it is a statement made without qualification or development in a context of praise, and without, therefore, helping readers to see (as I suppose the writer herself does not see) that to raise our fears and insecurities into consciousness in order to confront them, to deal with them, is good; but that if the pain is confused with art itself, then people at the receiving end of a poem describing a pain and insecurity they share are not really brought to confront and deal with their problems, but are instead led into a false acceptance of them as signs or precursors of art, marks of kingship with the admired artist, symptoms of what used to be called ‘the artistic temperament.’” See Levertov 57.
The peculiar fusion of poet, critic, and fan detectable in the anecdotes of Dessner and Levertov reverberates in the many accounts by Anne Sexton of the highly participatory nature of her poetry readings and the subsequent devotedness of her fans. Of a poetry reading at the 92nd Street Y in New York, Sexton notes: “I had a temperature of 104 and bad bronchitis, a man yelled up from the audience as I was speaking, ‘Whatever you do, Annie, baby, we’re with you.” Of another reading at the Hatch Shell in Boston, Sexton recalls an instance in which an adoring fan screamed out, “long live Anne Sexton” (NES 35).

Such anecdotes tend to subdue the conscious role played by poets in this process of celebritization, focusing instead on the omnipotent capacity of celebrity culture to impose new and shifting labels upon the artist. There is, however, a case to be argued for the reverse of this interaction. In addition to the influence that celebrity culture had over the careers of the confessional poets, the confessionals themselves actively employed the burgeoning advertising and publicity industry of mid-twentieth-century America towards a manipulation of public dimensions of their work. In many ways, Anne Sexton was her own Hollywood agent. Maxine Kumin, poet and author as well as close friend of Sexton, describes in detail the meticulous arrangement that went into Sexton’s live readings:

The intimate details divulged in Sexton’s poetry enchanted or repelled with equal passion. In addition to the strong feelings Anne’s work aroused, there was the undeniable fact of her physical beauty. Her presence on the platform dazzled with its staginess, its props of water glass, cigarettes, and ashtray. She used pregnant pauses, husky whispers, pseudoshouts to calculated effect. A Sexton audience might hiss its displeasure
or deliver a standing ovation. It did not doze off during a reading. (xxi)

Thus, for Sexton and her fellow confessionals, the process of confessing became almost indistinguishable from the process of performing, a practice through which the poets were able to mobilize audience response by reconfiguring their poetics around the generation of spectatorial pathos.21 The notion of confession as a performative speech act is supported by numerous theorists, most notably J.L. Austin whose distinction between “constatives” and “performatives” provides a useful framework within which to situate the immense interest of confessional poets in their audience’s immediate response. In his influential How to Do Things with Words (1962), Austin draws a contrast between “constatives” which comprise only true or false statements of fact, and “performatives” which are characterized by action and necessarily result in the accomplishing of something, such as confessing (Austin 3-7). The predetermined, ritualized quality of Sexton’s readings, with their discernable attempt to activate an audience response, strongly reflects Austin’s theorization. In the preface to Anne Sexton: A Biography, Diane Middlebrook notes an exemplification of this highly stylized, provocative and, most importantly, rehearsed performance style:

Anne Sexton liked to arrive about ten minutes late for her own performances: let the crowd work up a little anticipation. She would saunter to the podium, light up a cigarette, kick off her shoes, and in a throaty voice say, “I’m going to read a poem

21 Edna St. Vincent Millay unquestionably influenced Anne Sexton, especially in relation to femininity, the female body, and performativity. See Michailidou.
that tells you what kind of woman I am, so if you don’t like it you can leave.” Then she would launch into her signature poem, “Her Kind.” (xix)22

Detectable in Middlebrook’s paraphrasing of Sexton is not only the carefully prepared nature of the poet’s readings, but also the poet’s deliberate attempt to further—and I would go so far as to say, insidiously—conflate herself with the persona projected in her work. Prefacing her reading with the brazen remark, “what kind of woman I am,” Sexton instantly distorts the role of the live poetry reader, transforming the act of reading into a “performative” in which the practice of reading becomes confused with the act of personal confession, and subsequently is taken as a direct revelation of fact.

In recognizing this curious synthesis of intimacy and publicity that is fundamental to the modern era of advertising, Lowell, Berryman, Sexton and Plath were also able to circumvent the “stark choice between authenticity and artifice … through the transfiguration of apparently commonplace objects” (Lears, Fables of Abundance 13). Alvarez has detected this capacity in Plath’s poetry, noting of her work:

A casual visitor … a cut, a bruise, a kitchen bowl, a candlestick, everything became usable, charged with meaning, transformed. Her poems are full of references and images which seem impenetrable at this distance but which could mostly be explained by a scholar with full access to the details of her life. (“A Casual Visitor” 34-36)

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22 The carefully rehearsed nature of Sexton’s readings did not always, of course, go entirely unnoticed. Note for example, Rosemary Johnson, who remarks of Sexton: “Other people really only existed for her as an audience.” See Johnson 391.
Indeed, any attempt to define what is or what should be meant by “full access” to a poet’s life—whether that access is by family, friends, critics or biographers—has been met with inexorable controversy, representing yet another example of the inability of critics to detach the work of the confessional poets from their biographies. However, Alvarez’s oversight notwithstanding, the observation is useful for dramatizing the unique fusion of intimacy and publicity upon which the confessional poets based their self-promotion.

In the same way that critics have devoted energy to uncovering the “meaning” in “a cut, a bruise, a kitchen bowl, a candlestick,” it is necessary to chart the poetics of the confessional poet’s non-written self-promotion in order to address adequately the ultimate significance of poetry. In addition to both the lyric’s inclination towards audibility and the factual ambiguity of the written confessional poem, there is an indispensable site of investigation to be found in the intersection between intimacy and publicity in the public demeanour of the confessional poets. David Haven Blake, referred to earlier, has written perceptively on the intersections between poet and star, noting how critics have been reluctant to examine the importance of fame to the lives of many confessional poets. Blake’s explanation for this unwillingness rests on the idea that “nothing on first glance could seem more antithetical, more irreconcilable, than the worlds of celebrity and confessional poetry. Celebrities—unlike poems—are forged less by individual imaginations than by teams of marketing and public relations specialists” (716). However, in the decades following World War II, American society experienced a transformation that relocated the poet’s position within the cultural landscape. Prompted by the phenomena of suburbanization, prosperity and the emergence of the television, as well as unprecedented access by
American citizens to “education, museums, symphony orchestras, to European literature in translation, [and] inexpensive reprints of classic literature,” American popular culture underwent an intensification that saw the previously disjunct worlds of advertising and poetry form an unprecedentedly intimate union (Von Hallberg, *American Poetry and Culture* 175). Blake describes this fusion accurately when he observes the way in which, with the amplification of the intersections between poet, celebrity, and advertising, “confessional poetry developed into an unusually participatory form of verse, one in which readers became fans and writers became stars” (717). To a large extent, this idea suggests a necessary connection between advertising and the social identities of the poet and reader.\(^\text{23}\) In *Distinction*, Pierre Bourdieu makes a series of postulations that provide a theoretical grounding for these ideas. Addressing his concept of “lived experience,” Bourdieu notes the necessity of moving “beyond the abstract relationships between consumers with interchangeable tastes and products with uniformly perceived and appreciated properties” towards “the relationship between tastes which vary in a necessary way according to their social and economic conditions of production, and the products on which they confer their different social identities” (100; 101). In addition to its commentary on the ultimate impurity of taste, the transition espoused by Bourdieu makes an important statement regarding the role of the “product” as a source of social investment for the modern consumer, a pact in which the intermediary party is essentially advertising. Thus, the confessional poets, through their interpretation and utilization of twentieth-century advertising techniques, manufactured an annotation of their own “lived

\(^{23}\) Or, to quote Stephen Fox on the insertion of ‘personality’ into advertising throughout the Creative Revolution of the 1960s and 1970s, “gray-flannel anonymity gave way to personal expression.” See Fox 218.
experience,” using meticulously crafted poetic commentaries. For Bourdieu, the products and consequences of advertising are intimately connected to an individual’s understanding of his/her own social identity. Thus, the advertised object—in this case, the confessional poet—becomes reconstituted as a lived social experience.

Fundamental to the promotional mobility of the confessional poet was his or her capacity to become a “product,” embodied, as many accounts reveal, in the fixed, fetishized celebrity image. *Time* magazine’s June 1967 cover story on Robert Lowell, in which the publication labelled him “the best American poet of his generation,” served to praise Lowell’s achievement at widening modern American poetry’s previously limited audience (“The Second Chance” 79). Furthermore, the laudatory article does not hesitate to emphasize the new, commercially viable face of poetry, tracing out Lowell’s developments in an innovative poetic genre where “verse for edification or moral uplift” had become “totally dead” (79). Nevertheless, the edition’s front page presented Lowell as far from contented. The cover portrait, painted by the poet’s friend and Melbourne-born painter, Sidney Nolan, features a hardly recognizable Lowell, sketchy and peering downwards with a “sorrowful head and … triumphant wreath of laurels,” designed specifically to make the poet appear “heroic” (“A Letter From the Publisher” 21). This image was clearly geared towards an evocation of the hero-victim stereotype synonymous with confessional poetry. The article notes how “slowly, poetry moved out of the parlours of overstuffed gentility into the academy. Now it is moving out of the academy—out of college lit courses and esoteric coteries—back to where it was when minstrels sang their verses in the marketplace” (“The Second Chance” 79). Joe Moran’s reaction to the *Time* article highlights the specifically commoditized aspect of not only Lowell’s image, but also
the confessional enterprise more generally; that is, the media’s apparent belief that confession sells. “Time’s treatment of Robert Lowell,” he comments, shows how “relatively obscure material which deviated from Time’s conventional popular-serious subject matter could still be used if a correspondence between the author’s life and work was expressed in a formulaic way” (359). The “formula” necessary for this furtive conflation of ‘life’ and ‘work’ involves, according to Moran, a shift in focus from a poet’s “achievements” to his/her “embodiment of a particular lifestyle” (356). The consequence sees the transmutation of poets from “distant heroes” into “figures to identify with,” resulting in a diminution of reverence for them as artists and a burgeoning of the belief that a poet’s “private life is of public concern” (356).

Similarly, Elizabeth Wurzel’s description of the black-and-white sleeveless dress in which Anne Sexton chose to deliver a substantial number of her poetry readings (see Fig. 1) illuminates the larger fetishistic interest in the images of celebritized poets. Of Gwendolyn Stewart’s iconic image of Sexton, which appears on the cover of Diane Wood Middlebrook’s *Anne Sexton: A Biography*, and was inserted into both the Boston *Phoenix* and the Harvard *Crimson* as a flyer, Wurzel notes:

> The image … is so glorious and alive, it reveals a lust for life that makes it perfectly understandable why the book’s terrible revelations of character deficiencies … are delivered in a tone that is sad and loving and forgiving … The photo is all charisma and charm, the poet is shown twisted into place, her legs tightly crossed, her feet in white shoes with a crisscross buckle, her sleek black-and-white dress aswirl in Matisse-style geometry, bangles spangled down her arms, her hands lively and expressive, as if arguing a point or responding with glee to
It is hard to imagine that photographs such as that described by Wurzel were not, at least partially, manufactured. When first-hand accounts reveal Sexton to have invested considerable effort into the flyer-oriented advertising of her confessional poems, and various other attempts at self-image proliferation, it comes as no surprise that a premeditated aesthetic would underpin her many promotional photographs. But what is it about the photograph of a poet that generates such an extraordinarily powerful response? According to W.J.T. Mitchell in *What Do Pictures Want?*, images exist not just as inactive objects that communicate meaning but as animated beings with appetites, desires, needs, demands, and motives of their own. Thus, the photograph of the celebrated confessional poet possesses the power to persuade us, manipulate us, and ultimately lead us astray. “Pictures want to be kissed,” says Mitchell, “and of course we want to kiss them back” (xvi). This process of skewed negotiation over meaning is not, however, always as forceful as Mitchell initially implies. “Not every picture dramatizes its desires quite so explicitly and obscenely,” he states (xvii). “Most of the pictures we value highly are much more discreet about the libidinal fields they construct, the deadly kisses they invite” (xvii). Georgiana Banita describes the ‘deadly kiss’ in one of the most famous images of Sylvia Plath that consumes the cover of the Faber edition of *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams* (see Fig. 2). Describing this insidious image, Banita notes how “Plath smiles up from beach sand, her hair bleached, during the summer of 1954, sporting a white swimsuit and an endearing smile” (44). “To my knowledge,” she continues, “there is no other writer
who is depicted on the cover of her or his books in a swimsuit or any similarly intimate pose. None of the forewords, blurbs, or jacket statements of these books fails to suggest that Plath and her fictional character are entirely interchangeable” (44). Banita notes, too, Faber and Faber’s achievement in manipulating the propensity of readers to conflate the poet with her work by placing “two large, luridly colored, air-brushed illustrations of Plath” on the dust jacket to *The Bell Jar* (58). According to Banita, in the case of *The Bell Jar*, the publisher extends the fusion between image, work, and poet, intentionally utilizing photographs of Plath which place her “at moments of her life when she was close to her heroine’s age,” thus suggesting for the reader a textual analysis contingent on biographical interpretation (58).

Fig. 2. Sylvia Plath (On Cape Cod Beach, 1952), *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams* (London: Faber, 2005; print; cover page).
As these examples suggest, for poets such as Lowell, Berryman, Sexton and Plath, publicity and advertising became connected to the explicitly introspective act of attracting public attention through the consciously crafted artifice of cultural intimacy. In *Fables of Abundance*, Jackson Lears details the significance of a synthesis of intimacy and publicity for the rise of national advertising in the United States throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, emphasising the way in which advertising was able to collaborate with other institutions in promoting “what became the dominant aspirations, anxieties, even notions of personal identity, in the modern United States” (2). For Lears, “distinctions between public and private have always been artificial,” thus the ease with which twentieth-century advertisers were able to merge an idealization of materialistic and vitalist approaches with the human condition (137). Adapting a position similar to that of Deborah Nelson, previously mentioned in relation to privacy’s ultimate loss of inviolability, Lears notes how “the apotheosis of private selfhood coincided with the emergence of new ways to invade privacy – and new justifications for the invasion” (137). It is therefore through a harnessing of the idyllic balance between publicity and intimacy, a powerful combination underpinning modern advertising, that the confessional poets were able to proliferate their self-images without diminishing their works’ assumed authenticity.
n “Epilogue,” the poem that concludes Robert Lowell’s collection *Day by Day* (1977), Lowell laments not only the apparent mediocrity of much of his verse, but also what could be construed as the confessional text’s tragic redundancy:

Those blessèd structures, plot and rhyme—
why are they no help to me now
I want to make
something imagined, not recalled? (*Day by Day* 127)

Less an indulgence and more of a self-deprecating ode, “Epilogue,” which appeared at the very outset of this study, represents the height of Lowell’s self-analysis in terms of his own craft. The poem’s central notion, that truth exists not in reportorial but only ever in aesthetic terms—“Pray for the grace of accuracy”—hints at the poetic artifice detectable in almost all confessional verse. What Lowell here laments—and confessional poetry embodies—was probably akin to what Friedrich Nietzsche meant by his dictum: “we have art in order not to die of the truth,” a proclamation developed by Nietzsche in response to the realization that there is no definite, all-encompassing truth. Exemplified by his strangely metaphysical pronouncement, we require “the veil of illusion,”¹ Nietzsche’s resolute thesis both predates and reverses the near-platitudinous metaphor that characterizes the popular conception of confessional

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¹ In *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche states: “Knowledge kills action, to action belongs the veil of illusion – that is the lesson of Hamlet” 46.
poetry. This popular metaphor aims to say that, in the act of writing, a confessional poet “removes the mask,” rendering his speaker “unequivocally himself” (Rosenthal, “Poetry as Confession” 154).

There is no doubt by now that this reductive, and I would go so far as to say idealistic, understanding of the confessional enterprise is not only outmoded but is considered an utterly improper way of describing a complex, reflexive, and ultimately elusive form of postmodern poetics. Such is the foresight in M.L. Rosenthal’s remorseful remark that confessional poetry “was a term both helpful and too limited, and very possibly the conception of a confessional school has by now done a certain amount of damage” (The New Poets 25).2 Given this, I find it necessary to assert that perhaps more important to the overarching objectives of this thesis are not necessarily the ideas that I have proved, but rather those that have been intentionally avoided. The temptation to introduce and subsequently defend a new label for “confessional poetry” was—and still is—a pressing one. Yet the circumvention of a redefinition was necessary in order to avoid subscribing to the very feedback loop identified by this thesis. This self-propelling loop is the body of scholarship that has, to date, focused on either defending the connections between confessional poetry and biography or unequivocally denying them. The alternative to this dialectic represents an innovative and indispensible approach to the study of confessional poetry, one that sees this mode as both a dynamic response to its lyrical lineage and the deeply troubled cold-war years of twentieth-century America as well as to a system of poetics which constantly queries how the written confessional act should be measured and defined.

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2 I earlier refer to this remark by Rosenthal in Chapter One.
My methodology in most cases, therefore, has involved restructuring of the ways in which the study of confessional poetry has thus far been treated. Others, of course, have attempted to de-simplify the confessional poetic prior to this study. Robert Von Hallberg, for example, has commented of a list of key influential confessional texts that “whatever claims may be made on behalf of confessional poetry, it is plain that these books all contributed to the reinstatement of two closely related literary conventions: the notion that poems originate in their subject matter and the corollary that poets mean, at least literally, what they say.” Yet Von Hallberg afterward contradicts himself, noting how despite the fact that confessional poetry places unprecedented stress on these specifically rhetorical rules by which poems are understood, the fact remains that it is ultimately as conventional as any other; it has no special claims on truth telling.

Ultimately, and as I have sought to demonstrate throughout this thesis, the reality is exactly as Von Hallberg suggests. This is, despite confessional poetry’s unfortunate and fundamentally misleading title, we cannot assume that it is any more biographically revealing than other forms. Yet, somewhere along the line, this notion has been either ignored or completely forgotten, with both readers and critics “trailing the rags of the intentional fallacy,” searching for biographical fact as if panning for gold in a murky pool of fiction, truths, lies and memoir. As I have argued over the

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5 Here I am quoting Peter Middleton who writes, in his assessment of the damaging illusory intimacy of the live poetry reading, “a spectre is haunting poetry readings. The ‘dead author,’ risen from the text again and trailing the rags of the intentional fallacy, claims to be the originating subject from which poetry is issuing, right in front of your eyes.” See Middleton, *Distant Reading* 33.
course of the three chapters of this thesis, the rigorous autobiographical approach that critics have adopted in response to confessional poetry can’t be attributed wholly to the poets’ desire that their texts be read autobiographically. Nor can this approach be linked to the many entirely accurate autobiographical facts that do exist in a number of confessional poems. Indeed, if at any moment we are led astray by these two factors, the “rage and contempt”6 with which the poets themselves reacted to being called confessional should serve as a reminder of the many misleading connotations of the term, and the need to avoid ascribing to confessional poetry a reductionist autobiographical methodology.

One’s response to a confessional poem is, of course, largely a result of the poem itself: the words printed on the pages that do not change over time or in synchronization with the unpredictable vicissitudes of literary criticism. However, reading practices are also determined by the expectations with which we approach a given text. Thus, naturally, our expectations of texts that declare themselves “confessional” are different to the expectations we place upon texts that are openly fictional or, alternatively, labelled non-fiction. This said, to insist on reading confessional poetry autobiographically is not only to deny its complexity as a poetic and cultural form but also to make a severe and ultimately unfair demand upon its authors. Many who insist upon the factuality of confessional poetry have overlooked the ultimate paradox, namely that a confessional poem that does not provide at least one biographical truth about its author must be eliminated from the canon. If we were

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6 This remark was John Berryman’s response to being labeled a confessional poet. I discuss Berryman’s reaction in Chapter One.
to apply this reasoning, the number of confessional poems eligible to be called “confessional” would be few in number.

But because we can never know for sure if a confessional poem has made a factual claim, it is more productive—and, for the purposes of poetics, more interesting—to ask why readers and critics have struggled to keep strictly separate the roles of poet and persona in their assessments of confessional verse. What this study has done is examine three sites within which these questions might be considered. By selecting three diverse yet intricately connected aspects of confessional poetics, what I have demonstrated is both the complexity and breadth of the problems that have arisen out of this fascinating postmodern form. The status of confessional poetry as lyric—a form in which the notion of voice becomes a beacon for the exploration of the boundaries between private and public—made for a dynamic reliance on sound. In addition to this, both the contested definition of confessional poetry and its inherently ambiguous poetic claims to truth have contributed to a conflation of the roles of poet and persona in readings of confessional poetry. Finally, the theatrical and often particularly entertaining self-promotion practised by the confessionals has worked to blur the distinction between the poets and their poetic personas even further. While all three sites of investigation illuminate the many reasons why confessional poetry has attracted so much debate, they have not been summoned as a means of either redefining the confessional poetic or attempting to test confessional poetry’s biographical authenticity. Rather, by weaving my study in and out of these concentrations, I have attempted to shed light on some key problems surrounding the reading of confessional verse. My three sites are not intended to trivialize the reasons why readers and critics have fallen victim to the “confessional” label, but rather to
open up a new door for understanding a body of work, which has become somewhat marginalized within academic studies.

In conclusion, this study attempts to unpack a profoundly chaotic aspect of confessional poetics by considering the form alongside its status as lyric poetry, its role as a socially and politically invested commentary on the tumultuous cold-war years in America, and the many tensions between public and private, publicity and intimacy that emerged during the cultural and technological boom of the post-war United States. As Deborah Nelson has asserted, post-war American social life had both too little privacy and too much, a reminder of the anxious uncertainty in which confessional poetry developed in mid-twentieth-century America (PP 167-168). The insertion by the confessionals of intimate, seemingly personal revelations into their complicated public world only underscored the very tensions from which their poetry originated. Thus, an appropriate way to conclude seems to be to return one final time to the perplexing fluidity with which the confessional poets were able to convince readers of the veracity of their aesthetic craft. Richard Tillinghast, whose work Damaged Grandeur (1995) provides one of the more intimate accounts of the life of Robert Lowell (with whom Tillinghast studied as a graduate student at Harvard University in the mid-1960s), recalled a trip he took to view the Lowell family cemetery in Dunbarton, New Hampshire. Tillinghast, who had in mind Lowell’s poem “Sailing Home from Rapallo,” expected to find the “pink-veined slice of marble” of Lowell’s father’s gravestone and the “too businesslike” Latin motto it displayed, as described by Lowell in the poem. Yet upon his visit to the actual gravesite, Tillinghast was surprised to discover none of these things. Instead, somewhat ironically, he found a line of Lowell’s verse, leading him to conclude that, “in the poem, [Lowell]
deliberately misdescribes his father’s gravestone.” Tillinghast groans: “I felt, ‘This is a man who will change anything.””\footnote{This anecdote is taken from a larger collection of remarks compiled at the Kenyon Review’s celebration of Robert Lowell in November 1998. See Laskin.}
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