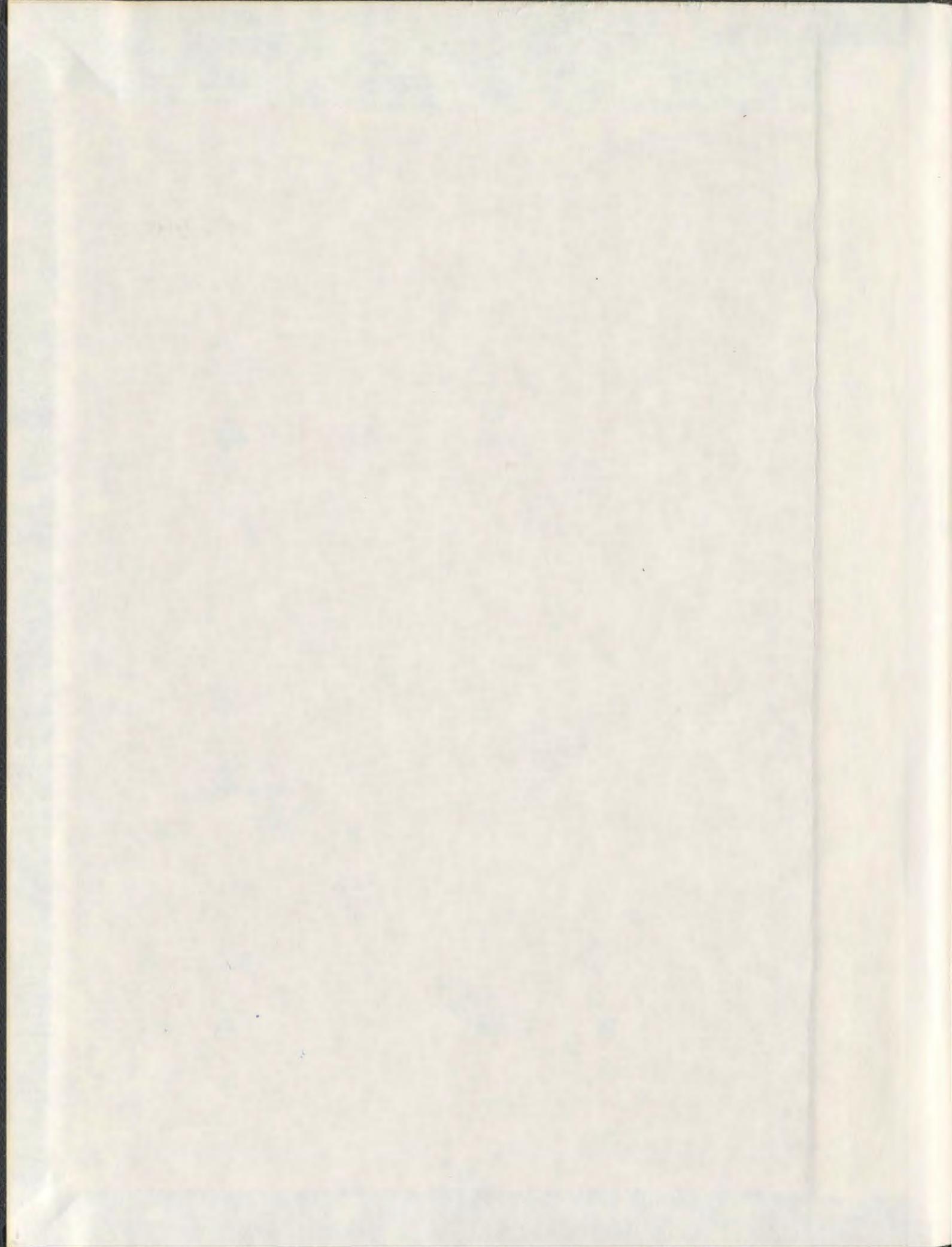


COLD WAR CONFESSIONS

AUTOBIOGRAPHIC POETRY IN THE AGE OF ANXIETY

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Cold War Confessions  
Autobiographic Poetry in the Age of Anxiety

by

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## Abstract

This dissertation revisits a contentious group of twentieth-century American “confessional” poets consisting of John Berryman, Robert Lowell, Anne Sexton, Sylvia Plath, Delmore Schwartz, and Randall Jarrell. It analyzes their poetry in relation to its Cold War political context and argues that the subjective style of these poets was symptomatic of a subversive response to containment culture. Forgoing the impersonality of modernist idiom, these writers developed a poetics of personality that has often been dismissed by critics as maudlin and narcissistic. This dissertation counters this prevailing view. It argues that at a time in American history when civil liberties were routinely threatened by state-sanctioned initiatives such as the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), the turn to an autobiographic style emerged as a covert means of expressing political dissent. For these midcentury poets, an exploration of the abject self was the starting point for a poetics that revealed the guilt, trauma, and anxiety common to Cold War experience and that challenged state incursions upon individual autonomy.

One of the central arguments of this dissertation is that the insidious nature of Cold War containment pervaded all facets of society. Impositions upon individual autonomy made by an American surveillance state eager to contain the domestic communist threat made it difficult for citizens to express political dissent publicly without reprisal. This study positions the “confessional” style as a subversive poetics that expresses the impact of public anxieties on the private self. The first section argues that John Berryman and Robert Lowell forged a poetics grounded in a negative epistemology in order to articulate Holocaust and nuclear anxiety. The second section

explores how Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath used confession to challenge constructions of normalized identity advocated by the increasingly influential institutions of psychiatry and psychology. The third section analyzes Delmore Schwartz and Randall Jarrell's reactions to what they regarded as similarities between cultural containment and the institutionalization of literary studies via the organically "contained" protocols of New Criticism. This dissertation redresses a critical misreading of midcentury autobiographic poetry by demonstrating how its "confessional" style was a voice of resistance to the repressive anxieties of Cold War experience.

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**Introduction: “Here’s to the glory of the Great White—awk—”: Confession in the  
Age of Anxiety**

On 13 October 1943, Robert Lowell was “arraigned before the U.S. District Court in New York and sentenced to prison for one year and one day” (*Collected Prose* 367). His sentencing came just over a month after he posted a letter to President Roosevelt refusing participation in the armed forces. Attached to the letter was Lowell’s “Declaration of Personal Responsibility,” copies of which, as he told the President, were also sent “to a select number of friends and relatives, to the heads of the Washington press bureaus, and to a few responsible citizens who, no more than yourself, can be suspected of subversive activities” (*Collected Prose* 367). The declaration, which was composed during an era of post-Pearl Harbor patriotism, was based on Lowell’s recognition of fundamental hypocrisies in America’s strategic policies. Asserting that historically in the United States “we glory in the conviction that our wars are won not by irrational valor but through the exercise of moral responsibility,” Lowell claimed that rumours of “staggering civilian casualties,” including those that took place during “the razing of Hamburg, where 200,000 noncombatants are reported dead, after an almost apocalyptic series of all-out air-raids” (369), caused a foundational shift in his judgment of America’s wartime motives. Whereas in 1941, the U.S.

undertook a patriotic war to preserve our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred honor against the lawless aggressions of a totalitarian league: in 1943 we are collaborating with the most unscrupulous and powerful of totalitarian dictators to destroy law, freedom, democracy, and above all, our continued national sovereignty. (*Collected Prose* 370)

Written from a perspective of moral, political, and patriotic responsibility at a time when he considered himself “a fire-breathing Catholic C.O.” (*Life Studies* 85), the declaration, for Lowell, was integral for the maintenance of an American tradition of critical dissent:

It is a fundamental principle of our American Democracy, one that distinguishes it from the demagoguery and herd hypnosis of the totalitarian tyrannies, that with us each individual citizen is called upon to make voluntary and responsible decisions on issues which concern the national welfare. I therefore realized that I am under the heavy obligation of assenting to the prudence and justice of our present objectives before I have the right to accept service in our armed forces. No matter how expedient I might find it to entrust my moral responsibility to the state, I realize that it is not permissible under a form of government which derives its sanctions from the rational assent of the governed. (*Collected Prose* 369)

This commitment to democratic rationality aligns Lowell with a tradition of critical dissent and resistance to civil government popularized by his nineteenth-century predecessors Thoreau, Whitman, and Melville; it also earned him several months in a federal prison. Written at the dawn of the Cold War, the letter anticipates the complex, often paradoxical relationship between the poet and the State that developed during the first two decades following the Second World War.

It seems not entirely coincidental that the silencing of Lowell’s voice of public dissent by his physical incarceration anticipated a midcentury poetic style characterized by its lack of overt engagement with Cold War politics. At a time in American history that saw the state-sanctioned repression of many of the civil liberties fought for during the

war, key literary figures, including Lowell, John Berryman, Anne Sexton, Sylvia Plath, Delmore Schwartz, and Randall Jarrell, opted for what has often been considered a politically benign, “confessional” poetic style. Forgoing the so-called impersonality of Modernist poetic idiom, these writers developed a poetics of personality that seemed to privilege private tragedy over public protest. Though they are often criticized for what seems an introspective, even narcissistic style, the repressive political environment from which their autobiographic poetics emerged suggests that limitations on the expression of public dissent necessitated more covert forms of political engagement. For many midcentury poets, the abject self was the starting point for a poetics that revealed the guilt, trauma, and anxiety common to Cold War experience.

This dissertation analyzes a core group of midcentury autobiographic poets—John Berryman, Robert Lowell, Anne Sexton, Sylvia Plath, Delmore Schwartz, and Randall Jarrell—from a perspective that locates their work within its contentious Cold War paradigm. Analysis of the poetry in relation to its political context reveals connections between the turn to a subjective poetic style and incursions upon civil liberties made by such state-controlled apparatuses as HUAC and the Truman Loyalty Programs at the height of the Cold War. It also underscores the relationship between the emphasis upon guilt, anxiety, and aberrant sexual and psychological behaviour common to the autobiographic style and the wider impact of nuclear and post-Holocaust anxiety that pervaded American culture and consciousness in the postwar years. Caught between a desire to engage the political, cultural, and psychological repercussions of existence in the age of nuclear anxiety and the threat of ostracization, even persecution, that accompanied dissenting voices in an era of political containment, these authors were forced to develop

unique methods of formulating responses to the Cold War climate. Far from representing a politically benign, naively personal and tragic style, the autobiographic aesthetic of midcentury poets often invokes images of the abject, fragmented self as symbols of a culture irrevocably altered by the mass death and suffering of the Second World War and by the dual threats of nuclear annihilation and communist infiltration. While this turn to an introspective aesthetic sheltered their critiques of American culture and policy from an explicitly public spectatorship, their fragmented style, emphasis on the psychological impact of domestic life, and exploration of mental illness and suicide, manifest themselves as implicit critiques of the impact of containment culture upon individual identity.

Containment culture broadly refers to a postwar American climate that privileged—and proliferated—discourses of domestic normalcy and security as a means of “containing” the threat posed by communist infiltration and by the possibility of nuclear conflict. The idea of containment, which was first penned by US policy analyst George Kennan in a 1947 essay called “The Sources of Soviet Conduct” and published anonymously in *Foreign Affairs*,<sup>1</sup> came also to designate practices in the cultural sphere designed to preserve American culture from a corruptive Red Menace. As Alan Nadel explains in *Containment Culture*, the term signifies

a privileged American narrative during the cold war. Although technically referring to U.S. foreign policy from 1948 until at least the mid-1960s, it also describes American life in numerous venues and under sundry rubrics during

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<sup>1</sup> In his article, Kennan argues that the United States must confront the insidious nature of communist infiltration by “entering with reasonable confidence upon a policy of firm containment designed to confront the Russians with unalterable counterforce at every point where they show signs of encroaching upon the interests of a peaceful and stable world” (581).

that period: to the extent that corporate production and biological reproduction, military deployment and industrial technology, televised hearings and filmed teleplays, the cult of domesticity and the fetishizing of domestic security, the arms race and atoms for peace all contributed to the containment of communism, the disparate acts performed in the name of these practices joined the legible agenda of American history as aspects of containment culture. (2-3)

Containment is therefore a multifaceted term that describes a campaign waged against the insidious communist threat on the overt level of political policy, and on the hegemonic level of cultural discourse. While on the political level containment advocated for greater measures of domestic security, on the cultural level it privileged the nuclear family as the locus for the proliferation of secure, domestic American values. Containment was also proliferated via the cultural narratives, including the film, television, and literature, that came to define the 1950s as an iconic age of domestic suburban values. Haunting the proliferation of such discourses of normalcy was the spectre of what might occur should America let its guard down. The insidious communist menace lingered, waiting for its opportunity to infiltrate the sanctity of a secure America, just as the possibility of nuclear disaster, often dramatized on both overt and metaphorical levels in the era's science-fiction films, was constantly reinforced by the prevalence of "duck and cover" television ads and nuclear drills in public schools. The spectacle of such politically sanctioned repression as HUAC meant that also haunting these discourses of normalcy was the very real threat to personal liberty posed by deviant behaviour. By publicly promoting the importance of conforming to discourses of American domestic normalcy, discourses of

containment “made personal behaviour part of a global strategy at the same time as they personalized the international struggle with communism” (Nadel xi). Containment ideology therefore found its political efficacy in paradox: it reminded citizens that the freedom and virtues of American capitalism could be upheld so long as individuals were willing to conform to discourses of domestic security, surveillance, and consumption that impinged upon their autonomy within a democratic political system.

It is the personal and psychological repercussions of this strategy that autobiographic poets engage. Each poet, in his or her unique way, responds to the relationship between Cold War policies of containment and the formation of individual identity in the early Cold War era. Though thematically focused on personal trauma and anxiety, the mid-century breakdown between public and private domains and the rise of state-sanctioned incursions upon individual autonomy occasioned a politically charged autobiographic poetics that chronicles and challenges the hegemony of Cold War ideologies.

### **Cloistering the Politics of Confessional Poetics**

That the term “confessional” poetry has done more damage than good to the reputations of midcentury poets is the focus of this literary investigation. The term’s negative connotations still linger in several prominent critical studies on midcentury poetry. The term was infamously coined by M.L. Rosenthal in his review of Lowell’s *Life Studies* in 1959, and refers to the naked chronicles of personal strife that the book exemplifies. Later, Rosenthal recognized the potentially misleading nature of the term:

“confessional poetry” came naturally to 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 limited, and very possibly the conception of a confessional school has by now done a certain amount of damage. (25)

Much of that damage lies in the manner in which the associations linked with the term *confessional* privilege readings that assume a passive acceptance, or even a wilful courting, of illness and tragedy by the poet. The term's negative connotations have led several key studies in the field to neglect the intellectual, aesthetic, and political complexity of this group of midcentury poets, choosing instead to read their poems as cathartic, self-contained chronicles of avaricious, selfish, and often tragic behaviour.

Early studies of poets grouped within this "confessional paradigm,"<sup>2</sup> including those by sympathetic critics such as A. Alvarez, tend to highlight tragedy over artistic or intellectual achievement. As Alvarez writes in *The Savage God*, his study of suicide in the postwar years, confessional poets "survive morally by becoming, in one way or another, an imitation of death in which their audience can share. To achieve this the artist, in his role of scapegoat, finds himself testing out his own death and vulnerability for and on himself" (262). Alvarez, by identifying confessional poets as scapegoats within a hostile cultural environment, posits them as Romantic hero-victims, compelled to mine tragic experience for poetic inspiration at the expense of personal well-being, and for the sake of an audience that shares their sense of persecution, but lacks the poetic sensibility to express it. Other more recent studies, including Jeffrey Meyer's *Manic Power: Robert Lowell and his Circle* and Bruce Bawer's *The Middle Generation: The Lives and Poetry*

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<sup>2</sup> For an extensive analysis of the critical damage done to "confessional" poetry by prevailing assumptions surrounding the signifier "confessional," see Thomas Travisano's elucidating chapter "The Confessional Paradigm Revisited" in *Midcentury Quartet: The Making of a Postmodern Aesthetic* (1999).

of Delmore Schwartz, Randall Jarrell, John Berryman, and Robert Lowell, offer a less sympathetic take on the confessional poet as sacrificial victim, one that highlights the selfish and narcissistic, rather than heroic and tragic, qualities of their work. As Meyer prosaically claims, "The poets competed with each other in madness as in art, and flaunted their illness as a leper shows his sores" (13). Similarly, Bawer makes the generically prescriptive claim that

All of [Berryman, Schwartz, Lowell, and Jarrell] were disabled by emotions upon which they could muse eternally and with great eloquence, but which they were powerless to control. Here lies the ultimate irony of their lives: the very conditions which so tragically crippled them as men also provided their poetry with its greatest beauty and strength. (4)

Lewis Hyde asserts that Berryman's *Dream Songs*, far from being poetically innovative, are little more than an accumulation of drunken ramblings that "can be explicated in terms of alcoholism" (215), while the omnipresent critic of American poetry Harold Bloom, in the introductions of his *Modern Critical Views* editions on both Lowell and Berryman, dismisses their work as a minor contribution to the American canon. Of Berryman, for instance, he writes: "I believe he will be judged at last only by *The Dream Songs*. To compare them, as some admirers do, to *Song of Myself*, is palpably an error; they are neither of that mode nor anywhere close to that astonishing eminence" (1).

Against such charges of indulgence, of heightening tragedy for the sake of poetry, the poets themselves perhaps most effectively respond. As Lowell claimed in a conversation with Stanley Kunitz,

poets of this generation are more conscious of our wounds ... than the poets before us, but we are not necessarily more wounded.... The difference may be that modern art tries more deliberately to save the unsavable by giving it form.... The truth is that no sort of life seems to preclude poetry. Poetry can come out of utterly miserable or disorderly lives, as in the case of a Rimbaud or a Hart Crane. But to make the poems possible a huge amount of health has to go into the misery. (qtd. in Travisano 65)

Lowell's blunt assertion is important in terms of recovering his own poetic practice as well as that of his contemporaries. As many critics eager to read biography into the poetry have noted, Lowell battled severe bouts of manic depression at various points during his adult life, many of which were serious enough to warrant hospitalization. In the 1950s and 1960s Lowell was hospitalized nearly twenty times, most often at McLean's hospital in Boston.<sup>3</sup> These periods of "madness" and recovery have been the source of many of his most compelling poems, including "Waking in the Blue" and "Home After Three Months Away," both of which appear in his most "confessional" book, *Life Studies*. The relationship between these poems and Lowell's personal life has often led critics to assume that they were written in times of madness, or worse, that Lowell courted illness in order to serve his poetry. Such assumptions debase the intellectual complexity of Lowell's poetic achievement and trivialize the severity of his mental illness. As Lowell asserts, a measure of "health" was required to complete poems that engage and analyze, rather than glamorize, the trauma of mental illness. Critics such as Meyer and Bawer, and

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<sup>3</sup> During the 1950s and 1960s Lowell was treated with Thorazine, which was eventually proven ineffective. In 1967, he began Lithium treatments, which allowed him a measure of psychological stability until his death from a heart attack in 1977.

even Alvarez, are guilty of what Susan Sontag has argued is a typical extension of the Romantic notion that disease expresses character to the modern notion that character comes to express disease.<sup>4</sup>

Berryman is cagier when asked about the relationship between himself and Henry, the protagonist of his *Dream Songs*:

I think I'll leave that one to the critics. Henry does resemble me, and I resemble Henry; but on the other hand I am not Henry. You know, I pay income tax; Henry pays no income tax. And bats come over and they stall in my hair—and fuck them, I'm not Henry; Henry doesn't have any bats. ("An Interview with John Berryman" 7)

Berryman's typically enigmatic response functions to assert the inherently heterogeneous nature of textual interpretation against readings that seek to derive a singular, unified meaning from a combination of textual analysis and biographic or factual interpretation. Henry, he reminds his interviewer, is a fictional character open to interpretive multiplicity, while John Berryman the individual deals with taxes, bats in the hair, and other (presumably) *real* issues.

Lowell perhaps sums up this disparity between biography and literary discourse in his late poem "With Caroline at the Air Terminal," where he writes that "Everything is real until it's published" (*Collected Poems* 702). Against the tyranny of the term "confessional" both authors assert the discursive nature of poetic signification. By consciously challenging their own "authority" as authors and poets, they reposition

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<sup>4</sup> In *Illness as Metaphor*, Sontag demystifies the manner in which diseases such as tuberculosis, the paradigmatic nineteenth-century disease, and cancer, the disease of the twentieth century, have been associated with specific character traits.

themselves as recorders of texts produced within particular historical contexts, and not as purveyors of originary meaning. Their chronicles of personal trauma reflect their own situation within Cold War cultural discourse; the confessional nature of their verse reveals how specific historical events shape, and reshape, their relationships as individual beings to American culture. By presenting the self as a fallible being enmeshed in the cultural quotidian, they tacitly deconstruct the Romantic notion of the author as a voice of moral or cultural authority and reposition authorial, and individual, identity as entities shaped and renegotiated by specific discursive paradigms.

In spite of claims by poets such as Lowell and Berryman about the disjunction between personal history and literary discourse, the bulk of criticism devoted to their work, until recently, has tended to highlight the tragic nature of the confessional paradigm. While the critical history of the term “confessional” has done much to complicate, and obfuscate, the complexity of midcentury autobiographical poetics, a resurgence of interest in the issues surrounding confessional poetry demonstrates that the time for a critical reinvestment in these poets has arrived. Work by scholars such as Susan Gubar, Ernest Smith, Jo Gill, Stephen Burt, Phil Metris, Suzanne Ferguson, and Thomas Travisano, to name a few, has begun to renegotiate the issues surrounding confessional poetics from more rigorous theoretical perspectives. In his study *Midcentury Quartet*, which analyzes the influence Jarrell, Lowell, Berryman, and Elizabeth Bishop had both on one another and on shaping a postmodern aesthetic, Travisano clearly outlines the reasons why such a reassessment is overdue. His study considers

- 1) how the confessional paradigm has prejudiced, and is still prejudicing, artistic evaluation;
- 2) how the paradigm’s treatment of the poem as a reliable

source of factual disclosure slights the epistemological complexity of the work while downplaying its fictive character; 3) how the paradigm's assumption of authorial stasis ignores the poetry's perceptual mobility and moral relativism; 4) how the paradigm promotes assumptions of the reader's moral authority over the author; and, 5) how the paradigm promotes assumptions of the author's creative passivity. (44)

Travisano clearly identifies the complications that arise from reading confessional poetry as a tragic and narcissistic genre. By reading the poems as the product of a singular authorial voice obsessed with expounding personal trauma and history, such conventional interpretations place critics in positions of moral authority that pronounce upon the poet's failure to adapt to a complex environment.

While Travisano notes the damage done to the reception of confessional poetry by such readings, his list overlooks the manner in which these poets employ their complex epistemological and moral stances to negotiate the repressive Cold War politics of the era. The subjective nature of their autobiographic poetics means that political engagement often occurred at the level of symbol, metonymy, metaphor, and even structural parataxis. While considering the issues of epistemological and moral reception noted by Travisano, this study extends the analysis of autobiographic poetry into the realm of the political by examining implicit correlations between the turn to a subjective poetics that conceals itself from the gaze of state surveillance, and the increasingly repressive incursions upon individual civil liberties experienced during the early Cold War era.

### **The Politicization of Cold War Culture**

For these midcentury poets, life in the postwar period was complicated by the insidious rhetoric of containment to the degree that it informed both their daily lives and their literary output. Cold War political policies during the two decades following the Second World War flowed beyond the strictly governmental and military into the cultural, domestic, and economic spheres of American society. As Stephen J. Whitfield contends in *The Culture of the Cold War*, this politicization was integrally linked to the containment of the communist menace on American soil.<sup>5</sup> That the Soviet Union presented a threat to geopolitical stability and to American security is a fact. That the atrocities committed by Stalin within his own country and throughout Europe were on par with some of the worst atrocities in history is also a fact. That the Red Scare of the 1940s and 1950s ever presented a veritable threat to the sanctity and domestic authority of the American government, however, seems unlikely. Campaigns against communist infiltration waged by the American government from the 1930s onward, combined with a growing realization of Stalin's totalitarian tactics in Eastern Europe, caused American Communist Party membership to dwindle by the 1950s. As Whitfield points out, in the United States "The battalion of Stalinists may have been secret, but it was too negligible to divert the course of American history. Though evidence of infiltration could be detected from Hollywood to Harvard, Party membership hovered around forty-three thousand by 1950, around thirty-two thousand a year later" (4). This dwindling membership meant that "A nation of about one hundred fifty million people included as many members of, say, the Finnish Evangelical Lutheran Church (Suomi Synod) as there

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<sup>5</sup> For a detailed and extensive analysis of the political history of the Cold War era see Stephen Whitfield's *The Culture of the Cold War*; Ellen Schrecker's *The Age of McCarthyism: A Brief History with Documents*; and Victor Navasky's *Naming Names*.

were Stalinists” (Whitfield 4). The relatively small number of American communists, combined with the steady decline in party membership, meant that American government analysts and committee members were blithely overstating the danger of the Red Menace. As Whitfield contends,

The party and its outriders could inflict mischief in a few trade unions or in some advanced social movements, but the cost that American society paid to crush domestic Communism was disproportionate. For the repression weakened the legacy of civil liberties, impugned standards of tolerance and fair play, and tarnished the very image of a democracy. This Red Scare was not a collective tragedy, but it was a disgrace. (4)

The Red Scare was a disgrace primarily because its zealous containment of the communist threat occurred at the expense of many of the civil liberties America fought for during the Second World War. The tactics exercised by the American government through such ventures as the Truman Loyalty programs and House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) resembled the totalitarian tactics practiced by regimes such as the USSR. First implemented in 1947 by the Truman administration, the loyalty-security program attempted to weed-out potential communist subversives from federal employment positions. While the flexible criterion of loyalty, which was advocated during both the Truman and Eisenhower administrations, placed employees in a position of scrutiny and forced them to conform rigorously to the terms of government employment under threat of dismissal, and even prosecution, it also worked to legitimize “the main weapon of McCarthyism: the use of political tests for employment” (Schrecker 43). While HUAC and loyalty oaths are two of the initiatives most commonly associated

with the Red Menace, the campaign against communism during the 1940s and 1950s found its way into most facets of American government policy. As Ellen Schrecker observes,

The government did not speak with a single voice. It was an amalgam of separate and often competing institutions, bureaucracies, and political parties.... almost every agency became involved in the anti-Communist crusade. From the State Department and Congress to the Post Office and the Supreme Court, federal bureaucrats, politicians, and judges struggled with the issues of domestic communism as they debated and implemented policies to deal with it. On occasion, those policies came into conflict; yet—and this is crucial—they were always invested with the power of the state. Not only did this make it possible, for example, for HUAC to send recalcitrant witnesses to prison for contempt of Congress, but it also gave a legitimacy and resonance to even the wildest pronouncements of its members that the statements of private citizens did not possess. (25-26)

The extensive, insidious political campaign against communism manifested an anti-communist consensus that vastly amplified the actual level of threat against the general populace. The American government effectively increased its ability to generate approval for domestic and foreign policy initiatives. Action taken in the name of the preservation of the sanctity of American rights was positive action indeed, so positive, that American citizens condoned the serious violation of civil liberties to help contain the Red Menace. The government's success in conjuring the intensity of the Red Scare was proven by the support it received from the general populace. A poll taken after President

Eisenhower's 1954 State of the Union speech, in which he "even proposed depriving communists of American citizenship," showed that "80 percent of the populace agreed with the president's suggestion; 52 percent wanted all Communists jailed; 77 percent wanted them banned from the radio" (Whitfield 14). This widespread approval allowed the American government to adopt increasingly repressive policies, ones that allowed for extensive anti-communist legislation that manifested itself in the form of academic purges, in HUAC hearings, and in the public trials of such infamous communist subversives and spies as the Hollywood Ten.<sup>6</sup>

The totalitarian nature of this repressive influence amounted to the advocacy of thought control. As Whitfield explains,

Consider that the Committee on Socialism and Communism of the Chamber of Commerce proposed in 1946 and 1948 to remove liberals, socialists, and Communists from opinion-forming agencies. Communists, fellow-travellers, and "Dupes" would not be permitted to teach in schools or work in libraries, or write for newspapers. By 1952, this advocacy of thought control had become the official position of the Chamber of Commerce. Those of dubious political reliability would also be prohibited from employment in "any plant large enough to have a labor union"—thus foreclosing for radical workers as well as left intellectuals opportunities to earn a living. (15)

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<sup>6</sup> After taking the Fifth Amendment before a government committee, the Hollywood Ten were nevertheless indicted and subsequently fired from their positions with Hollywood studios. Precipitating the blacklisting that would occur regularly throughout the McCarthyist era, the case of the Hollywood Ten exemplified the collusion between government anti-communist committees, the Supreme Court (which denied their appeal to the Fifth Amendment) and private industry. The case also demonstrates how, in a very real way, anti-communist policy and legislation terrorized, and even destroyed, the lives of countless Americans.

Poets living in the middle of the twentieth century, because of the intellectual and creative nature of their vocation, qualified as individuals of “dubious” political reliability. The veritable threat of persecution for the expression of public dissent, as is argued in this study, forced many midcentury poets to develop new protocols of political engagement. Unlike their more openly political and often irreverently dissident colleagues in the Beat circles, the autobiographic poets in this study often depended upon academic postings, editorships with literary magazines, and grants from foundations such as Guggenheim in order to maintain a living. The loss of employment and subsequent ostracization that accompanied accusations of communist sympathy posed a serious threat to their livelihoods.

However, it did not prevent them from acutely experiencing the persecution of the era, or from refusing to engage the totalitarian tactics of their government. Their personal journals and correspondence, which could have been used to make a case against them had they been pursued, clearly and repeatedly indicate frustration with the actions of the American government. For example, just as Lowell refused military participation in 1943, Jarrell voiced his disgust with the bombing of Hiroshima and the subsequent glorification of that event in government addresses and public celebrations. In a September 1945 letter to Margaret Marshall of *The Nation*, he complained

I feel so rotten about the country's response to the bombings at Hiroshima and Nagasaki that I wish I could become a naturalized dog or cat. I believe our culture's chief characteristic, to a being from outside it, would be that we are liars. That all except a few never tell or feel anything near the truth about

anything we do. Though even at that we're not bad enough to deserve the end we are going to get. (*Letters* 130)

Jarrell expresses both a sense of anxiety about the potential repercussions for America's unprecedented military action and contempt for initial reactions that celebrated the end of the war in spite of the means used to achieve that victory. While the personal documents of these poets repeatedly make reference to the repressive political situation of the era, their poetic documents often sidestep manifest political content.

Lowell perhaps best states why such efforts were taken to avoid direct engagement with the public sphere in a letter addressed to another president—one written to reject Eisenhower's invitation to the White House Festival of the Arts: "every serious artist knows that he cannot enjoy public celebration without making subtle public commitments. After a week's wondering I have decided that I am conscience-bound to refuse your courteous invitation" (*Collected Prose* 371). Sylvia Plath, who began her novel *The Bell Jar* with the execution of the Rosenbergs,<sup>7</sup> reports her "sickness," in a typically graphic journal entry, about the state-sanctioned killings:

All right, so the headlines blare the two of them are going to be killed at eleven o'clock tonight. So I am sick at the stomach.... There is no yelling, no horror, no great rebellion. That is the appalling thing. The execution will take place tonight; it is too bad that it could not be televised ... so much more realistic and beneficial than the run-of-the-mill crime program. Two real

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<sup>7</sup> Julius and Ethel Rosenberg were executed on 19 June 1953 after being convicted of conspiracy to commit espionage. The immensely disproportionate punishment has been held up as a primary example of McCarthyist persecution. The punishment's vindictive nature arguably enabled the McCarthyist apparatus to further intimidate the American public into conformity with anti-communist legislation and surveillance of suspicious activities. E.L. Doctorow fictionalizes a similar scenario in his novel *The Book of Daniel* (1971).

people being executed. No matter. The largest emotional reaction over the United States will be a rather large, democratic, infinitely bored and casual and complacent yawn. (*Journals* 541-42)

Plath insightfully connects state repression with a containment that manifests itself in a bored and apathetic mass culture that seems to passively accept the atrocity that state and media have manufactured as the closest thing to a medieval public execution. As Foucault has argued, such spectacles serve only to reinforce the ubiquitous power of state surveillance and serve to discipline the public to conform to specific ideological discourses.<sup>8</sup>

In a more public stance, Berryman wrote in a 1945 editorial published in the Dwight Macdonald-run *Politics*, that “The new energy, like the existing energies, will be at the service of the powers which possess and control it; it will change their strength but not their aims.... We stare with interest and fear upon the terror which in our name has been wrought” (qtd. in Haffenden 158). Common to each of these statements is an acknowledgement of the increased power of the state apparatus in the Cold War era and a concomitant anxiety about the psychological and physical repercussions such power will have on the individual. Berryman and Jarrell recognize the connection between atomic power and an increase in state power that will have both international and domestic repercussions. Fearing the potential consequences of their nation’s deployment of nuclear weapons, they also fear existence within a supposedly democratic nation that has just proven itself capable of world-shifting acts of violence.

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<sup>8</sup> See Michel Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish*.

The pervasive influence of containment politics meant that for midcentury autobiographic poets, the act of writing became thoroughly implicated in the rhetoric of atomic anxiety and state surveillance. Torn between allegiance to their country's fight against international communist totalitarianism, and hostile campaigns of nuclear proliferation and political repression at home, many midcentury poets found themselves in a state akin to the split atom, bristling creatively and psychologically. The trick was to forge an aesthetic response capable of containing their psychic and political fission while concealing it from state surveillance.

### **Atomic Poetics: Containment of the Fissured Self**

The implicit connections between containment in the political sphere and containment within the subjective—if politicized—self, was not lost on midcentury poets. Certainly they had little choice but to recognize the growing incursions of containment culture into their own private lives. As the political sphere invaded the lives of private Americans through its repressive surveillance tactics, it also cultivated an increasingly politicized cultural sphere. The rhetoric of containment enmeshed itself in the wider cultural economy by informing many of the primary discourses of the era. Film and television were primary sites for the distribution of narratives invested with containment rhetoric. By the middle of the 1950s, thirty-two million Americans owned television sets. The new electronic marvel instantly became a primary locus for the creation of Cold War political consensus amongst the American populous. As Whitfield reports, during the Eisenhower era “no one besides Eisenhower bestrode the video colossus more formidably than Secretary of State Dulles, who was given eighteen separate opportunities in less than seven years of office to report to viewers on the state of the planet” (156). The presence

of political leaders such as Dulles on television, combined with images broadcast from foreign hot zones such as Korea, was a new occurrence for the American populace, and allowed the government to present its take on issues with very little contradictory opinion. Dulles, for example, was fond of making “‘departure statements’ and ‘arrival statements’ from the collapsible lectern that was taken on his flights” (Whitfield 157). His travels around the globe allowed television networks to broadcast him from countless nations. As Whitfield notes, “Television and film cameramen were often encouraged on these occasions to shoot their peripatetic subject from a low angle, giving Dulles a redoubtable ‘American eagle look’” (157). This gave Dulles, and the America for which he spoke, an air of superiority; his imposing face on the television monitor signified a monolithic American presence in locations around the globe.

The consensus-forming collusion between the burgeoning television news media and the American government, while providing an overt example of the influence of television on public opinion, was mirrored in the cultural sphere by the popularity of iconic television programs such as *Leave It to Beaver*, *The Andy Griffith Show*, *The Honeymooners*, and variety programs hosted by the likes of Ed Sullivan and Perry Como. Every week, such programming emphasized the strong moral properties of nuclear family values for an ever-growing American audience. Their focus on heterosexual domestic scenarios emphasized the containment of aberrant sexuality and insisted upon the suburban home as a scene of middle-class stability, prosperity, and consumption. They helped to promote and normalize the postwar growth of a prosperous and comfortable American middle class who remained sheltered from urban socio-economic crises and more interested in keeping up with the Jones’s than keeping up with the skewed rhetoric

of American foreign affairs. Game shows that included audience participation further reinforced the American ideological discourse that prosperity was obtainable by the common individual and crime dramas featuring hard-nosed cops, exemplified by programs such as *Dick Tracy* and *Dragnet*, reiterated the authority of American judicial codes of conduct while simultaneously disciplining audiences with examples of the consequences of deviant behaviour. Discourses of normalcy that promoted the fruitful consequences of conforming to ideals of domestic consumption, and that reiterated the consequences of deviating from cultural norms, filtered into American lives in the form of television, film, radio, newspapers, magazines, and other media on a daily basis.

While television broadcast containment ideology into the homes of millions of Americans every day, the film industry also responded with an increased focus on the codes of conduct required to successfully contain the threat of communist infiltration. Films of the later Cold War era such as *Top Gun* and *Red Dawn* were part of a lineage that began with early films such as *The Red Menace* (1949), *The Red Danube* (1949), *Red Snow* (1952), and *The Steel Fist* (1952) (Whitfield 133). While such films openly confronted the communist threat, other seemingly benign films served to reinforce containment ideology. Science fiction thrillers such as *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956) played out catastrophic scenes of alien invasion on American soil that served as metonymies for the potential repercussions of Soviet nuclear action and the dehumanizing, insidious spread of Soviet communism that could change America into a culture of unfeeling, brainwashed Red zombies. Other films, such as the Alfred Hitchcock classic *Rear Window* (1954), were predicated upon an environment of suspicion and surveillance. Starring James Stewart and Grace Kelly, this film centers upon a voyeuristic

protagonist who believes he witnesses a murder while spying on his neighbours. The film reminds viewers that in an environment of suspicion, even the most discreet of actions is open to surveillance and counter-surveillance. While not uncommon to thriller films such as Hitchcock's, the pervasive influence of containment ideology found its way into even the most innocent of cinematic narratives. In a convincing reading of *Lady and the Tramp* (1955), Alan Nadel highlights the influence of containment politics on Disneyfied discourses of Cold War identity:

Ostensibly the names of the two central characters—a domesticated female spaniel named Lady and a street-smart male mutt named Tramp—the names also identify the two sexual roles available to 1950s' [sic] females, "lady" or "tramp." As in the etiquette books of the day, the health education films, and the advice manuals for teenagers, in the film's title we are reminded that male sexual activity depends on the role the woman plays. The woman's ability to contain the man's sexual drives, in other words, was synonymous with her ability to preserve her good name. (118)

Infiltration of even the most seemingly innocuous corners of film, television, and other forms of media proves that containment was more than mere government policy; it was an ideological discourse that, through its hegemony in the Cold War era, shaped the trajectory of American history and, by extension, its literary production. As Nadel asserts,

Because of the United States' unprecedented capacity in the decades following World War II to deploy arms and images, to construct alliances and markets, to dominate global entertainment, capitalize global production, and

epitomize global power, containment was perhaps one of the most powerfully deployed national narratives in recorded history. (4)

It was the containment of artistic expression with which midcentury autobiographic poets most expressly had to contend. Their responses to those anxieties manifest themselves in their private explorations of trauma, madness, and identity. Their poetics evinces a tension between containment and fracture. On one level, the private nature of their poetry suggests that it is contained within the atomized self, beyond the gaze of Cold War ideology; on another level, the personal anxiety, trauma, and fragmentation expressed in their poems overtly confronts discourses of domesticity and personal security by figuring the private American individual as threatened by a psychic dissolution caused in part by external, hostile, social forces.

While American government and media waged a campaign to assert that the communist threat could be contained in the public sphere by an adherence to principles of domesticity and through a vigilant commitment to surveillance, midcentury autobiographic poets were demonstrating that there was a psychological price to be paid for repressing the anxieties implicit in Cold War ideologies. Anne Sexton, for example, often complained of the constraints of her domesticity, and even placed a writing desk in her dining room early in her career to facilitate her joint ventures in writing and housekeeping. This feeling of domestic entrapment resonates in a 1948 letter to her parents updating her progress as a newlywed. The letter predates her writing career and her serious mental breakdowns:

My cooking has taken a slight turn for the better. This morning we had coffee cake with our breakfast. We both thought it was delicious and it was. Tonight

I made pineapple muffins—they are muffins with little bits of chopped up pineapple in them and they were also very edible. In fact I get two gold stars for today. (*A Self-Portrait in Letters* 20)

Sexton's sarcastic tone anticipates what would become one of her primary poetic themes: the tension between conforming to the cult of domesticity in the manner deemed socially appropriate for women of her generation and the desire to subsist as a creative artist. As she writes in "The Black Art," "A woman who writes feels too much, / those trances and portents" (*Collected Poems* 88). For Sexton, an autobiographic poetics threatened codes of domestic stability by projecting an uncontrollable femininity. Conscious of the relation between the cult of domesticity and Cold War politics, Sexton goes on in "The Black Art" to proclaim that "A writer is essentially a spy / Dear love, I am that girl" (*Collected Poems* 88). Recognizing that her status as a female writer goes against the grain of American Cold War rhetoric, Sexton equates herself with the potential communist spies who were marginalized and prosecuted in the Cold War State. Typical of Sexton's writing, the term "spy" also indicates that she is using her writing as a means of surveillance, of seeking out the sources of anxiety and repression in a society focused on containing and obfuscating political dissent.

In poems such as "Fall 1961," Robert Lowell captures a similar tension between the rhetoric of conforming to models of domestic containment and the psychological fission created by living in a geopolitical environment predicated upon mutually assured destruction:

All autumn, the chafe and jar  
of nuclear war;

we have talked our extinction to death.

I survive like a minnow

behind my studio window. (*For the Union Dead* 11)

The autumn setting indicates that the poem takes place in a time of foreboding, where individuals await the death signified by winter. Lowell's use of the word "jar" as a verb also puns on its status as a noun that physically contains. Nuclear war is thus positioned as something that "chafes" and "jars" precisely because the anxiety it causes is heightened by its presence and proliferation within discourses of security and containment. The image of the minnow helplessly trapped behind glass evokes an American populace contained by the rhetoric of nuclearism, anxiously waiting to be preyed upon by an unstable geopolitical situation that may ultimately seal their fate. While the passive minnow conveys the vulnerability of individual existence within the wider political landscape, the desire to write the anxieties of the era from a prone position is integral to autobiographic poetic praxis. The clarity of the window indicates that Lowell's speaker is willing to reveal the most intimate details of personal trauma and anxiety at a time when voyeuristic surveillance posed a serious threat to individual autonomy. The window reveals that the site of disclosure for the confessional poet is that which is private, outside of the domestic sphere, yet magnified by an internalized vision. However, the connection between the private self and the "chafe and jar" of nuclearism clearly implies an inherent connection between the construction of subjective identity and Cold War politics. Thus, for Lowell and his confessional contemporaries, explorations of the private self, while in most cases refraining from overt political reference, are invested with a containment ideology that pervades all facets of cultural discourse.

The move to a more revealing poetic style was politically expedient on more than one front. The open disclosure of anxiety and trauma, while veiled from overt political engagement, left the droogs of McCarthyism<sup>9</sup> with few questions about the meaning of autobiographic poems. By shedding the impersonal masks of modernist formalism, confessional poets seemed to leave their politics in the open. However, the turn towards a poetics of personality was in itself a strategic political gesture. Midcentury autobiographic poets posited the abject psyche as a site of resistance, one that could not be contained by the rhetoric of public ideology. Tension between containment in the public sphere and private disintegration is characteristic of the competing discourses cultivated by autobiographic poetics. It also marked an important break from the dominant literary discourses of the era. By the 1950s, New Criticism was at its apogee of influence in American literary scholarship. Eschewing readings that relied too heavily on historical or biographical analysis, New Criticism was predicated upon a methodology that elevated the importance of organic textual containment. For midcentury autobiographic poets, such an impersonal approach functioned as another form of containment, one that subordinated psychological and political issues to formal protocols. At this critical juncture, midcentury autobiographic poets used a personal style that explored the inherently fractured nature of the atomized self. In so doing they challenged the containment of history and personality integral to New Criticism as a literary ideology.

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<sup>9</sup> McCarthyism, or the McCarthy era, refers to a period of heightened anti-communist activity by the American government. Named for the Republican Senator Joseph McCarthy, who was famous for extolling the need for increased vigilance against the communist threat, the term does not refer exclusively to McCarthy, but to the general tactics of repression and persecution enacted by such government committees as the HUAC roughly from the late 1940s until McCarthy's death in 1956. The persecution of often innocent civil servants, actors, writers, and intellectuals that characterized McCarthyism has led some observers to label its tactics "witch hunts."

## The Cold War Academy

The evolution of “confessional” poetry in the early Cold War era corresponds with dramatic changes in the literary academy. What seems like a lack of overt political engagement in midcentury autobiographic poetry is consonant with the era’s dominant strains of literary criticism. As David Montgomery asserts, “The Cold War reshaped university structures and the content of academic disciplines, just as it penetrated the whole fabric of political and intellectual life” (xii). The transformation of the academy that occurred during the Cold War affected academics differently depending on their politics. As liberal, Left-leaning academics, particularly those who were sponsored by government money or private investors with stakes in American policy, were forced to conform to the agendas of Cold War ideologies, research methodologies were skewed in favour of postwar ideology. Intellectuals unwilling to abandon their commitment to what they viewed as more just political visions were more often than not removed from their posts and forced to appear before government committees. As R.C. Lewontin explains,

Both by its material manifestations and through the ideological atmosphere that it was instrumental in creating, the Cold War was responsible for an unprecedented and explosive expansion of the academy. Moreover, by making entrepreneurial professors the conduits through which extraordinary sums of public money have flowed into the universities, the Cold War has provided academics as a profession with a potent weapon in their struggle for power within their institutions.<sup>10</sup> (2)

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<sup>10</sup> For an extensive analysis of the relationship between the growth of the university and Cold War politics, see Noam Chomsky et al., *The Cold War & the University*.

The connection between external funding and research, because of the interests of both public and corporate investments, continues to be hotly contested in contemporary academia. While literary studies, because of its lack of industrial connections, appears to be a benign discipline, its development nevertheless shifted during this period of Cold War academic expansion. Tangible, if mild, connections between literary studies and Cold War ideology could be observed in the rhetoric of certain granting institutions. For example, Henry Allen Moe, President of the Guggenheim Foundation, “thundered in his biennial reports on behalf of freedom and against those who would restrain it, proclaimed loyalty to the nation our highest duty ... and promised that no member of the Communist Party would receive Guggenheim funding” (Ohmann 75-76). Such small links hardly amount to the tacit participation of literary studies in Cold War ideology on the scale experienced in scientific, technological, and economic disciplines. Rather, as Richard Ohmann points out, literary studies played a role in the Cold War “not by selling our unwanted expertise, not by perfecting the ideology of free world and evil empire, but by doing our best to take politics out of culture and by naturalizing the routines of social sorting” (85).

This depoliticization of English literature was in large part due to the influence of New Criticism. By helping to establish guidelines for textual analysis, New Criticism allowed uninitiated readers a means of decoding the ambiguities, paradoxes, and ironies of, for instance, Shakespeare, Donne, Keats, and even Eliot. This emphasis on access to the poem coincides with the rise of a postwar mass culture that led to increasingly diverse enrolments at academic institutions. From such a perspective, New Criticism appears to have led to a greater democratization of the literary text, one that should have helped

cultivate a more literate and politically engaged culture. However, the connections between specialized poetic jargon and the institutionalization of literary studies as a discipline worked to contain the poetic text as much as it sought to democratize interpretive strategies. As Edward Brunner explains,

By insisting on the autonomy of the artwork, the New Criticism democratized the reading site. At the same time, the New Criticism succeeded in professionalizing that reading site by claiming a distinct set of interpretive procedures that would do justice to the literary text. Once the merit of a work of art was dependent upon its accessibility, then obscurity in poetry was no longer a virtue but a symptom of a particular failure: a mark of the incomplete work of the poet whose poems had not been suitably revised and polished. In the properly completed poem, all the elements had been placed in the service of communicating to the reader, who would be continually reassured that this work was ready for the reading and rereading that was necessary for it and which it deserved. All the parts were packed in place, all the material was properly assembled; everything was awaiting the attentive reader. (7)

The New Critical notion that the effective poem is based upon the assemblage of constituent formal elements functioned in itself as a form of containment. While tensions could still exist within the poetic text, the poem was a vessel that did not explicitly engage with wider sociocultural issues. So while New Criticism sought a greater textual democratization, its exaltation of formalism over historical or dialectical materialism divorced the poem from its social context and thus reflected a concomitant diminishing of

the poem's effectiveness as a social document. Poetry became something studied in institutionalized vacuums, not something that spoke to issues in the real world. As Brunner contends, "Formalism in this regard does not offer itself as a set of intimidating gestures that are tokens of elitism but as an assemblage of useful techniques that guarantee consumer usability. The new poem of the 1950s comes to the reader as helpfully pre-interpreted" (7).

The notion of the poem as a consumable artifact suggests correlations between New Criticism's democratization of literary access and the rise of postwar mass culture. Most often seen as a threat to highbrow arts and intellectual pursuits, the rapid expansion of Cold War mass culture was a source of anxiety for postwar intellectuals. Influential studies such as David Riesman's *The Lonely Crowd* (1950) and William H. Whyte's *The Organization Man* (1956) analyzed changes in human social dynamics in an America based on consumer capitalist values. Lamenting what he regards as a burgeoning generation of bureaucrats, Whyte mocks the conformity he sees on university campuses:

Come spring and students may start whacking each other over the head or roughing up the townies and thereby causing a rush of concern over the wild younger generation. But there is no real revolution in them, and the next day they likely as not will be found with their feet firmly on the ground in the recruiters' cubicles. (83)

While this formalist approach may have made poetry accessible for a wider audience, it also, in the minds of midcentury autobiographic poets, cultivated a conformity that amounted to a formulaic of reading. The poem had become a text to be decoded, an object of consumption in a critical economy that neglected its most potent and visceral

elements, namely those that challenged the very conformity of the containment culture from which New Criticism emerged.

Midcentury autobiographic poets reacted against this sense of critical conformity. Their visceral portraits of abject psychological dissolution not only jarred with New Critical notions of poetic methodology by egregiously succumbing to such shortfalls as the affective and intentional fallacies, they also sought to reconnect poetry to the social and cultural spheres of American life. In a 1961 interview with Frederick Seidel, Lowell outlined what he regarded as problematic about poems written with New Critical methodologies in mind:

Poets of my generation and particularly younger ones have gotten terribly proficient at these forms. They write a very musical, difficult poem with tremendous skill, perhaps there's never been such skill. Yet the writing seems divorced from the culture. It's become too much something specialized that can't handle much experience. It's become a craft, purely a craft, and there must be some breakthrough back into life. (*Collected Prose* 244)

This "breakthrough back into life" is what Lowell and his autobiographic contemporaries sought to accomplish, not from a naïve or cathartic perspective, but from a position that recognized the inherent relationship between poetry and society. A necessary component of such a "breakthrough back into life" was the exploration of themes explicit enough to overcome the impersonal polish of New Critical poetics: a focus on the traumas of the self constituted as a dialectical struggle between the individual psyche and a repressive Cold War culture.

Berryman summarizes this tension between individual “constitution” and anxiety in a culture of consumption in poems such as “Dream Song 311”:

Hunger was constitutional with him,  
women, cigarettes, liquor, need need need  
until he went to pieces.  
The pieces sat up & wrote. They did not heed  
their piecedom but kept very quietly on  
among the chaos. (333)

Punning on the word “constitution,” Berryman here links an insatiable urge to consume within the American democratic system to personal breakdown. In the mass cultural era, capitalist consumption was linked to issues of domestic and personal security. Berryman posits this desire to achieve personal stability through consumption as reckless and destructive. He also seems to pun on the New Critical notion of the poem as a consumable object. Employing the affective fallacy as a poetic strategy, Berryman’s poem challenges strategies of critical containment by employing an obscure, paratactic style that mirrors its thematic focus on disintegration.

What is important from the perspective of the autobiographic writer here is that in spite of the forces of disintegration that affect Berryman’s narrator, “The pieces” of the disparate self still “sat up & wrote.” Berryman’s poem suggests that part of the mandate of autobiographic poetics is to chronicle this sense of disarray from within a fragmented, psychic state. There is no desire to contain trauma or to integrate its tensions with wider cultural discourses or formalist literary properties; rather, the fragmented perspective adopted by Berryman and other autobiographic writers asserts the heterogeneity of

perception in an age of anxiety. The autobiographic style of Berryman and his contemporaries asserts that the poem in midcentury America is inherently disparate. It is an object that attests to the disintegration of the atomistic self rather than a vessel that contains disparate formal elements. By focusing on dissolution rather than integration, midcentury autobiographic poets strike a political pose within the realm of midcentury literary ideology. By “breaking back into life,” they counter the containment impulses of New Critical protocols and reassert poetry as a mode of expression deeply, and personally, invested in cultural and ideological issues.

### **Disparate Selves and Cold War Poetry**

While midcentury poets shared an aesthetics of personality deeply invested in the politics of the Cold War era, each individual poet maintained a unique and evolving style. While there is a critical tendency to group these poets under the “confessional” banner, one object of this study will be to demonstrate how each poet forged a unique poetic response to Cold War ideologies. In order to emphasize the heterogeneous nature of their poetics and to give each poet the necessary degree of critical investigation, this study focuses on a single poet in each individual chapter. These six chapters have been grouped into three primary sections.

The first section, *Witnessing Annihilation: The Negative Epistemologies of Berryman and Lowell*, focuses on the poetry of John Berryman and Robert Lowell in relation to two of early Cold War culture’s most prominent and paradoxical issues: the pervasive spectre of nuclear oblivion and the difficulty of bearing public witness to repression in an era of politically sanctioned containment. The section counters conventional claims about the apolitical nature of autobiographic poetics by arguing that

both Berryman and Lowell initiate a poetic praxis by documenting the effects of repression and anxiety on the fragmented individual psyche. For both poets, the postwar period ushered in a crisis of consciousness, one that shattered the possibility of reviving bourgeois normality. Rather than offering narcissistic explorations of their own personal experiences, their confessional poetry works to reject shallow Cold War reifications of existence founded upon transcendent Western epistemological notions of truth or morality. Instead, they ground their poetics in a negative epistemology that foregrounds identity as inherently decentred, fragmented, and confronted by an essential absence at the core of existence. For each poet, it is from this abject space of absence and trauma that the recuperation of postwar identity must take place. Their poetics therefore respond to the challenges of constructing identity from a shattered postwar consciousness.

For Berryman, this formulation of identity is grounded in the concept of witnessing. The first chapter, "Cold War (Wit)ness: John Berryman's Double-Talk Poetics," examines several of Berryman's key *Dream Songs* as documents that speak to the psychology of repression in the postwar paradigm. Taking Whitman's *Song of Myself* as his model, Berryman's *Dream Songs* provide an updated version of the American democratic spirit from a mid-twentieth-century perspective. They function as a negation of Whitman's poem by bearing witness to the era's sociopolitical cacophony, rather than its harmony. For Berryman, bearing witness demanded the development of a unique structural poetics, one that voiced its political opposition through parataxis and discord instead of overt statement. Such a paratactic poetics accomplishes two primary goals: its strained syntax and ruptured grammaticisms attest to the psychological strains characteristic of the era and its obtuse nature allows for the expression of political dissent

in the form of a poetic double-talk that avoids the surveillance of state repression. By making this space of rupture and loss the starting point for his poetics, Berryman critiques the trauma and repression of the Cold War era and locates the source for the reclamation of autonomy in a negative epistemology that resists containment and conformity. Though seldom overtly public in their critiques, Berryman's *Dream Songs* are strong testimonials of the pathologies inherent in an age of repression, anxiety, and persecution.

The second chapter, "Learning to Love the Bomb: Robert Lowell's Pathological Poetics," also analyzes the relationship between poetry and negative epistemology in the postwar era. Looking specifically at several poems from Lowell's most notably "confessional" books, *Life Studies* and *For the Union Dead*, it investigates the relationship between nuclear anxiety and mental illness by considering the metaphorical correlations that exist in the absence at the core of the nuclear hypocentre and the loss of epistemological value at the core of midcentury American society.

For Lowell, the pervasiveness of nuclear anxiety raises questions about the relationship of madness to atomic nothingness. In both *Life Studies* and *For the Union Dead*, Lowell uses his own illness as a metaphor for the epistemological madness of the nuclear age. In several of Lowell's madness poems, the figurative absence at the hypocentre of nuclear epistemology finds its symbolic equivalent in the figure of the depressive trying to recover the lost object at the core of the self. Seeking a referent capable of articulating the nothingness at the hypocentre of nuclear consciousness, Lowell turns to a poetics of madness that dramatizes the pathological fission of the ego in the age of atomic anxiety. By dramatizing the volatility of the subjective ego in atomic culture, Lowell attests to the impossibility of containing nuclear anxiety and refigures the Cold

War subject as inherently displaced and pathological. This is Lowell's point of praxis: by accepting nothingness as a primary cultural referent, he deconstructs conventional notions of stable identity and posits the fragmented, decentred ego as the locus for the reclamation of autonomy in a repressive Cold War society.

The dissertation's second section, *'Though this is madness, yet there be method in 't': The Cold War Poetics of Sexton and Plath*, analyzes the ways in which these two poets appropriate discourses of psychology and Terror<sup>11</sup> in order to deconstruct their interpellation as Cold War subjects. As two of midcentury poetry's most provocative, nakedly "confessional," and tragic figures, Sexton and Plath have each earned a significant level of notoriety—and infamy—within the literary establishment and beyond. This section argues that like the poetics of Berryman and Lowell, the autobiographic poetics of Sexton and Plath are deeply invested in the politics of the Cold War. Focusing specifically on Sexton's poetics of mental illness and on Plath's infamous Holocaust poems, this section argues that for these poets confessionalism is an act of self-invention rather than self-discovery. By appropriating the iconography of analysis and persecution, each interrogates and deconstructs the relationship between dominant Cold War ideology and the formation of a disciplined and normalized identity.

The third chapter, "Fastening a New Skin: Anne Sexton and the Confessional Paradigm," analyzes poems invested in psychological breakdown from Sexton's first two collections, *To Bedlam and Part Way Back* and *All My Pretty Ones*. It focuses specifically on poems in which Sexton's persona enters into dialogue with an authority figure intent

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<sup>11</sup> I use the capitalized "Terror" in a sense that resembles Maurice Blanchot's usage of the term in his essay "Literature and the Right to Death," in which it signifies a moment of trauma powerful enough to inscribe the awareness of death as a final vestige of sovereignty.

on helping to shape or instruct her personal and poetic identities. By focusing on this patient/analyst dialectic, this chapter claims that Sexton seeks to expose discourses of “normalcy” as thoroughly invested in Cold War containment ideology. I posit that Sexton’s poetics, so often regarded as primarily therapeutic and cathartic, in actuality manifest themselves as a thoroughly political critique of Cold War ideology’s implications for the institutions of psychological health.

The fourth chapter, entitled “Towards a Poetics of Terror: Sylvia Plath and the Instant of Death,” focuses primarily on the controversial Holocaust poems from Plath’s *Ariel*. This chapter counters arguments that Plath’s appropriation of Holocaust imagery is an act of exploitation by contending that the Holocaust’s metaphorical connotations evoke a Terror that evokes the limits of experience. Plath’s poetics is driven by a fascination with a Terror powerful enough to conjure an encounter with the impossible instant of death. Her evocation of the Holocaust acts as a vehicle for approaching the “essential solitude” opened by the recognition of the right to death as the only sovereign right in an era of containment and repression. Thus for Plath, the appropriation of the Terror of the Holocaust is an act of revolution instead of an act of exploitation, one aimed at reclaiming a sovereign identity from the constraints of Cold War ideology.

The third section, *Critical Menace: The Anti-Establishment Poetics of Schwartz and Jarrell*, examines the relationship between Cold War ideology and the institutions of literary criticism in postwar America. It analyzes the poetry of Randall Jarrell and Delmore Schwartz within its context of Marxist and New Critical literary politics, and in relation to the institutionalization of English as a critical and theoretical discipline. By focusing on these two poets, the section demonstrates the ways in which Cold War

ideology shaped and influenced the development of literary studies, and the ways in which midcentury poets conceived of an autobiographic poetry as a means of countering discourses of cultural hegemony.

The fifth chapter, entitled “Delmore Schwartz and the Poetics of Everyday Life,” situates Schwartz within his late 1930s and 1940s literary milieu. By focusing on this contentious era, one that saw the Leftist radicalism of writers such as Edmund Wilson and those associated with the *Partisan Review* compete with the conservative formalism of the burgeoning New Critics, this chapter sheds light on the relationship between literary and Cold War politics. Centering on Schwartz, an itinerant poetic figure who moved between *Partisan* and New Critical allegiances, the chapter exposes the pressures and politicking inherent to the formulations of ideological perspectives. A close reading of several of Schwartz’s pivotal early poems positions him as a pioneer in the movement towards an autobiographic poetics. Recognizing the static, often politically motivated, nature of the era’s dominant Marxist and New Critical literary ideologies, Schwartz turns to an autobiographic poetics that reveals similarities between psychological and cultural repression. For Schwartz, the self serves as a site for exploring the implicit heterogeneity of individual identity, a heterogeneity that defies ideological containment. His focus on the quotidian elements of personal history recovers and exploits the quotidian details repressed by containment ideology and posits the self as engaged in a plurality that voices resistance in an unquantifiable individuality. Schwartz cultivates a poetics grounded in psychoanalytic historiography that emphasizes the destabilizing potential of autobiography at a time when the literary establishment sought allegiance to totalizing literary discourses.

The sixth and final chapter, entitled “New Critical Conspiracy Theory: Randall Jarrell and the Poetics of Dissent,” analyzes correlations between New Criticism’s promotion of reading practices that seek to contain textual tensions such as irony, ambiguity, and paradox, and the Cold War political desire to “contain” the geopolitical anxieties of the era. For Jarrell, New Criticism’s isolationist focus on the text was a thoroughly political gesture, one that helped cultivate a cultural ethos of liberal disengagement from political realities, and one that contributed to poetry’s growing obscurity and irrelevance in the political sphere. Challenging the critical hegemony of New Critical protocols, Jarrell uses his acerbic style to call for a properly dialectical approach to poetics, an approach that he fulfills in his own poetry. By examining the relationship between subjective identity and capitalist ideology, Jarrell’s poetry uses autobiography to forge a dialectical materialist critique of Cold War political, and literary, ideologies.

While each chapter and section focuses on unique elements of Cold War poetry, politics, and culture, their overall themes repeatedly intersect and ultimately demonstrate containment ideology’s irreversible imbrication in midcentury poetry and poetics. The blend of historiographic, theoretical, and poetic criticism that comprises this dissertation’s methodology demonstrates the investment these autobiographic poets made in the political and cultural realities of their day. It reasserts their presence as politically charged artists, and provides a new poetic lens through which to explore Cold War literary history.

**Witnessing Annihilation: The Negative Epistemologies of Berryman and Lowell**

Cold War (Wit)ness: John Berryman's Double-Talk Poetics

*These Songs are not meant to be understood, you understand.*

*They are only meant to terrify & comfort*

—John Berryman, "Dream Song 366"

In *Witness*, his epic, histrionic, and often self-aggrandizing memoir, the reformed communist and senior editor of *Time Magazine* Whittaker Chambers recalls the sense of moral obligation he felt when subpoenaed to testify before HUAC in 1948:

I snapped on the light and wrote my managing editor and understanding friend a brief memo. I told him that I expected to be subpoenaed. I told him that any act a man performs, even the simplest and best, may set up reverberations of evil whose consequences it is beyond our power to trace; that my action might cause great suffering. But one man must always be willing to take upon himself the onus of evil that other men may be spared greater evil. For the sake of his children and my own, that all children might be spared the evil of Communism, I was going to testify. (531)

While Chambers portrays his testimony as an act of patriotic heroism, he was in fact performing a duty that government agencies would force hundreds of other Americans to perform as the anti-communist investigations of the 1940s and 1950s intensified.

Chambers was a key witness in the case against Alger Hiss,<sup>12</sup> the decorated and dignified State Department bureaucrat, secretary general of the inaugural meeting of the United

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<sup>12</sup> Hiss was convicted of perjury in 1950 after two trials, the first resulting in a hung jury. He was sentenced to five years imprisonment. He could not be charged with espionage as the statute of limitations on the case had run out. Although Chambers admitted to several counts of perjury during HUAC's investigations of the Hiss case, he was never charged with a crime and *Witness* became a national bestseller. The case against Hiss remains controversial; his conviction hinged largely upon the testimony of Chambers. For more information, see Ellen Schrecker's *The Age of McCarthyism* or Stephen J. Whitfield's *Culture of the Cold War*.

Nations, president of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, and, to his demise, Soviet agent. According to Chambers, he met Hiss during his own involvement with the Communist party, which purportedly ended in 1938. Though Chambers claims to have once regarded Hiss and his wife as “friends as close as a man ever makes in life” (*Witness* 70), his testimony against Hiss helped secure an indictment for perjury in 1949.

Hiss’s indictment was a pivotal moment in American Cold War culture. The publicity it generated helped further galvanize the public against the communist threat. Hiss’s station as a seemingly mild-mannered, ambitious, and conscientious federal employee only highlighted the duplicitous nature of Soviet agents. The case told the public in no uncertain terms that if the most innocuous of individuals could be spying for the Reds, then an even more vigilant surveillance of coworkers, neighbours, even friends was required to prevent communist infiltration. Citizens with Leftist sympathies and feelings of political dissent (often considered coextensive in the early Cold War era) could no longer escape the panoptic surveillance of a public that had become ideologically mobilized against the invasive Red Menace. Hiss’s conviction helped legitimize an increasingly pervasive discourse of anti-communist ideology that sought to contain and exploit the fear endemic to the nuclear era. This anti-communist discourse incorporated agendas of domestic security, internationalism, and xenophobia in a rhetorical strategy that sought to *contain* dissent and which repressed, on the level of official culture, the legitimate anxiety raised by the spectre of atomic oblivion.

It is therefore not surprising that in an era of stigmatization and repression a more private, personal style of poetry emerged. The work of John Berryman exemplifies this poetic turning away from the gaze of state surveillance and towards an exploration of the

private ego. *The Dream Songs*, his long-poem masterwork, functions as a sequence of private Cold War testimonials. The poems bear witness to the latent psychological damage caused by the combination of repressive state policies and the epistemological uncertainty that entered American consciousness with the detonation of nuclear weapons in Japan. The instability of his gnarled syntax and ruptured grammaticisms, combined with the anxiety, avarice, guilt, and depression, endured by his protagonist Henry, allow Berryman to forge a metacommentary on midcentury political and cultural ideologies that testifies to the latent pathologies of containment culture without naming the names of its promoters or exposing its author as seditious.

Modeled on, by Berryman's own admission, Walt Whitman's *Song of Myself*, the long poem re-examines the status of the self in postwar America only to find Whitman's spirit of democratic optimism replaced with an ego torn asunder by the tension between the spectre of nuclear oblivion and the repression of containment culture. Taking the fragmented ego as his starting point, Berryman employs a paratactic poetics of "double-talk" that bears witness to the era's psychological trauma. For Berryman, the fragmented nature of the postwar self contains the seeds of poetic praxis: by accepting anxiety and loss as primary elements of individual experience, he develops a poetic identity grounded in negative epistemology. From this negative epistemology he reclaims a compromised agency capable of a resistance that configures postwar identity as inherently fractured and unstable. His strained, double-talking poetic style enacts a critique of the anxiety and stress on the ego in postwar culture while remaining below the disciplining gaze of state surveillance.

“Of all nations,” wrote Walt Whitman in his 1855 preface to *Leaves of Grass*, “the United States with veins full of poetical stuff most needs poets and will doubtless have the greatest and use them the greatest. Their Presidents shall not be their common referee so much as poets shall” (9). By the mid-1950s, one hundred years after Whitman published his preface, his optimism could not have appeared more misguided (nor, arguably, could America have been more in need of its poets). The fact that the Walt Whitman School of Social Science in Newark, New Jersey was one of dozens of organizations listed by the Attorney General as potentially totalitarian, fascist, communist, or subversive, reveals metaphorically the suspicion with which poets in particular, and the cultural humanities in general, were viewed by the American anti-communist apparatus. The ambiguous nature of poetry could easily have concealed what FBI director J. Edgar Hoover referred to as the “deceptiveness of the ‘double talk’” of Communism, which fulfilled “the useful propaganda technique of confusion” (qtd. in Schrecker, *The Age of McCarthyism*, 129).

Within this repressive climate poets such as Berryman had real cause for concern. Berryman relied upon university postings to sustain himself throughout his career, the better part of which was spent teaching at Princeton and the University of Minnesota. At a time when academics were being routinely purged from their posts for eliciting communist sympathies, publishing poetry that conveyed Leftist political sympathies—or even dissenting views that could have been construed as Leftist by anti-communist committees—was tantamount to professional suicide.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> In “English and the Cold War,” Richard Ohmann argues that academic institutions, by refusing to challenge investigations and purges occurring within the academy, were complicit in Cold War witch hunts: “Major academic institutions evaded issues, sought compromises, remained silent. Universities let HUAC

The trick, for Berryman, was to use “deceptiveness” and “double talk” to his advantage. By cultivating an ambiguous, subjective poetry that emphasized personal and psychological dissolution, he created a poetics of double-talk that evoked the anxiety of the tense Cold War environment without ever explicitly challenging or engaging the state apparatus responsible for that anxiety. In “Dream Song 8,” for example, Berryman employs an esoteric metaphor of personal decay in order to build a tension between surface existence and inner turmoil:

The weather was fine. They took away his teeth,  
white & helpful; bothered his backhand;  
halved his green hair.  
They blew out his loves, his interests. ‘Underneath,’  
(they called in iron voices) ‘understand,  
is nothing. So there.’

The weather was very fine. They lifted off  
his covers till he showed, and cringed & pled  
to see himself less.  
They installed mirrors till he flowed. ‘Enough’  
(murmured they) ‘if you will watch Us instead,  
yet you may saved be. Yes.’

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and anti-Communist trustees set the agenda: they advised faculty members to come clean; they accepted and used FBI information; they set up their own inquisitions.... Their guild organization, the American Association of Universities, publicly stated that administrations and faculty members had a duty to cooperate with investigators, and that one of the latter who declined was probably not fit to teach” (82-83). Ellen Schrecker, in *No Ivory Tower*, compiles a list of notable academics who were fined or dismissed for refusing to testify or for taking the Fifth Amendment. The list includes, among others, Kenneth Burke, who was denied employment at the University of Washington.

The weather fleured. They weakened all his eyes,  
and burning thumbs into his ears, and shook  
his hand like a notch.  
They flung long silent speeches. (Off the hook!)  
They sandpapered his plumpest hope. (So capsize.)  
They took away his crotch. (10)

Located early in the collection, the poem immediately distinguishes between a calm surface and a psychic state tormented by persecution. At the beginning of each stanza, Berryman declares that the weather was fine, evoking a superficial discussion that ignores, or refuses to engage, more serious issues. The superficiality of the calm climate is then immediately, and paratactically, juxtaposed with images of inquisition and decay. Berryman's unnamed subject, presumably Henry, the protagonist of *The Dream Songs*, is systematically prodded and tormented by an unnamed "They," who remove his teeth, halve his "green hair," and blow out his loves and interests. His torment is described with strained grammaticisms that heighten the poem's tension and convey the sense that the subject, like his sentences, is under duress. The focus on weather signifies not only environmental conditions but also the calm political and cultural climate that the containment apparatus sought to project onto the Cold War public. The paratactic juxtaposition between the climate and ambiguous forces of persecution indicates that political calmness is obtained (and maintained) by aggressively suppressing individual autonomy and expression.

This violent suppression appears in the actions performed against Henry's body as he is taken apart by nameless agents. The images of decay amount to an ironic reversal of the biological metaphors associated with the insidious disease of communism. Disease and decay, for Berryman's poetic subject, comes not from virulent communism but from the state apparatus mobilized to contain its spread. By taking away his teeth and backhand (with both its anatomical and sports connotations), the ambiguous "They" disarm Berryman's subject, making him defenceless against their violations of his personal autonomy. His loss of love and interests renders him flaccid and implies a transition from a state of vigour and creativity to a state of apathetic conformity evocative of the conformity advocated by containment ideology. The inquisitors' reminder that "'Underneath,' ... is nothing" reads like an appeal against autobiographic poetry's impulse to find meaning by exploring the self in its relation to the wider social context. For the "They," the speaker's exploration of personal subjectivity allows him to maintain a sense of autonomy that cannot be controlled by their repressive tactics.

For Berryman, however, the "nothing" that is "underneath" also connotes an essential nothingness at the core of experience. When Henry glimpses beyond the containment consciousness perpetuated by the Cold War apparatus, he encounters an epistemological absence at the core of experience. His recognition of this absence leads to a loss of faith in the conventional, humanistic epistemological values that, as some commentators have observed, were displaced by the trauma and violence of the Second World War. As John Gery asserts, "for the thinking person in the aftermath of the horrors of Auschwitz to be alive means to encounter an emptiness or nothingness within the self. This is the paradox of post-Auschwitz consciousness" (22). In poems such as "Dream

Song 8,” Berryman intensifies this paradox by demonstrating that the postwar individual is afflicted not only by nothingness but also by the discourse of containment propagated to control the anxiety linked to nothingness. The self is therefore torn between a desire for autonomy and coercions to conformity.

In “Dream Song 8,” Henry’s disintegration at the hands of a faceless containment ideology forces him to develop new methods of testifying to the psychic traumas intrinsic to Cold War experience. Prevented from critiquing ideology on the level of clear, realist discourse, he adopts a subversive poetic double-talk that “epitomizes a poetic tradition marked by fragmentation, interconnection, lack of closure, loss of meaning, and, most importantly . . . the collapse of a coherent subjectivity” (Martin 189). Berryman’s poetic application of this tense, fragmented state of consciousness in the postwar environment is his most revolutionary gesture. Far from probing the self for a stable, centered ego in a tense psychic and political environment, *The Dream Songs* assert fragmentation as an essential component of postwar identity. Recognizing that sovereignty lies in the acceptance of an agency afflicted by trauma is where praxis begins for Berryman: his composition of a poetics of fragmented identity, while accepting anxiety and loss as inherent components of experience, allows him to reclaim a compromised agency that resists the standardization of containment ideology. “Dream Song 8” thrives on the “double talk” Hoover warned Americans against, using it not to allay communist messages, but to disclose the fragmented nature of selfhood in an age caught between the spectre of oblivion and the agencies of repression.

This poetic double-talk becomes clearer in the second stanza of “Dream Song 8,” where after being surrounded by mirrors that prompt him into a state of self-examination,

Henry begins to “flow.” The esoteric application of the verb “flow” evokes multiple meanings. On one level, it registers a purgative bleeding or crying related to his loss of identity; Henry’s sense of stable selfhood figuratively flows out of him as he endures the attacks of his interrogators. On another level, the “flow” evokes the flow of the pen, or the act of writing an unstable identity that is further destabilized by the incursions of his interlocutors. The nameless “They” who have coerced the subject into this state of flowing seem to recognize immediately that they have seen ““Enough”” and that the subject should watch *them* instead if he wishes to be saved. This recognition indicates that introspection beyond the gaze of state surveillance, and more importantly the recording of that introspection in the form of writing, threatens and subverts their authority and therefore must be contained.

The broken, paratactic style of Berryman’s poetics is devised specifically with the subversion of such containment in mind. It is stylistically evocative of what Theodor Adorno identifies as the paratactic method in Friedrich Holderlin’s late hymns and fragments. According to Adorno, parataxis, or the “juxtaposition, without explanatory correctives, of various syntactical and grammatical elements” works to “reject a bourgeois poetic realism that strives to duplicate the unfreedom of human beings, their subjection to machinery and its latent law, the commodity form” (*Notes to Literature Vol. 1* 127). In Adorno’s terms, a fractured, paratactic style is a necessary means of destabilizing the reality from which conventional notions of self have been estranged. The flow of Henry’s selfhood in “Dream Song 8” is disrupted by the paratactic method through which it is communicated. As such, it evokes the fragmented postwar psyche. *The Dream Songs* therefore *witness* the fractured nature of the ego on the level of

structure as much, or more, than on the level of content. By integrating the concept of witnessing into his structural paradigm, Berryman emulates the manner in which anxiety and repression destabilize both political and psychological structures within the Cold War paradigm in a manner that circumvents the gaze of state surveillance.

While this paratactic flow of language seeks to subvert containment, the final stanza implies that overcoming such repression is difficult. Henry is subjected to torture; his eyes are “weakened” and his ears plugged by “burning thumbs” as he listens to “long silent speeches.” The silent speeches evoke the rhetoric of Cold War political ideology. Their assault on the subject’s eyes and ears conveys the irritating persistence with which the Cold War citizen is exposed to a containment rhetoric that ranged from overt political speeches to discourses of consumerism and domesticity generated by an increasingly pervasive mass culture. It also indicates the psychological toll of repression and anxiety insofar as cognitive faculties are being attacked. Henry is broken by his interlocutors; he is no longer able to see, hear, or feel the effects of government repression. Berryman finds political recourse in Henry’s suffering, which for him signifies the level of psychological numbing that is the result of the repression of the Cold War apparatus. And while the speeches are “silent,” an adjective that evokes both their lack of substantive meaning and their lack of visible effect on the public, their persistence and prevalence is still powerful enough not only to sandpaper his speaker’s “plumpest hope” for discovering a stable identity, but also to “take away his crotch.” This final, emasculating blow points to a lack of potency on behalf of the individual citizen, and a loss of fertility within the American critical and creative paradigm. The Cold War apparatus, by way of its tactics of repression and coercion, bullies citizens into a state of conformity that effectively

castrates critical and creative concerns. The castration places the subject in a position of inferiority, one that closets, or contains, his identity. Berryman's sexual metaphor registers not only a loss of reproductive power against the ambiguous "They," the state-sanctioned agencies of containment ideology, but also the implicit alterity of his subject. His castrated, closeted sexuality subordinates his identity to a vigorous, public authority. As subsequent *Dream Songs* make clear, it is into the cloistered recesses of his own subjectivity, rather than to an outwardly combative resistance, that Henry must turn in order to expose the psychic fragmentation endured by his identity.

The need for a poetics capable of recording the anxieties of postwar experience is suggested by the immense and successful impact the "silent speeches" of Cold War ideology had on the American populace. Evidence indicates that most Americans were listening carefully to the warnings about the communist menace issued by their government. Propagating the metaphor of communism-as-disease, FBI director J. Edgar Hoover, whose own closeted sexuality has posthumously made him an infamous personage,<sup>14</sup> warned in a 1947 HUAC testimonial "Communism ... is a way of life—an evil and malignant way of life. It reveals a condition akin to disease that spreads like an epidemic and like an epidemic a quarantine is necessary to keep it from infecting the nation" (qtd. in Schrecker, *The Age of McCarthyism* 133). The public testimony of HUAC witnesses such as Chambers, Hiss, and Hoover helped facilitate unprecedented measures of political repression. It is no coincidence that within two weeks of Hiss's sentencing "the Lincoln Day orator for the Republican Women of Wheeling, West Virginia, Senator

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<sup>14</sup> In *Official and Confidential: The Secret Life of J Edgar Hoover*, Anthony Summers quoted an unnamed witness who alleged to have witnessed Hoover engaging in cross-dressing and homosexual activities. While the accusations are uncorroborated, Hoover's sexual inclinations have remained the object of widespread speculation since his death.

Joseph McCarthy (R. Wis.) claimed to have in his hand a list of 205 Communists” still working for the U.S. State Department (Whitfield 29). Throughout the McCarthy era, hundreds of public officials, intellectuals, actors, writers, and private citizens were systematically called to testify before HUAC. Many, including the infamous Hollywood Ten<sup>15</sup> were denied Fifth Amendment rights and cited for contempt for their refusal to cooperate with the commission. Others, fearing for their personal well-being and the well-being of their families, spared themselves by naming names, often, as in the case of Chambers, those of close friends and associates. It was, as Ellen Schrecker observes, “a crude political test—and one that caused enormous anguish for the committees’ witnesses,” particularly because “By the 1950s, many of the people who appeared before HUAC and the other committees had already dropped out of the Communist party and were no longer politically active” (*The Age of McCarthyism* 66).

For Berryman, as for many Americans, the anguish caused by repression was doubled by the epistemological incertitude created by the spectre of the bomb. The paradoxical tension between the desire for affirmation against both repression and the spectre of oblivion demanded a poetics capable of confronting and exploring that trauma and tension head-on, one that overcame modernist impersonality and broke back into personal life. Berryman’s focus on anguish highlights a personal reaction to policies of cultural standardization. There is little question that the aggressive tactics of committees

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<sup>15</sup> On November 25, 1947, ten influential Hollywood writers and directors were “blacklisted” and fired from their positions with the Motion Picture Association of America. The blacklisting came the day following their citation for Contempt of US Congress after they refused to give testimony to HUAC. Those named included Ring Lardner, Jr. and Dalton Trumbo. While this blacklisting remains one of the McCarthyism’s most infamous, it was by no means its only. The appearance of a pamphlet called *Red Channels* in 1950, which named 151 “Red Fascists and their sympathizers,” meant many more Hollywood industry workers lost their jobs and had their reputations tarnished. The blacklist on many of those named was not lifted until approximately 1960.

such as HUAC, by bullying and at times terrifying American citizens, reinforced the supremacy of American political ideology in the public sphere. As Berryman recognizes, this repressive influence found its way beyond mass culture and into more intellectual, and supposedly autonomous, sectors of life, including the creative and critical discourses of literary studies.

The critical hegemony of formalist New Criticism throughout the Cold War era suggests that containment ideology also filtered into the academic sphere. As early as the mid-1930s, New Criticism was making poetry an increasingly specialized and institutional activity. For example, in his influential 1938 essay "Criticism, Inc.," John Crowe Ransom appeals for a criticism that "must become more scientific, or precise and systematic, and this means that it must be developed by the collective and sustained effort of learned persons—which means that its proper seat is in the universities" (94). For Ransom and other New Critics, establishing criticism as a purely academic discipline was a necessary means of countering the "affective" and "intentional" fallacies of more traditional modes of analysis.<sup>16</sup>

For Berryman and many of his midcentury autobiographic counterparts this organic approach to poetry resembled a form of containment that denied essential connections between poetry, personality, and history. The loss of poetic personality was not merely an issue of literary style or preference; rather it spoke directly to issues pertaining to the democratic status of the individual in American culture. In a repressive

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<sup>16</sup> W.K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley first explore the concept of intentional fallacy in their 1946 essay "The Intentional Fallacy." The concept is predicated upon the notion that it is fallacious to read the author's intent into a work of literature, just as it is fallacious to judge a work's merit based on the author's intent. Criticism should be based on a text's "internal evidence," which includes the words on the page and other formal elements such as irony and paradox. "External" and "contextual" evidence, according to Wimsatt and Beardsley, should be discounted.

political climate, the disengagement of New Criticism amounted to a denial of American poetry's tradition, stemming from the likes of Emerson, Whitman, and even Anne Bradstreet,<sup>17</sup> of investing itself in the social and historical issues of American democracy.

Contrasting the personal, democratic poetics of Whitman against the formalist theory of T.S. Eliot, Berryman clearly states his problem with New Criticism's reluctance to engage sociohistorical issues in a 1957 essay entitled "Song of Myself: Intention and Substance":

I call your attention to an incongruity with Eliot's amusing theory of the impersonality of the artist,<sup>18</sup> and a contrast between the mere *putting-on-record* and the well-nigh universal current notion of *creation*, or making things up. You will see that as Whitman looks more arrogant than Eliot in the Personality, he looks less pretentious in the recording—the mere-recording—poet not as *maker*, but as spiritual historian. (*Freedom of the Poet* 230)

Berryman complains that the modernism of Eliot emphasizes the creation of poetic form at the expense of the recording of events. The task of the poet, in Berryman's terms, must be to record "spiritual" history, or to capture the essence of an epoch by poetically recording events that profoundly impact human experience. It is this notion of the poet as "spiritual historian" that motivates *The Dream Songs* to engage Cold War culture.

Berryman recognized that in a dynamic cultural climate such engagement must account for shifts in historical materialism, a recognition that indicates a fundamental difference

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<sup>17</sup> A dialogue between a twentieth-century poet and his seventeenth-century muse Anne Bradstreet is the subject of Berryman's long poem *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet* (1953), which marked the turn to his distinctive, mature style.

<sup>18</sup> The essay to which Berryman is most likely referring is Eliot's "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (1919) which extols the virtues of the Classical stress on impersonality over Romantic sentimentality.

between the poetics of midcentury poets such as Berryman and the modernists that preceded them. For poets such as Eliot, the notion of what Viktor Shklovsky termed “defamiliarization,” or of making “objects ‘unfamiliar’” (Shklovsky 20) by increasing the difficulty of perception, was integral to their vision. Berryman recognized a problem inherent in the defamiliarizing process. As an aesthetic tool, modernist defamiliarization focused on specific, individual instants. By doing so it remained incapable of reconciling itself with the movement of history.

This recognition is where Berryman’s midcentury aesthetic makes its fundamental break from the poetics of modernism. A poetry capable of recording the fragmented, unstable identity afflicted by the traumas of the Second World War requires specific attention to the diachronic nature of historical narrative. By focusing acutely on the neuroses of the self in *The Dream Songs*, a long, evolving poetic sequence, Berryman reconciles the concept of defamiliarization with historical diachrony. Each poem focuses simultaneously on the individual in a given historical moment, and on the larger historical intervals that contribute to that individual’s turbulent existence. Evocatively contrasting Whitman, whose vision of the self emphasizes integration, Berryman creates an acute vision of the self torn asunder by the larger turmoil of history.

Berryman establishes his position as recorder of “spiritual history” at the outset of *The Dream Songs* in a manner that is at once obscure and politically expedient. He begins by asserting the self in terms of a negative epistemology. In the first stanza of “Dream Song 1,” Berryman captures the struggle for individual composure in a turbulent interval of history by emphasizing a paratactic tension between a disintegrating formal structure and evocatively private content:

Huffy Henry hid the day,  
unappeasable Henry sulked.  
I see his point,—a trying to put things over.  
It was the thought that they thought  
they could *do* it made Henry wicked & away.  
But he should have come out and talked. (3)

Considered strictly in terms of content, this first song introduces Henry as a “sulky,” self-pitying character. Berryman’s conscious use of childish idiom heightens the poem’s sense of juvenile narcissism: Henry, like a child, “sulked,” when he “should have come out and talked.” However, the antagonism between subjective, even childish content and the elliptical style of the poem demonstrates that Henry’s sheepishness is meant to signify more than personal shortcomings. Like actual dreams, each of Berryman’s “Dream Songs” is comprised of several layers of latent meaning obscured by its manifest, often dream-like content. As Edward Mendelson notes, dreams are not “subject to the organizing power of the dreamer himself. The poem claims to derive from mental activity at a place so deep in the poet’s self that the self is no longer in control” (54). This loss of self-control, or even responsibility for the self’s actions, is integral to the sense of frustration and anxiety found throughout the sequence.

The fact that Berryman opens the sequence of what eventually grew to 385 poems with Henry “hiding” away from the “day” suggests an unwillingness to confront personal issues and trauma. Scholars interested in Berryman’s biography have made it clear that there was no shortage of trauma in his personal life, from his father’s suicide and the deaths of such friends as Bhain Campbell, Randall Jarrell, Dylan Thomas, Theodore

Roethke, and Delmore Schwartz, to issues of infidelity in each of his marriages and his chronic alcoholism. However, precisely what Henry is hiding from is deliberately left ambiguous by Berryman, an ambiguity that is heightened by the caesura between “hid” and “day.” The fractured syntactical structure of the line leaves it unclear whether or not Henry “hid” the day away by repressing it, or is hiding from particular cultural anxieties. The white space represents both an unspeakable trauma and, as in “Dream Song 8,” an institution Henry prefers not to name for fear of reprisal. Berryman cultivates such ambiguity as a means of heightening the anxiety conveyed by the poem. He creates a sense of being threatened by an unknown menace that mimics common Cold War concerns over communist infiltration, nuclear uncertainty, and the panoptic gaze of government committees.

In order to reinforce this anxiety and uncertainty, Berryman withholds knowledge of what “the thought they thought / they could do” is, and, as in “Dream Song 8,” he refuses to name precisely who “they” are. His deliberate ambiguity situates Henry as a witness figure who is being persecuted by an unnameable trauma or entity. The fear and repressed anxiety leaves Henry unable to “come out and talk.” When considered in terms of its historical context, Henry’s desire to “hide” the cause of such collapse reveals that psychic fragmentation is rooted within a repressive cultural paradigm, a hypothesis postulated by Freud in *Civilization and Its Discontents*:

If the development of civilization has such a far-reaching similarity to the development of the individual and if it employs the same methods, may we not be justified if in reaching the diagnosis that, under the influence of

cultural urges, some civilizations, or some epochs of civilization, —possibly the whole of mankind—have become neurotic? (109)

Henry is both a survivor and witness of a cultural trauma that has manifested itself on the level of personal neurosis. Berryman therefore recognizes that those afflicted by the traumas of World War II extend beyond those who witnessed it first-hand into the general populace who live beneath its legacies of anxiety and repression. In a similar manner, the psychologist and Holocaust scholar Robert J. Lifton extends the notion of a “survivor” of the traumas of the World War II to “one who has encountered, been exposed to, or witnessed death and has himself or herself remained alive”:

Whether witness is false or true, it involves struggles with grief and mourning. Where death occurs on the scale of Nazi genocide or atomic bombings, survivors are denied not only the physical arrangements of mourning (the grave, the remains, the place of worship) but also the psychic capacity to absorb and feel these deaths, to do the work of mourning. This aborted mourning can proceed to the extent that a survivor’s existence can turn into a “life of grief.” (*The Future of Immortality* 242)

For Berryman, the cultivation of an autobiographic poetic style allows him to explore this sense of cultural mourning and grief through his own fragmented personality. His use of the confessional style allows him to investigate the relationship between government actions, containment culture, and loss while avoiding the very real threat of juridical repercussions for engaging in overtly seditious activities.

Henry’s decision to hide “the day” in “Dream Song 1” signposts the fact that the political content of the sequence must remain hidden from plain view. Instead, Berryman

makes the grief and anxiety of the era felt. The poem's paratactic style produces what Fredric Jameson terms a "dialectical shock," or a jolt that brings individuals into conscious awareness of their status as both subjects *and* objects within the Cold War dialectic, rather than as benign individuals examining the teleological unfolding of history from an exterior, neutral position:

There is a breathlessness about this shift from the normal object-oriented activity of the mind to such dialectical self-consciousness—something of the sickening shudder we feel in an elevator's fall or in the sudden dip of an airliner. That recalls us to our bodies as much as this recalls us to our mental positions as thinkers and observers. The shock indeed is basic, and constitutive of the dialectic as such: without this transformational moment, without this initial conscious transcendence of an older, more naïve position, there can be no question of any genuinely dialectical coming to consciousness. (*Marxism and Form* 308)

For Berryman, containment culture promotes conformity to a fixed ideological system that privileges containment and security over individual autonomy. His paratactic style produces such a dialectical shock: it allows for the possibility of a "coming to consciousness" that transcends naïve positions, such as those that blindly support the rhetoric of containment. It is this coming to consciousness that allows for the reclamation of agency, even if fragmented by the tensions of State apparatuses.

As "Dream Song 1" continues, Berryman suggests that Henry has undergone such a "dialectical coming to consciousness," falling from a more innocent, naïve state into an

engaged state of being that recognizes loss as implicit to both Cold War epistemology and the formation of identity in the era:

All the world like a woolen lover  
once did seem on Henry's side.  
Then came a departure.  
Thereafter nothing fell out as it might or ought.  
I don't see how Henry, pried  
open for all the world to see, survived. (3)

Resembling the Lacanian entrance into the mirror stage,<sup>19</sup> or into the process of ego formation and away from the "woolen lover" primordial world, the second stanza supports the shift from a naïve to a dialectical state of consciousness, one that recognizes his antagonistic position within a repressive culture. Characteristic of Berryman's double-speak, the adjective "woolen" is ripe with multiple meanings, at once evoking the warmth and comfort of childhood innocence, and the itch and agitation of a hair shirt, conveying Henry's irritated impatience to enter the "Real" world. The shift from the pre-conscious is instigated by a nameless, traumatic "departure." For many critics, the temptation to read this departure as the suicide of Berryman's father John Allyn Smith, who "shot his heart out in a Florida dawn" (*Dream Songs* 406) when the poet was twelve, has been overwhelming. Certainly the spectre of Berryman's father haunts the entirety of *The Dream Songs*, just as Berryman was figuratively, and often literally, haunted by the

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<sup>19</sup> In "The Mirror Stage as formative of the function of the *I* as revealed in psychoanalytic experience," the first of his *Écrits*, Lacan describes the mirror stage as the developmental point at which the infant recognizes his/her own reflection, thereby catalyzing the formation of the ego. This formation is the product of the child's identification of his/her own specular image. Lacan argues that the wholeness of the image with which the child identifies represents an ideal, and misleading, conceptualization of selfhood as singular and integrated, and instigates the individual's permanent alienation from a sense of stable ego identification.

“angry ghost” that “appeared & leaned for years / on his front stoop” (*Dream Songs* 379). However, reading the poems as thinly veiled biography ignores the fact that the character Henry, and not the man Berryman, is their protagonist.<sup>20</sup>

Berryman makes it clear that his “departure” from a stable childhood realm into a world where “nothing fell out as it might or ought” conveys more than a shallow narcissism; rather, Henry functions as a barometer of *cultural* loss. The fact that his loss is “irreversible” reveals that for Henry, self-understanding is predicated upon the experience of absence and grief, and that identity must be forged from that experience and not from the recovery of a stable selfhood. While “once in a sycamore” Henry “was glad / all at the top, and . . . sang” (3), he now resides in a place where “Hard on the land wears the strong sea / and empty grows every bed” (3). The image of the sea slowly eroding the land illustrates a persistent deterioration, one that Berryman conjoins with a sense of personal isolation and loneliness. Investing this deterioration in natural imagery evokes the manner in which containment practices appear as natural phenomena within American containment culture. It also demonstrates that just as a nameless sense of loss and guilt plagues the autonomy of individual citizens, the very stability of America as a powerful nation is being imperceptibly eroded.

Henry’s encounters with the absence at the core of postwar epistemological experience pervade *The Dream Songs*, as in “Dream Song 29,” where

there sat down, once, a thing on Henry’s heart

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<sup>20</sup> After being dismayed by much of the early commentary on *77 Dream Songs* that sought to link the author with Henry, Berryman decided to preface the complete 385 song volume with a warning to readers and critics: “The poem then, whatever its wide cast of characters, is essentially about an imaginary character (not the poet, not me) named Henry, a white American in middle age sometimes in blackface, who has suffered an irreversible loss.”

só heavy, if he had a hundred years  
& more, & weeping, sleepless, in all them time  
Henry could not make good. (33)

Here, as in “Dream Song 1,” Berryman alludes to the loss that weighs on Henry’s heart without directly naming its source. However, it is precisely his refusal to name the source of the *absence* that invokes it as a spectral *presence*. Henry is haunted by an unnamed anxiety that he “could not make good,” which signals that rectification of the burden is beyond his control. However, by acknowledging a debilitating absence as a fundamental and irreconcilable part of experience, he begins to reaffirm his position as an active agent within the repressive Cold War paradigm.

Henry is forced to come to terms with the fact that he will perpetually be haunted by an unquantifiable sadness and grief, one that several scholars, including Jacques Derrida, have argued is characteristic of the Cold War era: “the eschatological themes of ‘the end of history,’ of the ‘end of philosophy,’ of the ‘ends of man,’ of the ‘last man’ and so forth were, in the ‘50s ... our daily bread” (*Specters of Marx* 14). The sense of the end of philosophical and historical tradition alluded to by Derrida, and enhanced by the traumas of World War II, mirrors the nameless loss that pervades *The Dream Songs*. Henry, however, recognizes that nothingness is the locus for the cultivation of an identity capable of resisting discourses of containment ideology. Following Adorno, John Gery asserts that such recognition of the revolutionary potential embodied in the cultivation of nothingness is crucial to both witnessing Cold War experience and the formation of a politically motivated autobiographic poetics:

Adorno argues that, given our post-Auschwitz consciousness of annihilation, to experience a sense of “being not quite there,” of living not as oneself but as “a kind of spectator,” may be closer to the truth of living than we have heretofore acknowledged. Paradoxically, the apathetic question “what does it really matter?” which “we like to associate with bourgeois callousness” may in fact be “The line most likely to make the individual aware, without dread, of the insignificance of his existence. The inhuman part of it, the ability to keep one’s distance as a spectator and to rise above things, is in the final analysis the human part, the very part resisted by the ideologists.” (Gery 22)

While absence on one level indicates that identity and agency are inherently unstable, for Henry such fallibility, by emphasizing the “insignificance of his existence,” allows him to see past the callous nature of bourgeois poetic reality. Adorno’s assertion that Cold War consciousness is characterized by a decentering of the Heideggerian notion of “dasein,” or “being there,” and replaced by a sense of “being not quite there,” reflects Berryman’s poetic exposition of the decentred self grounded in negative epistemology. He uses this negative epistemological space as the locus for the recovery of agency. This recovery of agency is implied in the concluding stanza of “Dream Song 29,” where Henry appears to overcome, at least on a cursory level, feelings of unaccountable guilt for actions that lie beyond his own personal control:

But never did Henry, as he thought he did,  
end anyone and hacks her body up  
and hide the pieces, where they may be found.  
He knows: he went over everyone, & nobody’s missing.

Often he reckons, in the dawn, them up.

Nobody is ever missing. (33)

Unable to shake the feeling that he has committed a horrible crime, Henry is nevertheless certain that he has done nothing wrong. This tension between guilt and composure indicates that Henry is conflicted by his recognition of the negative impact containment has on the individual conscience. While the disparity between feelings of guilt and essential innocence heightens Henry's sense of "being not quite there," the very fact that he recognizes the impact of anxiety and repression on his identity signifies that he has begun to reclaim a sense of agency, that he is undergone a dialectical "coming to consciousness." While Henry feels that he is guilty of murder, he knows that "Nobody is ever missing," which signifies that even though his sense of self is complicated by anxiety and repression, his actions as an individual agent are innocent. While this agency does not allow him to recover a stable identity within the Cold War ethos, it does allow him to cultivate a negative epistemology that confronts the space of grief and loss beyond containment ideology. Henry is able to reassert his position as an individual actor, however compromised by guilt and disintegration, in a world of containment and repression intent on limiting the autonomous and dissenting voice of the American public. He is both witness and recorder of America's history of trauma and repression.

Even in poems with more overtly political themes, such as "The Lay of Ike," Berryman resists manifesting an overt critique of the policies of Eisenhower; rather, he attempts to express the sense of confusion and frustration that is immanent for the individual within the 1950s cultural dialectic:

This is the lay of Ike.

Here's to the glory of the Great White —awk—  
who has been running—er—er—things in recent—ech—  
in the United—If your screen is black,  
ladies & gentlemen, we—I like—  
at the Point he was already terrific—sick. (25)

Berryman, who composed the poem shortly after Eisenhower was elected to a second term in the White House in the late 1950s, uses the word “lay” to invoke Eisenhower as a layman, a man ill-fitted for the task of president, and to intimate the deadness of his administration by implying that Ike was “lying in state.” Noting the importance of satire in what he refers to as Berryman’s “mock elegy,” Ernest J. Smith observes how

Following the announcement of the first line, the next three lines all begin as if about to pay tribute to the president and his accomplishments, but each is in turn cut off, the poet interrupted by his own inability to conjure and articulate any significant actions, until the faceless, flat voice of a television newscaster takes over. (290)

It is through this parataxis that Berryman evokes a sense of frustration with Eisenhower without manifesting an overt critique. Smith suggests that Berryman’s style invokes a dialectic of engagement and withdrawal from political concerns in an era when America’s lack of conscience and vision made it “difficult for them to assert a political vision of their own in terms other than those of enervation and helplessness” (288). However, it seems more likely that the “enervation and helplessness” of the response is itself an engaged evocation of the limits of dissent in the McCarthy era. Berryman refuses to allow his sentences to be completed, leaving it unclear whether or not he means the

poem as praise or critique. Using guttural utterances as end points for apparent lines of praise asserts both an inability to verbally manifest such praise, and a latent disgust for Eisenhower as its subject, as in “Here’s to the glory of the Great White—awk.” While “awk” homonymically implies a rare bird—and one that is extinct, past its prime—the spelling evokes a regurgitative sound meant to convey disgust. Later unable to complete Eisenhower’s juvenile sounding “I like Ike” campaign slogan, Berryman invokes Eisenhower’s early promise at West Point Academy, where “he was already terrific-sick.” The word “sick” sits unpunctuated at the end of the stanza without making a tangible transition to the next stanza. It again serves a dual function, indicating that there is something “sick” about Eisenhower, but more importantly, something “sick” about attempting to lavish the “lay” president with such platitudes. The dissociative nature of Berryman’s form disrupts the possibility of conceptual synthesis. It acts as a counterpoint to the Eisenhower era narrative of containment while defying easy containment itself through its spasmodic, paratactic methodology.

Henry furthers the relationship between the disintegration of identity and the desire for its reclamation by connecting that desire with literary tradition in the seventy-eighth Dream Song, “Op.posth. no. 1.” The opening poem of *His Toy, His Dream, His Rest*, and the first in the “Opus Posthumous” sequence, the poem dramatizes Henry’s experience of death from a third-person perspective:<sup>21</sup>

Darkened his eye, his wild smile disappeared,  
inapprehensible his studies grew,

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<sup>21</sup> Berryman, by dramatizing death, likely draws on Emily Dickinson’s private, first-person dramatizations of the death experience. As a nineteenth-century poet interested in poeticizing subjective experience, Dickinson is an important precursor of the twentieth-century “confessional” aesthetic.

nourished he less & less  
his subject body with good food & rest,  
something bizarre about Henry, slowly sheared  
off, unlike you & you

smaller & smaller, till in question stood  
his eyeteeth and one block of memories  
These were enough for him  
implying commands from upstairs & from down,  
Walt's 'orbic flex,' triads of Hegel would  
incorporate, if you please,

into the know-how of the American bard  
embarrassed Henry heard himself a-being,  
and the younger Stephen Crane  
of a powerful memory, of pain,  
these stood the ancestors, relaxed & hard,  
whilst Henry's parts were fleeing. (93)

Once again, the poem begins with a non-specific reference to a profound loss. Henry is dying physically, spiritually, and intellectually; he no longer eats, smiles, or studies, leaving him with the feeling that "something bizarre ... slowly sheared off" of his "subject body." While subject, on one level, connotes the subjective nature of his poem, it also implies his status as a "subject" in a wider sociopolitical environment. By calling

attention to Henry's subject status, Berryman indicates that there are limitations placed upon his actions by governing institutions, which in turn implies that the "shearing off" is beyond his control, a part of the disintegration he endures within the repressive political paradigm.

Henry's disintegration continues until he is reduced to "his eyeteeth and one block of memories." The image of "eyeteeth" evokes a last vestige of identity following his decomposition. Playing with the notion that dental records are used to identify victims who lack identity, Berryman specifically chooses "eyeteeth" to imply figuratively that a vision of decomposition is linked to this last physical marker of autonomous selfhood. Also linked to Henry's remnants of identity is "one block of memories" consisting of ambiguous recollections of Whitman, Hegel, and Stephen Crane, who stood as "ancestors, relaxed & hard / whilst Henry's parts were fleeing." The three writers that comprise Henry's "block of memories" allude to a historical and intellectual tradition that has been displaced by postwar atomic reality. As spectres of the past, they signify intellectual eminence and a sense of idealistic conviction that Henry is unable to obtain in containment culture.

Each literary figure that Henry alludes to carries with him connotations of a harmony that has been displaced in contemporary culture. The "orbic flex" to which he refers appears in section 26 of *Song of Myself*, where Whitman proclaims "A tenor large and fresh as the creation fills me, / The orbic flex of his mouth is pouring and filling me" (59). Literally referring to the flex of the tenor's mouth, the musical image invokes a sense of harmony and connection achieved through artistic reception. In Whitman's poem, it invests the larger theme of cosmic unity found in the resonance between

individual identity and the flow of the natural world in sensual, erotic terms. Although Berryman consciously evokes Whitman as a symbol of the spirit of democratic optimism, the discord between Whitman's sexually charged image of harmony and corporeal wholeness and Henry's disintegration reveals that such ideals are barren in containment America. Berryman's symbolic use of the "orbic flex" indicates the decomposition of Whitman's sexually and spiritually charged vision of American reality.

Furthermore, while Berryman evokes Whitman's poetics of optimism, the style of the poem is composed in opposition to Whitman's desire for harmony. The first edition of *Leaves of Grass* (1855) celebrates the possibility of the representative American, Whitman, being at one with the dominant strains of his culture. Berryman's representative American, Henry, necessarily finds himself at variance with the dominant culture of his age.<sup>22</sup> Unlike Whitman's long, smooth, flowing lines, Berryman's are broken and obtuse. Instead of singing the harmony of the self within the world, Henry sings the self's attrition in a hostile environment. In this sense *The Dream Songs* function as determinate negations of the Whitmanesque spirit of American democratic optimism, an act meant to record the disparity between Whitman's nineteenth-century belief in the potential for American unity and harmony and the foreboding sociopolitical landscape of Berryman's midcentury America. Berryman evokes loss as a foundational component of contemporary experience in order to fulfill his role as a witness to the spiritual history of America, just as he argued Whitman did for the nineteenth century.

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<sup>22</sup> Whitman progressively distanced himself from contemporary America in the subsequent editions of *Leaves of Grass* and in *Democratic Vistas*. Whitman's friend and contemporary Henry David Thoreau had already clearly established his own adversarial position with respect to contemporary American culture in *Walden* (1854). In opposition to the consumer culture of contemporary America, Thoreau posited the "true America" based on a personal economy of self-reliance and frugality.

Berryman further alludes to an American ideology grown antithetical to its founding premises with his reference to Hegelian triads. In Hegelian terms the Absolute, the rational minimum that can be contemplated, is the triad: thesis, antithesis, synthesis. In other words, contemplating the Absolute involves thinking not only of a singular object, but also of its reflection, of its antithesis. For Hegel, "The Absolute is mediation or internal reflection, identity of itself to itself in contradiction" (Hippolyte 61). Philosophically, Hegel's thesis-antithesis-synthesis logic enacts its own form of containment by integrating conceptual oppositions. Berryman's use of the concept, however, reveals a heightened antagonism between opposing structures that lack the potential for synthetic catharsis. Just as the harmonious song emanating from Whitman's tenor, when incorporated into Henry's vision, is plagued by discord and disintegration, the figure of the Absolute in Hegelian philosophy is fractured and displaced by the poem's paratactic disfigurements. While the displacement of the Whitmanian spirit of democratic optimism speaks to the corrupt nature of American political ideology, the displacement of the Hegelian Absolute speaks to the nothingness at the core of American epistemological understanding.

Henry incorporates these fractured reminiscences of Whitman and Hegel "into the know-how of the American bard / embarrassed Henry heard himself a-being" and combines them with his knowledge of "the younger Stephen Crane." Crane, on whom Berryman published a biography in 1950, appears in the "block of memories" as a figure of dissent.<sup>23</sup> His "younger" works include *The Red Badge of Courage*, an American Civil

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<sup>23</sup> In his preface to *Stephen Crane: A Critical Biography*, Berryman frames the book as a recovery project meant to raise the profile of Crane's too-often neglected work. Crane's position in the tradition of American critical dissent suggests that Berryman saw an affinity between Crane's political engagement and his own.

War novel that questions the ethics of wartime policy. While Crane's works are celebrated for their criticism of the Civil War, Berryman recognized that similar critiques against American policy could not be publicly voiced without the possibility of reprisal in Cold War America. The memories of these figures of literary tradition are combined with Henry's painful existential loss. The fact that these literary "ancestors" remain "relaxed & hard, / whilst Henry's parts were fleeing" demonstrates that while Henry is faced with disintegration, it is precisely from his memory of this tradition of critical dissent that he will attempt to cultivate what remains of his fragmented identity.

Berryman's confessional aesthetic therefore acts as a form of witnessing that is antithetical to the overt tales of communist infiltration and espionage recounted in texts such as Chambers's *Witness*. Whereas Chambers' content is manifest, and supports the dominant anti-communist ideology of the era, Berryman uses Henry as an informant of the psychic fragmentation caused by confrontation with the era's epistemological uncertainty. Rather than singing the harmony of the American self as Whitman does in the early editions of *Song of Myself*, *The Dream Songs* sing its cacophony. As a witness, Henry sees beyond the dominant narrative of anti-communism and reveals the domestic scourge of ideological containment. His metacommentaries function as compelling testimonials of the psychological burdens endured by individuals in Cold War culture. The juxtaposition of a disintegrating formal structure with an intense, private content in the poems enacts a tension between autonomy and conformity, while their parataxis evokes the psychic disarray caused by the excessive guilt and anxiety that is symptomatic of an environment afflicted by trauma and ideological repression. While saying very little

about the public state of Cold War politics, *The Dream Songs* confess volumes about the private pathologies of a neurotic cultural era.

The tension between public reality and private response is played out in the works of many midcentury autobiographic poets. In contrast to Berryman's parataxis and double-talk, Robert Lowell's autobiographic style often evinced a clearer response to issues in the public sphere. For Lowell, these responses converged with private testimonials of the madness and breakdown that is so often alluded to in the criticism surrounding his work. Often overlooked in that criticism is the manner in which Lowell evokes madness as a metaphor for the displacement of a sense of truth and rationality at the centre of postwar cultural experience. His poetry therefore evokes madness as a signifier of an essential experience of loss that is obscured by the proliferation of discourses of domestic normalcy in containment America.

## Learning to Love the Bomb: Robert Lowell's Pathological Poetics

Berryman's confrontation with the irrecoverable loss at the core of American epistemology, while unique for its paratactic testimonials of anxiety and repression, was not a unique preoccupation. The absence that entered into the American psychic imaginary in the weeks and months following the Enola Gay's fateful early morning flight over Hiroshima, presented—and continues to present—a challenge for postwar writers: how can one represent the space of nuclear disaster, which is the space of nothingness?

For Berryman, this representation was achieved through the development of a poetics of negation, an aesthetic that takes loss as its starting point and testifies to the psychic instability caused by that loss through its fractured, paratactic style. For Robert Lowell, the representation of nothingness, and its psychological impact on Americans, demanded the cultivation of a unique body of metaphors. In many of Lowell's poems this use of metaphor converges in the relationship between the poetics of unspeakable nothingness and the poetics of unspeakable madness where madness symbolizes the loss of cultural values and traditions. As has often been noted by scholars of Lowell, the poet suffered from serious manic episodes instigated by bipolar disorder during much of his adult life. Chronicles of the vulnerable ego afflicted by mental illness comprise some of Lowell's most important works. In particular, several key poems from Lowell's *Life Studies* and *For the Union Dead* demonstrate his engagement of psychological trauma. A closer analysis of these works reveals a nuclear spectre beneath their preoccupation with mental illness.

In Lowell's poetry, the encounter with absence at the hypocenter of nuclear society finds its symbolic equivalent in the depressive trying to recover the irrecoverable lost object at the center of the self. While Berryman's responses to containment often manifested themselves on the level of formal structure, Lowell's politics are more evident on the level of content. As Lowell recognizes, representing the hypocentre of nuclear society is an impossible act: its nothingness is devoid of referentiality. Lacking a referent to adequately describe nothingness, Lowell instead approaches its representation through a process of sublimation that traces nothingness through the experience of madness. Implementing the lyric form as a vessel of containment, Lowell's poetics enacts the encounter with nothingness through its tropological emphasis on illness and breakdown. The melancholic's inability to recover the lost object, in Lowell's nuclear poetics, symbolizes American culture's inability to recover the sense of tradition and hierarchical values displaced by the hypocentre of nuclear culture. It signifies a culture that is daily faced with the prospect of a death made instantaneous by the push of a button. Seeking a referent capable of articulating the nothingness at the hypocentre of nuclear consciousness, Lowell turns to a poetics of madness that dramatizes the pathological fission of the ego in the age of atomic anxiety. His poetics imagines the real by confronting its own potential eradication. By emphasizing the volatility of the subjective ego in atomic culture, Lowell attests to the impossibility of containing nuclear anxiety and refigures Cold War culture as inherently pathological. This is Lowell's moment of praxis: by accepting nothingness as the primary cultural referent, he deconstructs conventional notions of political and cultural orthodoxy and posits the pathological ego as the locus for the reclamation of identity in a repressive Cold War society.

In late March of 1949, a ““very nearly psychotic”” (Mariani 181) Robert Lowell arrived uninvited from Boston at the Chicago home of his friend and mentor Allen Tate and Tate’s partner Caroline Gordon. After exhausting and terrifying his hosts with Catholic fundamentalist rhetoric for the first twenty-four hours of his visit, Lowell began to sense that he had become something of a burden. He decided to lighten the mood by presenting Gordon with a list of the lovers her husband confided he had been with during their marriage. When his antics confused and infuriated Tate, Lowell became incensed and insisted that Tate repent for his sins. Tate, by this point beside himself with rage, refused and demanded that his guest leave. The tall, athletically built Lowell responded by grabbing his short and gaunt mentor, carrying him to a second story window, and holding him out over the street below while reciting Tate’s “Ode to the Confederate Dead” in the cartoon voice of a childhood imaginary friend. The police were summoned and it took several officers to wrestle Lowell into submission.

After a night in the psychiatric ward at a Chicago hospital, Lowell concluded that he had overstayed his welcome with the Tates and he boarded a train for Bloomington, Indiana, where he met his friend Peter Taylor for dinner at the University of Indiana’s Faculty Club. Once seated, Lowell informed Taylor that he was positive he could smell brimstone. He then began looking frantically around the restaurant “trying to locate the devil” whom he soon spotted “behind a large potted fern” (Mariani 183). A frightened and confused Taylor managed to calm Lowell and escorted him back to his room for the night. A few hours later, however, Taylor got a call from the Club manager claiming that Lowell ““had run through the kitchen terrorizing the cooks, and then run out into the streets”” (Mariani 183). Recalling the episode later Lowell claimed that he believed he

“could stop cars and paralyze their forces by merely standing in the middle of the highway with arms outspread” (Mariani 183). Police were summoned once again and Lowell, now foaming at the mouth, was wrestled into a straitjacket. He would spend the next months of his life undergoing treatment at the Baldpate psychiatric institution in Massachusetts.

These details, which are recorded in *Lost Puritan*, Paul Mariani’s biography of Lowell, describe one of Lowell’s first major psychotic episodes. They are evidence of the insular, atomized self split apart by a volatile physical and psychological reaction. For Lowell, such episodes of psychological fission would be a regular, almost annual occurrence until he began lithium treatments in the late 1960s. These treatments nearly crippled him intellectually and seriously exacerbated his personal turmoil. His experience of madness also informed much of his best poetry, a relationship few critics have failed to comment on. Much of this criticism has focused on the tragic and maudlin elements of Lowell’s poetics of madness.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Lowell’s psychological illness has caused many critics to make a causal connection between his poetry, his personality, and notions of the doomed poet-hero. In *Manic Power*, for example, Jeffery Meyers egregiously claims that the midcentury poets “followed the emotionally stable and long-lived generation of Frost, Williams and Eliot” (1) and exemplified an era when “If the best contemporary poetry was the record of the most intense suffering” then the poets’ “lives must inevitably lead to mania and suicide” (21). In a more rigorous but equally misleading claim, Marjorie Perloff argues that Lowell and Berryman are genteel *poètes maudits*: “Baudelaire, Nerval, Rimbaud—those archetypal *poètes maudits* did not have to *ask* to be so obsessed; they simply were. But for Lowell and Berryman and their poet friends, the obsession was less with writing for its own sake (something you do because you have to, nevermind the circumstances or rewards, as in the case of Joyce or Pound or Stevens) than for what Berryman called, in the title of his last published book, *Love & Fame*” (100). Such readings engage the poetry on the level of passive biographic reference while simultaneously exalting Modernism as a stable, unified, and somehow more purely motivated aesthetic force. In some cases, glaring errors and oversights suggest a lack of engagement with the poems. For instance, Perloff mistakenly calls *Love & Fame* Berryman’s last book when it was in fact his second last (before *Delusions, etc.*) and also appears to miss the title’s ironic reference to the final couplet of Keats’s sonnet “When I have fears that I may cease to be,” which reads “Of the wide world I stand alone, and think / Till love and fame to nothingness do sink” (220).

What is perhaps more important to an understanding of Lowell's poetics of madness is the manner in which the pathological self in his poetry is affected by a profound sense of irretrievable loss. In the intensely subjective lyrics that comprise Lowell's "confessional" aesthetic, he often creates associations between a loss of traditional cultural values and political hierarchies with psychic instability. In "Beyond the Alps," which begins his groundbreaking "confessional" collection *Life Studies*, Lowell signposts the transition from an old age of stable hierarchic tradition to a postwar era of epistemological incertitude. The poem recalls a long, slow train ride down through the mountains from Rome to Paris. In an era when "even the Swiss had thrown the sponge / in once again and Everest was still / unscaled" (3), the literal descent from peak to landscape symbolizes a loss of traditional, even heroic, cultural and political values and indicates a fall to a less transcendent vantage point. The lack of Swiss heroism on the summit of Everest leads the first-person, autobiographic narrator to contemplate

Life changed to landscape. Much against my will  
I left the City of God where it belongs.  
There the skirt-mad Mussolini unfurled  
the eagle of Caesar. (3)

The poem's tension between notions of political and ideological hierarchy and the postwar absence of these ideals is indicated in the line "Life changed to landscape." "Landscape," for Lowell, evokes the intellectual and psychological levelling of a culture once rich with the tradition from which humanistic value was derived. The descent from the Alps into this vertical landscape "dramatizes Lowell's sense of the only models of meaning left when an essentially vertical symbolic order grounded by the doctrine of

incarnation gives way to a primarily horizontal secular one.... Landscape reveals no hierarchy, nothing valuable in itself" (Altieri 85). This new horizontal, secular setting is the backdrop for Lowell's vision of postwar reality. The loss of values once grounded in religious and historical tradition give way to a bleak, existentially empty landscape. Lowell's speaker's reluctance to depart the Augustinian "City of God"<sup>25</sup> suggests his reluctance to enter the emptiness of the new psychic landscape. However, Mussolini's presence in the "City of God" signifies that the midcentury world's adherence to conventional ideological doctrine for the purpose of withholding tradition is complicated by the "skirt-mad," murderous, imperial designs of contemporary dictators. The reference to Mussolini's madness anticipates Lowell's metaphorical formulation of midcentury culture as inherently pathological in later poems.

By introducing Mussolini into the poem, Lowell explicitly connects the sense of "Life changed to landscape" to the atrocities of the Second World War. In a land where "The Duce's lynched, bare, booted skull still spoke" and "God herded his people to the *coup de grace*," Lowell realizes that the "mountain-climbing train had come to earth" and that now "There were no tickets for that altitude / once held by Hellas." Rather, in the existentially bleak postwar environment, the loss of humanistic tradition reveals for the speaker a tangible sense of his own insignificance within a historical dialectic governed by chaos and the will to power. Lowell's speaker "has now joined the other society, the City of Man, which has its own, if lesser, values. Faithless, Lowell belongs to the 'monstrous human crush' in the fragmented region he once contemptuously termed,

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<sup>25</sup> St. Augustine's early fifth-century work *De Civitate Dei*, or *The City of God*, consisted of twenty-two texts and sought to console Christians, many of whom felt the sack of Rome by the Visigoths in 410 AD was their punishment for abandoning their pagan religions. Augustine's texts reminded them that the Christian City of God would ultimately triumph against earthly conflicts.

echoing Augustine, the land of unlikeness” (Axelrod, *Robert Lowell* 103). The speaker’s inability to reconcile himself with the legacy of hierarchic orthodoxy suggests a recognition that in the face of atrocities such as those experienced during the Second World War, the tradition of speculative metaphysics is no longer capable of allowing individuals to comprehend their position within the postwar historical dialectic. In the absence of metaphysical discourse, individuals are forced to reconcile their identities against a backdrop of absence and loss, rather than one of faith and history. For Lowell, this postwar failure of metaphysics—or perhaps more accurately this postwar recognition of metaphysics as linked to flawed ideological discourse—is the source of a profound sense of alienation.

By positioning the search for identity against a backdrop of metaphysical alienation, Lowell reveals the nuclear element in his poetics. While “Life changed to landscape” most explicitly refers to a failure of tradition caused by dictators such as Mussolini, it also has connotations that suggest the more literal obliteration of human structure and endeavour that follows nuclear detonation. Hiroshima, in the nuclear aftermath, was quite literally “changed to landscape” by the bomb’s massive force, and by the fires that it ignited in the surrounding area. However, as survivors and commentators have attested, it also rendered a sense of psychic loss almost tangible. Robert J. Lifton has described the “numbing” effect that encounters with trauma on the scale of Hiroshima and Auschwitz have on immediate victims and also on those who live beneath the spectre of oblivion in the postwar world.

This sense of “numbing,” according to Lifton, is due in part to an inability to reconcile oneself not only to the bomb’s disclosure of nothingness at the core of

experience, but also to the realization that humans are responsible for the creation and implementation of such dehumanizing power. While defining psychic numbing as a “useful defense mechanism, preventing the mind from being overwhelmed and perhaps destroyed by the unmanageable images confronting it” (*Hiroshima in America* 339), Lifton argues that its presence “is bound to be greatest in Americans, where numbing serves the additional purpose of warding off potential feelings of guilt” (*Hiroshima in America* 338). Numbing, from the perspective of containment politics, also had a useful function; as Lifton explains, it was “transmitted as official policy, throughout American society. One was supposed to be numbed to Hiroshima. It became politically correct ... in the deepest sense to remain numbed toward Hiroshima—politically suspect if one was troubled or inclined to make a fuss about it” (*Hiroshima in America* 338). Containing the guilt and anxiety endemic to postwar society was politically expedient. It helped to maintain a sense of psychic stability while divorcing the atrocities of American military activity from public consciousness.

On a more psychological level, however, the containment of the anxiety linked to atomic nothingness sought to dissuade the psychic reverberations inherent in such an encounter. In an interview conducted by Lifton a hibakusha, or survivor of the bomb in Japan, identifies the difficulty of symbolizing this nothingness:

We should figure out the exact hypocenter—and possibly put some small artistic monument on it—or better still, leave it devoid of anything at all ... in order to symbolize nothingness at the hypocenter—because that is what there was.... Such a weapon has the power to make everything into nothing, and I think this should be symbolized. (*Death in Life* 278)

In poems such as “Inauguration Day: January 1953,” Lowell more explicitly engages this relationship between atomic nothingness and American containment. Written in a stark, clear tone, the poem begins with a bleak vision of a New York where “The snow had buried Stuyvesant” (7).<sup>26</sup> The fact that the statue of Peter Stuyvesant, an influential seventeenth-century colonial administrator who helped to build and develop New York into a prosperous colony and city, is “buried in snow” signifies a whitewashing of the values that belied the democratic vision of early America. The snowy landscape also has connotations of a nuclear winter, in which the principles of American democratic ideology no longer hold any meaning against a backdrop of atomic oblivion. The image of the buried Stuyvesant, when considered in relation to the poem’s title, “also subtly hints that a similar fate may await the new president” (Smith 292). This allusion to Eisenhower’s fate, however, is double-edged: on one level it points to his inefficiency as a lowbrow, mass-cultural president; on another level it attests to the potentially devastating nuclear consequences of installing a war-minded general as president in an era of Mutually Assured Destruction.

As the stanza progresses, the political stasis symbolized by the snow is mirrored by the “Cyclonic zero of the word” (7). This figurative zero is evocative of the literal hypocentre of an atomic explosion. The reference has several important implications. First, it evokes the nothingness at the centre of the American cultural psyche, a nothingness directly linked to a loss of faith in the hierarchic authority responsible for the American use of atomic weapons. The actual figure of the zero signifies an emptiness ringed by a thin presence. As such, it evokes an epistemological emptiness at the core of

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<sup>26</sup> Peter Stuyvesant (c. 1612-1672) served as the last Dutch Director-General of New Amsterdam, which later became New York. His policies were influential in the development of the colony and city.

the American psyche. Second, it signifies the “suspended and continually postponed moment of nuclear annihilation,” a moment that, because of its persistence, “affects all the moments of our lives in ways we are not fully aware of, and cannot be, never having known any other mode of existence” (Schwenger 3). The anxiety generated by the postponed moment of annihilation is located not only in the fear of annihilation, but also in the recognition of nothingness that the potential for nuclear annihilation exposes at the core of Cold War consciousness.

However, as the “cyclonic zero of the word” suggests, in atomic society, finding a referent capable of representing that nothingness is itself an impossibility. The “cyclonic” nature of “the word” indicates that it swirls around an absence without ever touching the nothingness at the core, or without ever grounding itself in stable, unified meaning. The cyclone also connotes the inherent danger of attempting to confront such absence, of attempting to write the unthinkable. Peter Schwenger finds an analogy for this problem of writing absence in the problem of representing the ground zero of an atomic blast:

The visual form of that symbol is significant, for it is of course a circle around an emptiness. Ground zero, then, the center of the nuclear circle, recapitulates in its sign the problem of the whole—whether the nuclear blast can be said to have a center, if by center we mean a point at which its presence originated.... In any variation or version, the center point of a circle, even while posing a problem in representation, may represent another problem, that of the origin. (26)

The literal zero figure made by the nuclear hypocentre symbolizes the absence at the center of nuclear consciousness. To confront that madness is to be made aware of one’s

own displaced origins, one's essentially alienated place within Cold War culture. The nothingness signified by the nuclear hypocentre, as Lowell recognized, meant a tangible link between destabilizing madness and nuclear society.

The nothingness that the bomb signified in the American consciousness, and the loss of faith in ordinary discourse that accompanied it, is evoked by Lowell in the final stanza of "Inauguration Day":

Ice, Ice, Our wheels no longer move.  
Look, the fixed stars, all just alike  
as lack-land atoms, split apart,  
and the Republic summons Ike,  
the mausoleum in her heart. (7)

Returning to an image of winter, Lowell evinces the notion that America has been frozen into stasis. The "fixed stars, all just alike" evoke the patterned stars of the American flag. While their "likeness" evokes a sense of containment and conformity in postwar American culture, the simile's tenor reveals that such containment merely conceals the fact that beneath they are as "lack-land atoms, split apart." This explicit reference to the split atom of nuclear physics indicates that for Lowell the American values once signified by the flag have been torn asunder in the atomic landscape. The stars, with their iconography of navigation, are now incapable of providing guidance towards a safe and prosperous climate; instead they lead to a static, conformist state threatened by nuclear oblivion. No longer is America a land founded upon democratic cultural prosperity; rather it is a "lack-land," a land that has been deprived of something essential. The reference to

split atoms signifies that American culture and democracy have undergone a process of fission and are now faced with the emptiness, the "lack" that is the result of that fission.

In an overtly rhetorical gesture, Lowell, like Berryman, then implies that "Ike," the common nickname for Dwight Eisenhower, is the last alternative, the poor choice of a nation whose sense of value has been compromised by its confrontation with nothingness. Eisenhower, as a president whose campaign stressed the importance of domestic security and suburban values, symbolizes the need for the mediation of nothingness at the core of American beliefs. In Lowell's terms, Eisenhower has been sworn in to oversee the administration of a Republic with a "mausoleum in her heart," an image that again conveys the emptiness at the heart of American consciousness. Lowell's evocation of the "mausoleum," which is a literal container of death, is an ominous image that stresses the direct threat against identity posed by State repression.

While poems such as "Inauguration Day: January 1953" use suggestive nuclear symbols to confront the epistemological uncertainty of nuclear society, they also reveal a problem of signification attached to the act of nuclear representation. As Jacques Derrida asserts in his influential essay on nuclearism "No Apocalypse, Not Now (full speed ahead, seven missiles, seven missives)," the absence of veritable nuclear war means the absence of a referent capable of adequately describing its effects.<sup>27</sup> According to Derrida, the concept of nuclear war is "*fabulously textual*, through and through.... to the extent that, for the moment, a nuclear war has not taken place: one can only talk and write about

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<sup>27</sup> Derrida's paper appeared in the Summer 1984 issue of *Diacritics*. The issue included several articles on nuclearism and marked a key moment in the advancement of nuclear criticism. The articles were originally delivered in April 1984 at a colloquium held at Cornell University. Along with Derrida's essay the published issue included essays by Frances Ferguson, Michael McCannles, Dean MacConnell, Zoë Sofia, Mary Ann Caws, and Derrick de Kerkhove.

it” (23). Derrida’s distinction here, as Schwenger points out, asserts that the bombs dropped on Japan ended a “classical’ war rather than setting off a nuclear one. And if it has not taken place one can *only* talk or write about it” (Schwenger xv). This means that “the terrifying reality of the nuclear conflict can only be the signified referent, never the real referent (present or past) of a discourse or text” (Derrida 23). Thus the representation of nuclear annihilation exists in an endless state of deferral, a deferral that circles the absence represented by the hypocentre without being able to recover that absence.

The “*fabulously textual*” nature of nuclear representation recapitulates itself in the desire for the recovery of origins at the core of American consciousness. Lacking the ability to recover its lost origins in a “Lack-land split apart” by the spectre of oblivion, language can only circle the absence that now sits where the displaced origin, mythical or otherwise, once existed. This loss of referent, as Schwenger observes, resembles the central problem articulated by Derrida in his poststructuralist paper “Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences.” As Derrida argues,

Structure—or rather the structurality of structure—although it has always been at work, has always been neutralized or reduced, and this by a process of giving it a center or of referring it to a point of presence, as fixed origin. The function of this center was not only to orient, balance, and organize the structure—one cannot in fact conceive of an unorganized structure—but above all to make sure that the organizing principle of the structure would limit what we might call the *play* of the structure. By orienting and organizing the coherence of the system, the center of a structure permits the

play of its elements inside the total form. And even today the notion of a structure lacking any center represents the unthinkable itself. (109)

From the perspective of nuclear culture, it is precisely this structure or “organizing principle” that has been displaced. Thinking the nuclear hypocentre therefore means thinking “the unthinkable” itself. The “play” of elements within the structure, now devoid of an organizing principle, is subject to a “fission and fusion” (Schwenger 29) that resembles the stable atom’s dismantling in an atomic reaction. Thus the problem of nuclear representation is thoroughly grounded in the problem of linguistic representation itself; language, devoid of an originary referent, is pulled out of balance and threatened by fission and disintegration. Without that originary referent, it has no frame of reference, and is mired by an inability to signify a stable representation. This loss of representation is mediated into the cultural realm in the form of a loss of epistemological certitude. Language void of signification refracts the notion of stable identity into a condition of infinite regress, one from which, lacking a central referent, stability cannot be wholly recovered.

This inability to represent the nothingness of the deferred nuclear referent presents what can be construed as a crisis of representation for the poet confronted by atomic anxiety. As John Gery explains,

the challenge to the poet in the nuclear age consists of how, on the one hand, to confront and express the overwhelming sense one has of potential technological annihilation, not only of individuals but of the archive of human knowledge, as a subject of one’s art, without, on the other hand, denying that there can ultimately be no meaningful name given to that subject

except the “non-name of ‘name’” or nothingness itself. In other words, if in the realm of nuclearism the most important subject to write about is unnameable, is nothingness itself, in what way other than by writing nothing at all is a poet to approach it? (36)

Lowell recognized the difficulty of signifying the nothingness of the nuclear hypocentre. While poems such as “Inauguration Day: January 1953” respond to atomic anxiety by conveying a sense of profound loss on the cultural and political level, Lowell’s personal or “confessional” poetics of madness enact a more rigorous engagement of the unnameable by finding correlations between the irretrievable hypocentre and psychological dissolution. While recognizing that madness, like the nuclear hypocentre, is devoid of a stable referent, Lowell nevertheless has something to draw on when writing madness that he lacks when writing the bomb: a direct and personal experience of madness as a confrontation with the abyss. Lowell draws on his experience of the essential “Otherness” of madness in order to convey the empty space of disaster. Within the container of his subjective ego, Lowell re-enacts the fission of disaster in order to reveal, however momentarily, the Otherness at the abyss of postwar experience. As Schwenger notes, when we attempt to write the nothingness of the disaster, “Our apprehension of the abyss explodes only in a closed chamber, a structure of the restraint which intensifies all that force that is beyond restraint and beyond structure. Only under such circumstances can such force be evoked” (121). From within the “closed chamber” of individual consciousness, such a volatile reaction signifies severe psychological instability.

Lowell evokes the volatile intensity of madness in some of his most introspective poems, such as “Waking in the Blue,” where he recounts a stay at McLean’s psychiatric hospital in Boston:

The night attendant, a B.U. sophomore, rouses from the  
mare’s-nest of his drowsy head  
propped on the *Meaning of Meaning*.

He catwalks down our corridor.

Azure day

makes my agonized blue window bleaker.

Crows maunder on the petrified fairway.

Absence! My heart grows tense

as though a harpoon were sparring for the kill.

(This is the house for the “mentally ill.”). (81)

Lowell’s description of the inside of the institution points to a loss of structure and authority. The only figure of authority present is the “night attendant” who is only a “B.U. Sophomore.” The attendant’s lack of authority is reflected in his inability to remain awake while reading I.A. Richards and C.K. Ogden’s *The Meaning of Meaning*. Lowell plays with the weighty title; the fact that the sophomore dozes while trying to discern the “meaning” of “meaning” conveys the fact that within the confines of the institution a breakdown has occurred at the level of signification itself. The sophomoric authority figure is in no position to offer a sense of psychological or epistemological stability to the patients. From within this space of breakdown Lowell’s subject watches the world grow “bleaker” through his “agonized blue window.” By associating bleakness and agony with

his vision, Lowell indicates that his ill subject is staring into a wasteland where, in terms that resemble those of Eliot, "Crows maunder on the petrified fairway." This vision of absence and loss is juxtaposed with the persona's exclamatory revelation "Absence! My heart grows tense." Inverting the familiar euphemism "absence makes the heart grow fonder," Lowell here reveals that it is not the physical absence of the comforts of the outside world that makes his heart tense within the institution; rather, it is the confrontation with the essential absence at the core of experience. On one level, the subject's feeling of absence foregrounds his madness by alluding to his place in "the house for the 'mentally ill.'" It connotes that to encounter madness is to encounter an essential, irretrievable loss. However, the blankness that exists beyond his window indicates that absence extends beyond the institution into the world at large. The institution is a microcosm of a cultural absence that is more pervasive. While it attempts to contain "madness" and absence, they both exist in the bleakness beyond the thin windows. The institution therefore becomes a symbol for the convergence of individual psychological illness and a pathological Cold War culture.

The institution also functions as a symbol of a fallen social order. Fixtures such as the tub have grown "Vaguely urinous from the Victorian plumbing," which indicates that its once stately Victorian elements are now in a state of disrepair and ruin. The inmates include "Stanley," a former "Harvard all-American fullback" who is now "more cut off from words than a seal" (81), and "'Bobbie,' / Porcellian '29, / a replica of Louis XVI" (82). The two patients represent a fall from a higher social order into a state of madness that is conveyed in terms that conjure nuclear oblivion. The verb "ossified" connotes both an entropic sense of stasis and a violent, quick death. Ossification evokes a literal turning

to bone; the violence of this image recalls the effects of exposure to a nuclear attack, where, as survivors have recalled in gruesome detail, the heat and force of the blast literally peeled skin from bone. This conjuring of nuclear imagery works to symbolize the process of psychological entropy that the inmates have endured and does so in terms that show its effects on the human body. It also tacitly links their madness to the madness of nuclearism which is ironically rendered in the MAD acronym for Mutually Assured Destruction, and the nothingness that its spectre of oblivion exposes. Forced to contend with the lost origins of their younger lives, the inmates, including Lowell's persona, are now "all old-timers, / each of us holds a locked razor" (82). The locked razor conveys a thwarted desire to break out of their state of ossification, to get beyond the bleakness of a mad existence. Incapable of committing an act violent enough to reinvigorate the flow of blood, or worse, to transcend the ossified world through suicide, the inmates have no choice but to linger in perpetual alienation. This image of paralysis suggests that they are contained not only by the mental institution, but also by their madness, a madness exacerbated by Cold War containment culture.

By focusing on madness within its institutional setting, Lowell attempts to channel and intensify the experience of confronting nothingness. As the speaker asserts in "Home After Three Months Away," a poem about returning to his family after a lengthy institutionalization, "I keep no rank nor station / Cured, I am frizzled, stale and small" (*Life Studies* 84). Here the speaker implies that wellness requires conformity. It also indicates that such an existence within what Lowell elsewhere refers to as "the tranquillized *Fifties*" (*Life Studies* 85), is itself a form of false consciousness: it conceals the disaster at the core of postwar epistemology. While consistent with governmental

policies of containment, such concealment, according to Lowell's poetics, evades confrontation with a pervasive cultural trauma. The scale of this containment and conformity in the wake of such massive trauma registers as much a denial or disavowal of what has taken place as a passive acceptance of its effects. As Adorno argues, for individuals in the postwar period, repression is linked to a metaphysical paralysis. After the trauma of Auschwitz,

Our metaphysical faculty is paralyzed because actual events have shattered the basis on which speculative metaphysical thought could be reconciled with experience.... The administrative murder of millions made death a thing one had never yet to fear in just this fashion. There is no chance anymore for death to come into the individual's empirical life as somehow conformable with the course of that life. The last, the poorest possession left to the individual is expropriated. That in the concentration camps it was no longer an individual who died, but a specimen—this is a fact bound to affect the dying of those who escaped the administrative measure. (*Negative Dialectics* 362)

This metaphysical paralysis, which Adorno links directly to the “shattering” of origins, culture, tradition, and faith, forces individuals into a recognition of fundamental human insignificance. It reinforces Auschwitz consciousness in nuclear terms: just as victims of Auschwitz were deprived of agency, the spectre of nuclear oblivion places citizens in a position where the single push of a button can determine their fate, and the fate of the world at large.

For Lowell, the dehumanizing nature of post-Auschwitz nuclear consciousness finds its symptomatic correlation in depression. While on the cultural level the spectre of oblivion problematizes consciousness by signalling absence as the empty presence upon which culture is founded, on the psychological level the depressive is burdened by a desire to reclaim a sense of wholeness and stability that is irretrievable at the core of selfhood. As a manic depressive Lowell was familiar with this sense of alienation. It is for this reason that he uses depression as a symbol of the larger crisis in cultural epistemology: as a means of attempting to name the unnameable, or think the unthinkable, depression becomes an ideal signifier for quotidian encounters with oblivion.

This, for Lowell, is where an engaged political poetry begins. The challenge becomes not one of poetically seeking the meaning of despair, a task grounded in the very metaphysical speculation that has been destroyed by the bomb, but in acknowledging that meaning can be found *only* in despair. As Julia Kristeva argues, "The depressed person has the impression of having been deprived of an unnameable, supreme good, of something unrepresentable, or an *invocation* might point out, but no word could signify" (13). Contemplating depression, like contemplating annihilation, involves a crisis of signification, one that makes palatable a sense of *insignificance* related to the deprivation at the core of the self. At stake here is the ability to come to terms with the sense of existential oblivion that characterizes nuclear experience, a process that demands coming to terms with a language incapable of signifying that experience. In the oblivion of madness and depression, Lowell locates a metaphor for the existential anxiety instigated by the spectre of nuclear oblivion.

For the depressive, controlling this sense of loss is linked specifically to using despair and loss as means through which to construct a more positive figure of identity.

As Kristeva explains,

The melancholy Thing interrupts desiring metonymy, just as it prevents working out the loss within the psyche. How can one approach the place I have referred to? Sublimation is an attempt to do so: through melody, rhythm, semantic polyvalency, the so-called poetic form, which decomposes and recomposes signs, is the sole "container" seemingly able to secure an uncertain but adequate hold over the Thing. (14)

Thus for Lowell, confronting the encounter with nothingness that is the experience of madness is a means of attempting to contain, and reappropriate, the despair that it is responsible for. It also metonymically functions as a means of attempting to reconstruct identity, however negatively, against the backdrop of nuclear annihilation. From this perspective, identity is intrinsically grounded in pathos: it is a negation of logos, or of rational thought signified by a conventional literary and linguistic style. It explicitly contravenes the logos, or rationality, of what Lowell recognizes as an "irrational" Cold War society. By reformulating identity from a perspective of pathos and loss, Lowell deconstructs the logic of Cold War cultural ideology and exposes it as little more than a thin vessel of containment. Lowell posits a poetics grounded in pathos as a counter-discursive force capable of exposing the damaging singularity of hegemonic conceptions of identity grounded in containment ideology.

Lowell demonstrates this deconstructive practice in his most anthologized poem, "Skunk Hour." Described by Lowell as his dark night of the soul poem,<sup>28</sup> where his night "is not gracious, but secular, puritan, and agnostical," the poem begins with a vision of a seaside community where "Nautilus Island's hermit / heiress," now in her "dotage" but still "thirsting for / the hierarchic privacy / of Queen Victoria's century" does so by buying "up all / the eyesores facing her shore, / and lets them fall" (*Life Studies* 89). Allowing the "hierarchic" "Victorian" structures to fall once again signifies the loss of structure and tradition in postwar society, a process of disintegration that leads Lowell's speaker to the conclusion "The season's ill."<sup>29</sup> While on one level alluding to the "ill" look of the fall colours where "A red fox stain covers Blue Hill," Lowell's reference to illness also conveys a more pervasive cultural illness linked to the loss of origins. From this point of loss, Lowell's speaker emerges to detail an encounter with madness and the nothingness that it reveals:

One dark night,  
my Tudor Ford climbed the hill's skull;  
I watched for love-cars. Lights turned down,  
they lay together, hull to hull,  
where the graveyard shelves on the town....

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<sup>28</sup> Recalling Lowell's words, Axelrod notes that he "has written of his stanzas 'This is the dark night. I hoped my readers would remember John of the Cross's poem. My night is not gracious, but secular, puritan and agnostical. An Existential night'" (127). Lowell's reference to existentialism suggests that the poem is undermined by a pervasive sense of nothingness. It represents his speaker's recognition of his loneliness as an individual, and of the concrete relationship between his choices and his existence.

<sup>29</sup> The allusion to illness recalls Marcellus's claim in *Hamlet* that "Something is rotten in the state of Denmark" (1.4.1197). In *Hamlet*, the "rotten" state of Denmark refers to the political corruption that drives the play's dramatic action. Through the figures of Hamlet and Ophelia, Shakespeare draws correlations between political corruption and individual madness. Lowell updates the metaphor for contemporary America. His own subjective, mad character, is imbued with the melodramatic qualities of a Hamlet who is forced to watch deception and corruption deprive the political landscape of its traditional values.

My mind's not right.

A car radio bleats,  
"Love, O careless Love...." I hear  
my ill-spirit sob in each blood cell,  
as if my hand were at its throat....  
I myself am hell;  
nobody's here— (*Life Studies* 90)

The poem's trajectory here moves from an objective analysis of the sociohistorical environment to a subjective examination of the self's status within that environment of loss. Philip Metres argues that this movement in Lowell's poetics "functions as an analogue to the analytic relation; the poem allows Lowell to speak about himself as both subject and object" (675). While Metres refers specifically to "Memories of West Street and Lepke," a similar pattern takes place in "Skunk Hour." By enacting such a division between subjectivity and objectivity, Lowell's speaker submits himself to an analysis that dramatizes the search for the lost object, which in this case is the loss of a coherent selfhood and subjectivity. The "dark night" conveys simultaneously the environmental and psychic atmosphere of the poem as Lowell's subject stares into the abyss at the core of his interior. Invoking the mechanization of postwar mass culture with his reference to the "Tudor Ford," Lowell links that image to a sense of alienation and loss that results from his objectivization within its corresponding conformist mass. The word "Tudor," with its air of monarchy, is equated with "Ford," a family name associated with mass production and consumption which even further implies the devaluation of traditional

hierarchic values as they are reinscribed as signifiers of product quality in commodity culture.

As the speaker drives up the “hill’s skull” to watch for the “love-cars” that “lay together, hull to hull” he revisits the conventional “lookout” scene common to discourses of illicit sexuality and reinscribes it in wasteland imagery. The fact that it is the cars that seem to be engaged in sexual acts rather than the occupants dehumanizes the scene further and alienates the speaker by confronting him with a world of easy love that defies conventional courtship. This lack of integration leads to the conclusion “My mind’s not right,” which at once suggests his madness and the madness of the world devoid of signifiers of traditional ethical values.

This loss of conventional values echoes in the lyrics “Love, O careless Love” that “bleat” from the car radios. The song becomes a signifier of the postwar capitalist mass culture that Lowell here implicates with the levelling of conventional, Victorian hierarchies in the postwar landscape.<sup>30</sup> Ironically, the love of which it sings can no longer be a “careless” innocence as the cars lying together “hull to hull” signify the illicit love-making that is taking place within their contained sanctuaries. The banality of the song causes the speaker to hear his “ill-spirit sob in each blood cell,” which indicates a direct correlation between his spiritual malaise and a vacuous postwar mass culture.

Immediately juxtaposed with this moment of cultural criticism is the assertion “I myself am hell; / nobody’s here” (*Life Studies* 90). The lines recall Satan’s proclamation in Milton’s *Paradise Lost*: “Which way I fly is Hell; myself am hell” (4.75.173). By

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<sup>30</sup> The version of “Love Oh Careless Love” to which Lowell refers was likely that recorded by Big Joe Turner in 1951. Turner was a prominent African American blues performer whose 1954 hit “Shake, Rattle and Roll” helped redefine popular music.

making a connection between his speaker and Milton's Satan, Lowell establishes his speaker as an adversarial character. The word "Satan" has its etymological root in the Hebraic "adversary." For Lowell, these stark lines, on one level, indicate the speaker's (like Satan's) exile from tradition and community and register his adversarial relationship to a bleak social and spiritual landscape; on another level, the lines reveal his realization that the reclamation of identity within the postwar landscape begins in the recognition of that identity's essential insignificance. In Kristevan terms, Lowell's poetic dark night functions as a form of poetic sublimation, a means of attempting to reclaim the self from its encounter with the nothingness that exists both in his own psyche and in the wider sociohistorical landscape. His journey to an existential brink acts as a poetic deferral, one that allows him to ground his encounter with madness and nothingness in more practical and culturally recognizable imagery.

This proximity to essential nothingness is, as Lowell recognizes, available only through the negation of cultural norms. By containing the profound sense of madness and alienation within the vessel of his lyric poetry, Lowell insulates it against the forces of cultural containment that attempt to integrate such mad impulses into harmonious discourses of postwar capitalist ideology. Lowell's aesthetic negation is accomplished specifically through his encounter with madness. Such an encounter demands, as Shoshanna Felman (following Foucault) argues, a rigorous unspeaking of logocentric ideals responsible for the maintenance of ideological discourse, and a replacement of those ideals with a pathos, or a pathological metaphor "of the radical metaphoricity which corrodes concepts in their essence" (54). According to Felman, "Madness ... is for Foucault (like pathos) a notion which does not *elucidate* what it connotes, but rather,

*participates* in it: the term madness is itself pathos, not logos” (52). In Lowell’s poetics, the participation of madness in Cold War culture extends his encounter with nothingness beyond an analysis of the poles of presence and absence and towards an ethical recovery of identity. It does so by defining identity as essentially pathological rather than logical. For Lowell, identity participates in the madness of a neurotic and anxious cultural sphere. It cannot be contained and defined as logical by the ideologies of Cold War culture. Within the Cold War dialectic, the reclamation of autonomous identity, however compromised, must therefore be recovered through the negation of logical, rational reality. As “Skunk Hour” concludes, the skunks become a symbol of a negative dialectical methodology that embraces pathos rather than logos as the requisite attribute for the reclamation of identity. In Lowell’s dark night “Nobody’s here” except

...skunks, that search  
in the moonlight for a bite to eat.  
They march on their soles up Main Street:  
white stripes, moonstruck eyes’ red fire  
under the chalk-dry and spar spire  
of the Trinitarian Church.

I stand on top  
of our back steps and breathe the rich air—  
a mother skunk with her column of kittens swills the garbage  
pail.

She jabs her wedge-head in a cup

of sour cream, drops her ostrich tail,  
and will not scare. (90)

In the skunk, as a nocturnal scavenger, pest, and undesirably scented creature, Lowell finds the ideal symbol for praxis in the face of nothingness. Alone in the abyss of postwar culture his speaker sees only the skunks, who carry on and survive not in spite of the bleakness of culture, but because of it. As scavengers, they participate in its pathos; they are in fact figures of a negative praxis built from the residue of thought in a culture of ideological conformity. The skunks march up “Main Street,” a signifier of the cultural locus of the American town, which indicates that the vibrant democracy it once stood for has vacated, just as the “spar spire / of the Trinitarian Church” has become “chalk-dry.” However, in Lowell’s vision, the skunks’ reclamation of this domain is a positive gesture. It demonstrates not merely perseverance, but a means of finding usefulness in cultural nothingness.

As the speaker watches the skunks, he breathes “the rich air,” indicating that in their actions (and foul odour) he finds a sense of redemption, even within his own hell. Finding richness in the air in the presence of skunks reveals that the richness he finds is in something conventionally conceived of as rank, depraved, and unwanted. However, the fact that the skunks are comprised of “a mother skunk with her column of kittens” (itself a single-mother and therefore unconventional family) connotes that there is something inherently regenerative about their relationship to the waste of contemporary culture. They “swill” the garbage, finding nourishment in refuse. As the mother skunk “jabs her wedge-head in a cup,” she “will not scare,” indicating her intensity and resolve to stake a claim within the bleak landscape.

This rigour signifies for Lowell the resolve required to reclaim a sense of identity within a culture of waste. The skunk, as a scavenger that survives by its repugnance, symbolizes a renunciation of the norms of domestic reality. Moreover, its status as a nocturnal creature posits it as a symbol of irrationality, of the pathos of night rather than the logos of day. For Lowell, the determination of the skunks to establish existence through negation symbolizes the determination of the mind to act in the face of absence. This, in itself, is a thoroughly mad gesture: it privileges a pathological carrying-on in the face of nothingness, which is indicative of the absence of reason in a mad, atomic culture. Madness, itself the negation of reason, functions as a metaphor for that negation.

However, the impossibility of speaking madness, or of making meaning beyond reason, means that Lowell's pathological metaphor, rather than insisting upon madness as a new mode of Being, attests specifically to the impossibility of positing a stable ethos of Being at the centre of a culture fractured by nothingness. Felman, again following Foucault, elucidates the potential productivity embedded in such a use of pathos as metaphor:

“What then is madness?” asks Foucault; “Nothing, doubtless, but the absence of production (*l'absence d'oeuvre*).” Unaccomplishment *at work*: active incompleteness of a meaning which ceaselessly transforms itself, offers itself but to be misunderstood, misapprehended... any examination of its theme can but reveal its fusion with another, its energetic alteration, its endless metamorphosis; any examination of its *place*, of its conceptual center, encounters only the decentralizing energy of its *displacement*. The answer here can but disseminate the question. (54)

As Lowell recognizes, the decentralizing capabilities of his metaphors of madness displace the urge to contain anxiety in postwar culture; because of madness' essential lack of meaning, metaphors of madness are incapable of simply attempting to create a new logocentric, stable cultural signifier at the core of postwar culture. Rather, since madness, by its nature, is *pathological* rather than logical, its metaphors can only signify the essentially displaced nature of signifiers of cultural stability. Lowell's metaphors of madness attest to postwar culture's inherently destabilized and pathological nature and to the fragmentary nature of selfhood within that cultural paradigm.

For Lowell, the pathological metaphor, through its perpetual displacement and deferral, deconstructs the notion of the stable subject. He recognizes that the absence symbolized by madness, its uncontainability and unnameability, reflects the unnameability of nuclear disaster. Like the zero of the nuclear hypocentre, the pathological nature of madness lacks a centralized referent. The bomb's ultimate uncontainability in terms of both its physical destruction and its psychological reverberations mirrors the lack of closure inherent in a pathos devoid of a stable referent.

Lowell's focus on the self allows him to explore this relationship of loss on the level of the individual citizen. In "Myopia: A Night," for example, Lowell emphasizes the need to develop a new way of seeing in a world changed by "blinding brightness." Appearing in *For the Union Dead*, the volume published after *Life Studies*, the poem—like many in the volume—intensifies Lowell's preoccupation with madness. Using his myopia as a metaphor for a lack of intellectual and psychological clarity, the poem begins with his speaker in "Bed, glasses off, and all's / ramshackle, streaky, weird / for the near-

sighted” (*For the Union Dead* 31). His nearsightedness is quickly transcribed into a symbol for his inability to forge a clear intellectual vision:

I see  
a dull and alien room,  
my cell of learning.  
.....  
and yet my eyes avoid  
that room. No need to see.  
No need to know I hoped  
its blank, foregoing whiteness  
would burn away the blur,  
as my five senses clenched  
their teeth, thought stitched to thought,  
as through a needle’s eye.... (*For the Union Dead* 81)

Here Lowell suggests that his conventional study setting has turned into “A dull and alien ... cell.” The cell indicates that he has become at once trapped by the pursuit of knowledge and alienated from a knowledge capable of allowing him to transcend his “trapped” position. His desire to “burn away the blur” by writing leaves him only anxious and frustrated, as though his “five senses clenched / their teeth.”

From this state of anxiety, Lowell turns to a vision of religious emptiness that reflects the sociocultural loss that the poem gauges:

Think of him in the Garden,  
that seed of wisdom, Eve’s

seducer, stuffed with man's  
corruption, stuffed with triumph:  
Satan triumphant in  
the Garden! In a moment,  
all that blinding brightness  
changed into a serpent,  
lay grovelling on its gut. (32)

While on one level Lowell here conveys societal fall in conventional religious terms, locating corruption in the triumph of Satan at the Fall, on another level he uses religious imagery to symbolize the fall that occurred at the moment of nuclear detonation. The "blinding brightness" evokes the flash of the nuclear bomb reported by survivors of Hiroshima. As one survivor of the bomb recalled, at the moment of impact

a blinding ... flash cut sharply across the sky.... I threw myself onto the ground ... in a reflex movement. At the same moment as the flash, the skin over my body felt a burning heat.... [Then there was] a blank in time ... dead silence ... probably a few seconds ... and then a ... huge "boom" ... like the rumbling of distant thunder. (qtd. in Lifton, *Death in Life* 19)

The apocalyptic nature of the moment of disaster was often invoked in Christian terms by the American government as a means of justifying their actions. As Truman declared to the media following the attacks in Japan, "If [the Japanese leaders] do not now accept our terms, they may expect a rain of ruin from the air, the like of which has never been seen on this earth" (qtd. in Nadel 14). Recognizing the correlation between the moment of nuclear disaster and the God-like death from above conjured by America's framing of

nuclear attack in Christian terms, Lowell merges the two in order to convey the sense of an atomic society bereft of conventional ethical principles. No longer able to uphold its Edenic ideals of democracy, America is changed into a “serpent” that lies “grovelling on its gut.” Its status as serpent intimates that it will continue to corrupt those that are contained within its social structure in a malicious and devious manner.

This loss of ethics and instigation of anxiety answers the speaker’s own rhetorical question: “What has disturbed this household?” (*For the Union Dead* 33). The reference to “household” evokes images of the domestic stability and suburban conformity familiar to 1950s conceptions of normative reality and integral to government policies of containment. However, Lowell’s speaker recognizes the bankrupt nature of nuclear family ethics. For him, “The things of the eye,” or normal, logical ways of seeing reality, “are done.” He understands that to circumvent political ideologies, a pathological way of seeing, one grounded in negation is required. Lying in bed, Lowell’s speaker contemplates ways of seeing this pervasive sense of absence:

On the illuminated black dial,  
green ciphers of a new moon—  
*one, two, three, four, five, six!*  
Then morning comes,  
saying, “This was a night.” (*For the Union Dead* 33)

As he watches the dial of the clock, he is shaken into a conscious perception that a new era is being ushered in. While the “new moon” suggests change and progress, it also indicates that such change will be complicit with absence and darkness. The moon’s illuminated ciphers literally convey a zero shape over the clock—an absence ringed by a

thin presence revealing that a pervasive emptiness rings temporal experience. This sense of nothingness once again reflects the nothingness of the nuclear hypocentre. In the face of this emptiness, Lowell's persona "cannot sleep," which indicates that he cannot escape his confrontation with the nothingness that is his new epistemological reality any more than he can escape the temporality that shapes his daily experience. The hands on the clock act as signifiers of the urgency of coming to terms with this epistemological incertitude, just as they invoke a counting down towards a moment of nuclear disaster and oblivion.

While such a decision to continue is fundamentally premised upon uncertainty, it is the embrace of uncertainty that reveals its primary element of political engagement. By emphasizing the correlation between the instability of the ego in an age of anxiety, Lowell submits both the self and the concept of certainty to negation. While such a negation leads to a paradoxical emptiness within the self, it also repositions the ego as inherently decentred, unstable, and evolving. The notion of a unified ego, like the notion of a stable, logocentric cultural referent, is exposed as an empty container subject to the same volatile chain reaction and free play of signifiers that comprise the relationship between the casing of the bomb and the unstable atoms inside. Lowell evokes the empty, atomic self as the locus for renegotiating the containment and conformity characteristic of the early Cold War era. By representing the volatile pathos implicit in a confrontation with nothingness, Lowell posits the self as the locus for a charged reaction against the conformity of Cold War ideology.

For midcentury poets, exploring the relationship between the volatility of madness and the repression of containment was a means of engaging an oppressive state apparatus

below the radar of surveillance. While Lowell's poetics of madness feature the convergence of a private madness with public issues such as nuclear anxiety, his one-time student Anne Sexton forges a poetics that makes connections between psycho-scientific discourses of normalcy and the formation of identity in the postwar era. More overtly autobiographical than Lowell's work, many of Sexton's early poems are intimate portraits of personal breakdown. Though her work has been scrutinized for its seemingly cathartic and purgative sensibility, a rigorous engagement of its metaphorical use of madness yields a commitment to political engagement evocative of her one-time mentor's. While Lowell uses madness to assert a pathological mode-of-being in postwar reality, Sexton focuses on the doctor-patient relationship in order to deconstruct notions of identity linked to the postwar psychological paradigm.

**'Though this is madness, yet there be method in't': The Cold War Poetics of Sexton  
and Plath**

## Fastening a New Skin: Anne Sexton and the Confessional Paradigm

Robert Lowell's influence upon other, younger "confessional poets" has been well documented. Amongst his students at a Boston University poetry seminar in 1958 were the relatively unknown Sylvia Plath and a local-housewife-turned-poet named Anne Sexton. Each week Sexton sat amongst the fifteen graduate students enrolled in the seminar. Lacking even a bachelor's degree herself, Sexton was accepted into the seminar by Lowell personally, who responded to her manuscript with a heartening note: "Of course your poems qualify. They move with ease and are filled with experience, like good prose.... You stick to truth and the simple expression of very difficult feelings, and this is the line in poetry that I am most interested in" (qtd. in Middelbrook, *Anne Sexton* 91). While Sexton's more spontaneous, often more intimate, confessional style differs from Lowell's controlled diction, the two writers share one particular thematic concern: madness. Sexton, like Lowell, grappled with serious psychological afflictions. Like Lowell she was institutionalized on numerous occasions because of her illness. As in Lowell's poetry, illness is an important metaphor in much of Sexton's writing.

The use of illness as metaphor, however, differs significantly in Sexton's work. While Lowell uses madness as a metaphor for the experience of nothingness in atomic society, Sexton invokes madness in order to deconstruct the psychological paradigm's notion of a normal identity in Cold War culture. Sexton's poetry reveals, and challenges, the ways in which psychiatric and psychological discourses construct and discipline identity in relation to codes of Cold War normalcy. She investigates the ways in which being a normal human is a product of discourses aimed at shaping a disciplined, contained, and conformist identity.

In her early poem "Said the Poet to the Analyst," Sexton confidently asserts "My business is words" (12). Structured in the patient/addressee binary used in so much of her work, Sexton's poem here engages the problem of psycho-linguistic constructions of identity. For her speaker "Words are like swarming bees" (*Bedlam* 12); they are uncontainable and dangerous and cannot be reduced to essential constructs of truth or identity. Sexton's recognition of the slippery, essentially uncontainable nature of language presents a challenge to conventional readings of her work, many of which have chosen to focus on her confessional style as a form of purgative therapy practiced by the author in order to pacify feelings of extreme, even pathological, guilt, shame, and anxiety. Indeed, Sexton's cultivation of linguistic uncertainty seems almost to respond directly to such reductive claims about confessional poetry as M.L. Rosenthal's now infamous dictum that "Confessional poetry is a poetry of suffering. The suffering is generally 'unbearable' because the poetry so often projects breakdown and paranoia" (*The New Poets* 130). While the details of Sexton's personal life certainly suggest a degree of psychic turmoil and suffering, the urge to read her poems as "Self-dramatization[s]" that position the poet as a sensitive individual who must pay for such "gifts of sympathy and perception by mental illness" (Rosenthal, *The New Poets*, 131), reduces both the poems and poet to the level of a socially disengaged spectacle.

In poems such as "Said the Poet to the Analyst" Sexton's speaker reminds both her analyst and her audience that her representations of mental illness are much more cunning: "Your business is watching my words. But I / admit nothing" (12). Rather than submitting to the authority of her analyst's gaze, Sexton confesses her desire to evade and manipulate it. Defying the notion of confessional poetry as emotional catharsis, Sexton

exploits confession as a means of challenging constructs of normalized identity. In her first collection, *To Bedlam and Part Way Back*, she continually returns to themes of madness and illness as a means of exploring the confessional power relationship between patient and doctor in institutional psychiatry. Using the abject self as its model, Sexton's early poetry elucidates the correlation between the growing institutional authority of psychiatric disciplines and the repression of individual sovereignty in the containment culture of 1950s and 1960s America. Forging a space between the language of madness and discourses of authority, Sexton's confessional poetics speaks from a space "part way back" from Bedlam in order to reveal the role played by discourses of institutional authority in the construction of the identities of so-called "mad" American subjects during the Cold War era.

At times during her career Sexton made it clear that she conceived of her aesthetic as a means of identifying her "self" in opposition to 1950s and 1960s discourses of normal domesticity. The story of Sexton's abrupt transition from mentally ill housewife to poet is repeated in Sexton criticism to the point where it becomes a biographical myth. After returning from her hospitalization for suicidal depression in the months following the birth of her second daughter, Sexton followed the advice of her doctor and sought a means of improving her education. As she recalls, "One night I saw I.A. Richards on educational television reading a sonnet and explaining its form. I thought to myself, 'I could do that, maybe; I could try.' So I sat down and wrote a sonnet. The next day I wrote another one, and so forth" (Kevles 4). So began, as the story goes, the poetic development that would lead Sexton to a Pulitzer Prize just nine years later. Quoting Sexton, her biographer Diane Wood Middlebrook notes that during these formative years,

“She measured progress by changes in the furniture supporting her work. At first she used a card table ‘Because I didn’t think I was a poet. When I put in a desk, it was in our dining room. [...] Then I put up some book shelves—everything was tentative” (“Housewife into Poet” 484). For Sexton, the locus of writing was the literal site of domestic production and nuclear family values. While such observations about Sexton’s development are interesting insofar as they provide insight into her transformation from patient to poet and suggest the degree of self-actualization that such a transformation required, they also tend to prioritize conceptions of her poetic style as one characterized by her status as a victim of patriarchy, one lacking a “room of her own” in which to develop her craft.

While Sexton clearly returns to issues of feminine subordination in her poetry, her poetics takes a more complex stance in relation to constructions of identity in the Cold War economy. Her investigations of the relationship between containment culture and discourses of psychiatric normalcy extend beyond personal, and even gendered, concerns, often focusing on the power relationship between the confessing “mad” subject and the psychiatric, medical, and moral authority of her addressee. Such a focus on the power dynamics of this relationship, and on the manner in which they are responsible for constructing normalized identity in Cold War America, signifies the limitations of purgative readings of confessional poetry promoted by Rosenthal and others. It demonstrates the fact that Sexton’s poetic concerns are not merely cathartic. Instead, they reveal a political motivation that posits her work as actively engaged with Cold War constructs of identity.

In various interviews and letters Sexton overtly explores the role psychiatric confession plays in the construction of identity. In a 1964 letter to a psychiatrist friend, she recalls being awakened to what she ambiguously refers to as “language” during her first hospitalization for mental illness:

When I was first sick I was thrilled (a language word, translate, relieved) to get into the Nut House. At first, of course, I was just scared and crying and very quiet (who me!) but then I found this girl (very crazy of course) (like me I guess) who talked language. What a relief! I mean, well ... someone! And then later, a while later, and quite a while I found out that Martin [Orne] talked language. (*A Self-Portrait in Letters* 244)

Middlebrook suggests that when Sexton refers to “language,” she means a type of speech “in which meaning is condensed and indirect and where breaks and gaps demand as much interpretation as what is voiced. Schizophrenics use language this way, and so do poets: ‘figurative language’ is the term Sexton might have used here, except she meant to indicate that the crucible of formation was urgent need” (“Poet to Housewife” 48). While Middlebrook draws a correlation between Sexton’s desire to speak “language” and creative expression, she both relegates that expression to a purgative “crucible of formation” derived from “urgent need” and draws a direct, if unsubstantiated, connection between poetic expression and schizophrenia, a disease from which Sexton’s psychiatrist Dr. Martin Orne felt confident his patient did not suffer.<sup>31</sup> Middlebrook’s analysis

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<sup>31</sup> In *Anne Sexton: A Biography*, Middlebrook quotes Dr. Martin Orne’s observation that Sexton was not in fact schizophrenic, a statement that stands in direct opposition to her insinuation that Sexton’s poetic language borrows from her experience of schizophrenia. Orne states that when he first treated Sexton, “She was very, very sick, but like many interesting patients didn’t fit textbook criteria. I did the diagnostic work on her when she was at the hospital, which indicated that she was hysteric in the classic sense: like a chameleon, she could adopt any symptom. She experienced profound dissociation, and she had lesions of

therefore contains the myth of confessional extremism within a tautological construction: she posits Sexton as a poet who needed madness to write poetry and needed poetry to come to terms with madness. This reading reinforces the idea that her poetry is a symptom of her biography instead of an act of socially engaged aesthetics.

Sexton's own analysis of her use of "language" demonstrates a greater degree of calculation. Frustrated that neither her husband nor any of her suburban neighbours were capable of speaking language, she attempted to clarify her meaning of the ambiguous term by stating that

Language has nothing to do with rational thought. I think that's why I get so horribly furious and disturbed with rational thought.

Language is the opposite of the way a machine works.

Language is poetry, maybe? But not all language is poetry.

Nor is all poetry language. (*Letters* 245)

By viewing language as an alternative to a rational thought process that is frustrating and repressive, Sexton realizes that the production of an anti-rational linguistic discourse can function as a means of responding to the dominant discourses of containment ideology. Her implementation of discourses of madness functions as an act of linguistic defiance, as a means of reclaiming and asserting a discourse that lies beyond appropriation.

In "You, Doctor Martin," the first poem in *To Bedlam and Part Way Back*, Sexton uses her poetic "language" to expose and render problematic the discourses of normalcy inherent in the psychiatrist/patient relationship:

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memory. Some therapists were convinced that Anne was schizophrenic. I don't doubt that hospitalized in a ward of schizophrenics, she would exhibit their symptoms.... But I never saw evidence in her of loose associations or formal thought disorders, or other major symptoms of schizophrenia" (39).

You, Doctor Martin, walk  
from breakfast to madness. Late August,  
I speed through the antiseptic tunnel  
where the moving dead still talk  
of pushing their bones against the thrust  
of cure. And I am queen of this summer hotel  
or the laughing bee on a stalk  
of death. (3)

Immediately making a distinction between the rational and irrational worlds through the figure of Dr. Martin, who walks “from breakfast to madness,” Sexton situates herself within the realm of the patients, the “moving dead” looking for the “thrust of cure” in the “antiseptic tunnel[s]” of the institution. However, Sexton also establishes an important contrast between such self-abnegating, even violent descriptions of cure, and what appears to be a sort of inherent beauty or even freedom of madness suggested by her status as “queen of this summer hotel” and “laughing bee on a stalk / of death.” The juxtaposition of laughter with death suggests that within her institutional setting, the brief freedom afforded by her mad laughter parallels the release from social obligation proffered by death. It indicates that for Sexton’s speaker madness, and even death, offer greater potential for an essential freedom than recovery does based as it is upon the conformist coercions of institutional discourse and a return once cured to domestic containment. The fact that Sexton is both a “queen” and a “bee” signifies a level of method behind her madness. As queen (and queen bee) she reigns over her surroundings and exploits them to her own advantage, using her exile and alienation to construct an

identity derived from the irrationality contained by the institution. She therefore exploits the possibilities of madness as a counter-discourse to a contained, normalized identity as a housewife.

Sexton further challenges appeals to normalized identity by engaging the confessional paradigm between doctor and patient. Directly addressing Dr. Martin, she asserts “Your business is people, / you call at the madhouse, an oracular eye in our nest” (*Complete Poems* 4). Here the psychiatrist is given an authority that extends beyond scientific discourse into the function of an oracle. This oracular status signifies the extent of his authority as both scientist and man of enlightened reason. His “oracular eye” posits him as the beholder of an authoritative gaze of surveillance capable of disciplining and shaping the identity of his irrational subjects. As the poem concludes, Sexton chronicles the effects of this psychiatric gaze on her personality:

I am queen of all my sins  
forgotten. Am I still lost?  
Once I was beautiful. Now I am myself,  
counting this row and that row of moccasins  
waiting on the silent shelf. (*Complete Poems* 4)

Beneath Dr. Martin’s “oracular” gaze, Sexton’s speaker completes a transformation from a “beautiful,” if irrational, queen to “queen of all [her] sins”—a movement that indicates the disciplinary process inherent to psycho-scientific models of recovery. For Sexton, complicit with the beauty of madness is a freedom from the guilt and anxiety associated with her sins. Her experience at the institution reverses this relationship. After her psychological reformation, she is no longer free from the sins psychiatric discourse would

have so eagerly exposed. As queen of her sins she is required to rule over them, to deal routinely and rationally with their burden. From this perspective, the regimen of normalization proffered by Dr. Martin demands a conformity that denies the patient a degree of irrational sovereignty and posits normalcy as the product of discipline and regimentation. Sexton makes this regimen of psychiatric discipline clear in the poem's final ironic statement about her decidedly less beautiful status as a psychiatrically disciplined individual sitting in an assembly line of mental patients and stitching the sort of padded moccasins characteristic of the insular comforts of suburban life. As a symbol of bourgeois comfort the moccasins are themselves invested in exploitation, evoking the containment and commodification of Native American identity for a dominant community.

Sexton, however, refrains from glorifying madness as a positive alternative to psychiatric rationality. Instead, the poem constitutes a use of "language" aimed at addressing the bipolar relationship between madness and psycho-scientific constructs of identity. As Theodor Adorno observes with reference to lyric poetry,

the descent into individuality raises the lyric poem to the realm of the general by virtue of its bringing to light things undistorted, ungrasped, things not yet subsumed—and thus the poem anticipates, in an abstract way, a condition in which no mere generalities ... can bind and chain that which is human.

("Lyric Poetry" 213)

The individuality of autobiographic poetry strives for this freedom from subordination to cultural generalities. The confessional style of Sexton, Berryman, Lowell and others, by focusing on private, often traumatic experiences such as madness, circumvents allegiance

to dominant currents of thought and thus seeks to maintain a measure of aesthetic autonomy in an increasingly commodified environment. It is in this retreat from the public realm that its politics is manifested. Inscribed in Sexton's reduction of the suffering of madness to private experience is an implicit critique of a culture in which existence is predicated upon conformity to extrinsically imposed categories of bourgeois normality. While Sexton's poetics of madness issues overt challenges to the authority of psychiatry as an enlightened, scientific discipline, its imagery and language, by refusing to conform to normalized patterns of thought, speaks abstractly to "that which is human," that which cannot be contained by Cold War containment ideology. For Sexton, madness individualizes the subsuming conformity of the mass; as such, it reclaims a measure of identity, albeit compromised, from a repressive state apparatus.<sup>32</sup>

That Sexton was aware of the pressure to behave according to conventions of bourgeois normality is evident from her correspondence, which repeatedly refers to the difficulties of conforming to the life of a housewife. In a 1948 letter to her parents that predates her breakdown and poetic apprenticeship, she sarcastically hints at the difficulties of maintaining the role of wife: "I thought it was about time for me to sit myself down and write you a letter. I have been MONSTROUSLY busy cooking, washing ... cleansing, giving parties that don't happen, and etc. etc. Doing all my little wifely duties" (*Letters* 19). In later letters, this sarcastic tone turns to contempt for the domestic pressures that prevent her from focusing her attention on poetry. In a note

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<sup>32</sup> I use the term "state apparatus" in the Althusserian sense. For Althusser, identity is not innate; rather, it is the result of the individual's interpellation as a subject by the socioeconomic institutions that comprise the Ideological State Apparatus (ISA). According to Althusser, these institutions include entities such as the media, family, and education. See Louis Althusser, *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*.

retrieved by Middlebrook from Sexton's therapeutic sessions with Martin Orne, Sexton confides,<sup>33</sup>

I am so alone—nothing seems worth while—I walk from room to room  
trying to think of something to do—for a while I will do something, make  
cookies or clean the bathroom—make beds—answer the telephone—but all  
along I have this almost terrible energy in me and nothing seems to help ... I  
sit in a chair and try to read a magazine and I twirl my hair until it is a mass  
[of] snarls—then as I pass a mirror I see myself and comb it again ... Then I  
walk up and down the room—back and forth—and I feel like a caged tiger.  
(qtd. in Middlebrook, *Anne Sexton* 39)

While this passage offers insight into the frustration Sexton felt by being “caged” by her role as a housewife, such confinement was a condition that was by no means uniquely hers.

Dubbed “the comfortable concentration camp” by Betty Friedan in *The Feminine Mystique*, the domestic roles that many American women conformed to during the early Cold War period often had damaging psychological repercussions. Paradoxically, its discursive constructs were being promoted by the instruments of containment ideology to an unprecedented degree. This was, after all, a political era that took as one of its defining moments the 1959 “Kitchen Debate” between then Senator Richard Nixon and Nikita Khrushchev, a debate in which

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<sup>33</sup> Middlebrook's publication of *Anne Sexton: A Biography* in 1991 stirred controversy for its dependence upon detailed records from Sexton's private therapy sessions with Dr. Martin Orne. Orne was criticized for granting Middlebrook access to the materials, which included medical records, unpublished poems, and over 300 audiotapes recorded during therapy sessions with Sexton.

Nixon held up modern homes as a symbol of his country's superiority. The basis of his argument was that capitalism enabled individuals to have better lives, observing: 'You may be ahead of us in the thrust of your rockets ... We may be ahead of you in colour television'. Later, pointing at a panel-controlled washing machine, he [Nixon] observed: 'In America, these things are designed to make things easier for our women'. This was a defining event in Cold War politics—one that shows how vital the myth of suburbia and the propaganda of the housewife had become to the government's arguments, and how deeply the political and personal had become entwined. The battle-lines for hearts and minds were being drawn on kitchen tiles. (Pollard 11)

In an era when suburban expansion had become intimately affiliated with government discourses of containment, the promotion of domestic lifestyle was pervasive.

Sexton's world was one in which Tupperware parties, which marketed the importance of "containing" food safely, reminded women of "the economic function of the housewife as consumer" (Pollard 5). Advertisements and magazines glorified household activities and promoted conformity to domestic identities, and "sitcoms of difference such as *The Munsters* and *The Addams Family* ... playfully exaggerated the battle-lines drawn between neighbours and those they perceived as different or deviant" (Pollard 10). This coercion to conform to a specific notion of domestic identity had dangerous psychological ramifications for many women. As Friedan argues, "there are aspects of the housewife role that make it almost impossible for a woman of adult intelligence to retain a sense of human identity, the firm core of self or 'I' without which a human being, man or woman, is not truly alive" (305). Sexton's poetic style

demonstrates an acute awareness of the psychological damage that could potentially result from Cold War culture's barrage of signifiers of domestic containment. She explores this tension between the cultural appeal to conformity and the desire for personal autonomy in "Music Swims Back to Me."

The poem begins "Wait Mister. Which way is home?" (*Complete Poems* 6). This line once again identifies Sexton's persona as lost or deviant and in need of the "oracular," masculine authority of the unnamed "Mister" for guidance. The word "home" plays on notions of suburban domesticity, the transgression of which landed Sexton in the institution in the first place. Left alone in a "private institution on a hill" (*Complete Poems* 6), Sexton establishes the scene:

Imagine it. A radio playing  
and everyone here was crazy.  
I liked it and danced in a circle.  
Music pours over the sense  
and in a funny way  
music sees more than I.  
I mean it remembers better;  
remembers the first night here.  
It was the strangled cold of November;  
even the stars were strapped in the sky  
and that moon too bright  
forking through the bars to stick me  
with a singing in the head.

I have forgotten all the rest. (*Complete Poems* 6-7)

In this poem, the radio serves as a symbol of the world beyond the confines of the institution: it is a transmission from the normal world. It also functions as a symbol of the impingement of 1950s media upon the consciousness of common individuals. Radio technology allowed for the popular dissemination of the various discourses of consumption, normalcy and containment characteristic of the 1950s culture industry.

Sexton plays with the contrast between the radio's music and her antithetical reaction to the discourses of normalcy conveyed by popular media by associating the radio directly with her madness: "I liked it and danced in a circle." Her mad, circular dance signifies a loss of control and an eventual descent into a dizzying illness. In an image that resembles (and historically precedes) the moon in Lowell's "Myopia: A Night," Sexton invokes the moon as a cipher. The circular dance also reveals the figure of a zero, a presence dancing around an absence. It is precisely this confrontation with nothingness that Lowell describes as inherent in the experience of madness. This recognition of the nothingness upon which identity is focused, combined with the fact that the music comes "forking through the bars to stick me / with a singing in the head," reinforces the sense of separation between the normalized world symbolized by the radio, where "even the stars were strapped in the sky," and the mad world within the institution walls. It also indicates that the radio has infected Sexton's persona, affecting her psychological condition negatively. Sexton reinforces this notion in the final stanza:

They lock me in this chair at eight a.m.  
and there are no signs to tell the way,  
just the radio beating to itself

and the song that remembers  
more than I. Oh, la la la,  
this music swims back to me. (*Complete Poems* 7)

The institutional setting functions as a gross reenactment of the domestic. Locked in her chair, Sexton's speaker is incapable of finding a way out of her bind; she is forced to remain still and endure the radio's music. The music is elevated from a symbol of hegemonic containment to a psychological instrument in what resembles a scene of behaviorist treatment, or even torture, aimed at disciplining the patient by whatever means necessary. Sexton's speaker is psychologically accosted by the music. The fact that "there are no signs to tell the way" indicates that her recovery is predicated less upon intellectual self-discovery than on a mindless conditioning that is reinforced by the repeated "Oh, la la la" of the song's content. The notion that "the song remembers / more than I" recalls a formulaic, conformist America that is in diametric opposition to Sexton's "mad," irrational conception of reality. By placing herself within the confines of the institution in this poem, Sexton polarizes the disparity between conformist notions of American reality and her own abject perspective. She is able to mount a critique of both the banality of containment America and the tactics of normalization implemented by the processes of psychiatric discipline.

The power relationship between auditor and confessor has played a pivotal role in both the construction of individual identity and the production of historical truth in Western societies. As Michel Foucault argues, "next to the testing rituals, next to the testimony of witnesses, and the learned methods of observation and demonstration, the confession became one of the West's most highly valued techniques for producing truth.

We have since become a singularly confessing society” (*History of Sexuality* 59). Like Foucault, Sexton understands confession as a practice that has been elevated to the role of a discourse that manifests itself in life’s primary relationships. Her poems examine how confession plays an important role in the construction of individual identity: one is “forced to confess” to various figures of authority. Autonomy is then momentarily relinquished and placed in the hands of the auditor. Hence, the confessional relationship implies a power relation wherein the authority of the auditor directly affects the confessor’s sense of identity. As Foucault argues, in contemporary culture

The obligation to confess is now relayed through so many different points, is so deeply ingrained in us, that we no longer perceive it as the effect of a power that constrains us; on the contrary, it seems to us that truth, lodged in our most secret nature, “demands” only to surface; that if it fails to do so, this is because a constraint holds it in place, the violence of a power weighs it down, and it can finally be articulated only at the price of a kind of liberation. Confession frees, but power reduces one to silence; truth does not belong to the order of power, but shares an original affinity with freedom: traditional themes in philosophy, which a “political history of truth” would have to overturn by showing that truth is not by nature free—nor error service—but that its production is thoroughly imbued with relations of power. The confession is an example of this. (60)

Foucault’s statement works to deconstruct the cathartic concept of confessional poetics that sees poetry as a means of peeling back layers to expose a true poetic self; rather, he identifies confession as a concept compromised by ideological discourses of

power and authority that reduce the confessor to silence, or to the performance of conformity. It is precisely this relationship that Sexton exposes in her poems of madness, using confession as a symbol of the means by which, within the confessional environment of institutional psychiatry, individual confessors become disciplined subjects. In poems such as “Kind Sir: These Woods,” Sexton metaphorically conveys this recognition of the relationship between an essential subjective truth and social discourses:

Kind Sir: Lost and of your same kind  
I have turned around twice with my eyes sealed  
and the woods were white and my night mind  
saw such strange happenings, untold and unreal.  
And opening my eyes, I am afraid of course  
to look—this inward look society scorns—  
still, I search in these woods and find nothing worse  
than myself, caught between the grapes and the thorns. (*Complete Poems* 5)

Lost in the “woods” of her “night mind,” Sexton’s speaker says that she is “afraid ... to look” with the “inward look society scorns.” This line challenges those who criticize her poetics of personal trauma by demonstrating a self-reflexive awareness of negative responses to her subjective poetic methodology. Though she takes this challenge up more fully in poems such as “For John, Who Begs Me Not to Enquire Further,” her self-reflexive awareness conveys her willingness to manipulate subjective poetics for political effect. It also indicates that there is a certain level of risk involved with embarking upon an investigation of personal psychic trauma. Her fear is grounded in both the possibility

of recovering even more damaging knowledge of her self by looking inward, and in being scorned for looking away from the conformist median of containment identity.

When Sexton's persona does open her eyes, she finds "nothing worse / than myself, caught between the grapes and the thorns." Rather than asserting the wreckage of personal turmoil, this image projects a sense of being contained by elements external to her sense of identity. She is caught between two extremes: the grapes function as a symbol of comfort and pleasure. Evoking wine, catharsis, and luxury, they recall the excess of imperial feasts. For Sexton, this excess is transfigured into the excess of suburban comfort in containment America. It stresses the relationship between domestic comfort and conformity. The thorns, on the other hand, suggest the negative consequences of becoming too absorbed by such comfort. As images of violence and entanglement, they suggest at once a bleeding of the self, and an inability to escape from the object of violence, which in this case is coextensive with the object of luxury.<sup>34</sup>

This image of violence evokes an entanglement and loss endemic to the experience of madness. The fact that Sexton is once again asking a male authority figure for direction indicates that she is looking beyond herself for the construction of her identity. Her identity is constructed by the "Kind Sir" who will offer guidance in spite of the fact that, upon looking inward herself, she does not recognize anything that is implicitly wrong. Rather, she seems to recognize the poles of the thorns and grapes as representative of the discursive constructs that she is caught between. From this perspective Sexton's self is caught less in her own mind than in the "woods" of

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<sup>34</sup> Sexton may have also had Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind" in mind, where the poet confronts the inspirational wind with an exhortation: "Oh! lift me as a wave, a leaf, a cloud! / I fall upon the thorns of life! I bleed!"

discourses intent on imposing identity upon the sovereign individual. Her search for identity from her mad, alienated perspective is less a search for a centred, ideal truth than an attempt to locate an identity less compromised by the paradigm of confessionality.

Sexton takes her epigraph to *Bedlam* from an 1815 letter from Schopenhauer to Goethe, which states that the philosopher “Must be like Sophocles’s Oedipus, who, seeking enlightenment concerning his terrible fate, pursues his indefatigable inquiry even when he divines that appalling horror awaits in the answer.” With this epigraph in mind, Diana George Hume argues that “What forms the essence of Anne Sexton’s poetic achievement is not her status as victim but her struggle to discover the truth about herself, to turn her blindness into insight” (32). However, with Sexton, as with Oedipus, the desire to “inquire further” requires an acknowledgement that the “truth” about the self is inextricably linked to the social and cultural forces that help shape individual identity. From her position as a mad person, incarcerated in the woods of her mind, Sexton recognizes that the construction of her identity is linked to the psychiatric discourses that seek to coerce her to a more disciplined sense of normalcy. She recognizes that “Psychology ... is not a body of abstracted theories and explanations, but an ‘intellectual technology’, a way of making visible and intelligible certain features of persons, their conducts, and their relations with one another” (Rose 10-11). For Sexton, it is the correlation between the therapeutic construction of “normalized” identity and the “expertise” of psychology which is exposed by exploiting the resistance that is contained in the confessional paradigm. Her poetry therefore reveals a link between psycho-scientific discourse and the disciplinization of subjects within American liberal

democracy, a link obscured by the preponderance of hegemonic discourses of containment.

As cultural theorist Nikolas Rose explains,

liberal democratic problematics of government are autonomizing; they seek to govern through constructing a kind of regulated autonomy for social actors. The modern liberal self is 'obliged to be free', to construe all aspects of its life as the outcome of choices made among a number of options. Each attribute of the person is to be realized through decisions, and justified in terms of motives, needs, and aspirations of the self. The technologies of psychology gain their social power in liberal democracies because they share this ethic of competent autonomous selfhood, and because they promise to sustain, respect, and restore selfhood to citizens of such politics. They constitute technologies of individuality for the production and regulation of the individual who is 'free to choose'. (100)

In several poems in *Bedlam*, Sexton demonstrates a recognition that the illusion of freedom is constructed by the individual's status as a subject within a system that obliges her to choose from a limited number of options, like the music on the radio in "Music Swims Back to Me." Psycho-scientific reason is linked to government through its proliferation of discourses of normalcy, discourses that offer the illusion of autonomy by promoting conformity to the ideologies of liberal capitalism. It helps administer these

discourses through its treatment of deviant behaviour, as Sexton makes clear in poems such as "Kind Sir."<sup>35</sup>

It is to this process of discipline that Sexton responds by exploiting the confessional paradigm. In "For John, Who Begs Me Not to Enquire Further," she foregrounds the relationship between confession and authority and indicates that it plays a role in the construction of both her personal and literary identities. The poem is addressed to John Holmes, a professor at Tufts University and a prominent New England poet. Holmes also taught the poetry workshop offered at the Boston Center for Adult Education that Sexton enrolled herself in during her first tentative months of poetic apprenticeship. The workshop proved to be a formative experience in Sexton's poetic development and introduced her to her lifelong friend Maxine Kumin as well as several other influential contemporaries. Explaining her early trepidations about joining the class, Sexton draws an incisive analogy between the poetry class and her experience in the mental institution:

I started in the middle of the term, very shy, writing very bad poems, solemnly handing them in for eighteen others in the class to hear. The most important aspect of that class was that I felt I belonged somewhere. When I first got sick and became a displaced person, I thought I was quite alone, but when I went into the mental hospital, I found I wasn't, that there were other people like me. It made me feel better—more real, sane. I felt, "These are my people." Well, at the John Holmes class that I attended for two years, I found

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<sup>35</sup> In *Mrs. Dalloway*, Virginia Woolf forges a similar critique of the psycho-scientific establishment through the character of Septimus Smith, whose breakdown and suicide represent the failure of medical practice to effectively treat the otherness of post-traumatic stress related to shell shock.

I belonged to the poets, that I was *real* there, and I had another, “These are my people.” (qtd. in Middlebrook, *Anne Sexton* 50)

By establishing a direct correlation between the experience of poetry and the experience of madness, Sexton appears to endorse conceptions of confessional poetics as driven by extreme behaviour. However, her focus on the concept of community rather than behaviour or illicit activity demonstrates how in poetry she discovers a legitimate social perspective from which she can mount her critique of dominant social discourses. For Sexton, poetry endows her critiques with a legitimacy denied the institutionally insane. However, as she demonstrates in “For John,” poetry must also speak from an irrational perspective if it wishes to challenge dominant ideology.

Once again placing herself in the position of confessor, the poem functions as an apology for the personal nature of her style, a style that Holmes had warned her against for fear that she would one day live to regret such public declarations of personal turmoil. Meditating upon the revealing material she discovered in her own consciousness while institutionalized, Sexton begins the poem with an assertion that her intent is not to glorify her illness:

Not that it was beautiful,  
but that, in the end, there was  
a certain sense of order there;  
something worth learning  
in that narrow diary of my mind,  
in the commonplaces of the asylum  
where the cracked mirror

or my own selfish death

outstared me. (*Complete Poems* 34)

While asserting the difficult, rather than beautiful, nature of her madness, Sexton nevertheless argues that there was “something worth learning” from both her illness and her stay in the asylum. What was worth learning is linked less to the constructs of disciplined normalcy proliferated by institutional psychiatry than to the ways by which she can cultivate her irrationality as a means of forging a discourse that counters dominant ideology. She learns a “certain sense of order,” one that is irrational and that testifies to the “cracked mirror” as opposed to a stable and singular identity. It is this cracked specular self that she holds up as an alternative to the contained, disciplined self that her treatment sought to construct.

Sexton finds matter for poetic exploration “in the commonplaces of the asylum.” These “commonplaces,” or common places, evoke the domain of irrationality and contrast the institutional authority encountered in locales designated for treatment. For Sexton, this exploration of irrationality, of what is common in the asylum and beyond the walls of containment culture, is precisely what is required in order to cultivate a poetics that counters dominant ideologies. Against such notions of normalcy, Sexton posits the “Cracked mirror”<sup>36</sup> of her “own selfish death,” or suicide attempt, as a means of retrieving an autonomous identity. The cracked mirror suggests a fractured identity, an inability to integrate her self with the rationalized world. The fact that she turns to suicide for answers indicates that she recognizes identity as something that is fundamentally

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<sup>36</sup> The “Cracked mirror” has echoes of Tennyson’s “Lady of Shallot”: “The mirror cracked from side to side; / ‘The curse is come upon me,’ cried / The Lady of Shallot” (3.115-117.1062). Sexton’s poem shares Tennyson’s theme of female alienation.

fragmented and threatened by dissolution. As the poem continues, Sexton cultivates this sense of dissolution as a means of forging a counter-discourse:

I tapped my own head;  
it was glass, an inverted bowl.  
It is a small thing  
to rage in your own bowl.  
At first it was private.  
Then it was more than myself;  
it was you, or your house  
or your kitchen  
And if you turn away  
because there is no lesson here  
I will hold my awkward bowl,  
with all its cracked stars shining  
like a complicated lie,  
and fasten a new skin around it  
as if I were dressing an orange  
or a strange sun. (*Complete Poems* 35)

The idea of “tapping” her head signifies that she both finds a rich source of poetic material and has difficulty containing the flow of that material from her fragmented being once it begins. “Tapping” connotes tapping a well, which at once provides a source of sustenance, but also has a flow that is difficult to contain. For Sexton, this flow finds its source in the irrationality of her mad, abject self.

While Sexton recognizes and concedes that “It is a small thing” to draw her poetics from such seemingly narrow, even narcissistic concerns, she goes on to imply that her poetry soon moved beyond exclusively personal issues. On a literal level, this movement from private to public began when Sexton started attending the poetry seminar and sharing her work with others, and it grew as she became a published, public poet. However, Sexton indicates that the growth of her poetry into more than herself is linked to her recognition and exploitation of the power relationship inherent in the confessional paradigm. First, Sexton places her poetic development in the hands of Holmes, stating “it was you, or your house, or your kitchen” that influenced her early apprenticeship. She implies that the poetic authority of Holmes played a role in shaping her development as a poet. By situating this development within Holmes’s “house” or “kitchen,” which was the culturally standardized place for women in 1950s domestic ethos, Sexton deliberately places herself in a domestic position that remains subordinate to Holmes’s patriarchal and poetic authority. Holmes’s seminar literally becomes the ‘home’ of Sexton’s poetic development, a home in which she plays the role of subordinate woman to Holmes’s masculine authority. Both Holmes and his domestic environment function as symbols of a safe, contained poetry that will reflect the suburban atmosphere in which it is being produced. Recognizing the imbalance of such a power dynamic, Sexton asserts that the purpose of her private poetry is to deliberately oppose such notions of containment, an opposition demonstrated by the image of holding the “awkward bowl” of her head “with all its cracked stars shining / like a complicated lie” for the public to see. The fact that Sexton calls the contents of her head a “complicated lie” indicates that she recognizes the direct relationship between the construction of her identity and discourses of moral,

cultural, and psychological authority, as symbolized in this instance by Holmes. As an individual, she is the product of the contents of cultural discourses that exist in disparate order in her head. By exposing them, she identifies the means by which

the ethical technologies in which psychology participates, and in which psychological expertise is so deeply enmeshed, provide a means for shaping, nurturing, and managing human beings not in opposition to their personal identity but precisely in order to produce such an identity: a necessary reciprocal element of the political valorization of freedom. (Rose 98)

It is the production of such an identity that Sexton refers to as a “complicated lie.” With first-hand experience of the institutional formation of the self, Sexton finds parallels in the appeals she receives from Holmes (who plays the unfortunate role of strawman here) to conform to authorized models of poetic identity. In such appeals to authority, Sexton recognizes that the production of identity in Cold War America is linked to a vision of normalcy defined by the politics of containment and suburban domesticity, and manufactured by psychology. Thus, the notion of freedom sanctioned by discourses of normalcy in containment America, paradoxically, impinges upon the sovereignty of the individual.

It is precisely this paradox that Sexton seeks to expose and subvert by exploiting the confessional form. In “For John,” she suggests that the only means of opposing such liberal democratic constructions of selfhood is by taking the identity constructed by the “complicated lie” and fastening “a new skin around it / as if I were dressing an orange / or a strange sun.” Here Sexton recognizes overtly that her own identity is the product of discursive constructs, each a “new skin” fastened around an already “complicated lie.” By

posing the metaphor in this manner, Sexton reverses the conventional conception of confessional poetry as a genre determined to peel back the layers and reveal an essential truth at the core of selfhood. Instead, identity is posited as a layering of ideological constructs.

Exploring the power imbalance of the confessional paradigm by exploiting her madness is, for Sexton, a necessary political gesture. Her poetic exploitation of her own psychological dysfunction subverts the power of the confessional/medical relationship to encourage conformity to typologies of bourgeois normality. Her poetics of madness seems to defy Foucault's claim that

Since the end of the eighteenth century, the life of unreason no longer manifests itself except in the lightning-flash of works such as those of Hölderlin, of Nerval, of Nietzsche, or of Artaud—forever irreducible to those alienations that can be cured, resisting by their own strength that gigantic moral imprisonment which we are in the habit of calling, doubtless by antiphrasis, the liberation of the insane by Pinel and Tuke. (*Madness and Civilization* 275)<sup>37</sup>

Sexton encounters a paradox anticipated by Foucault: since madness, and the language of madness, by necessity exists in a space of exclusion, speaking madness in rational terms is impossible—it becomes only speaking *about* madness. It is because of this paradox that the use of a confessional, abject voice becomes imperative for Sexton, as it did for many of her “confessional” contemporaries, including Lowell, who invoked the impossibility of speaking madness as a metaphor for the impossibility of speaking atomic anxiety.

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<sup>37</sup> In *Madness and Civilization*, Foucault claims that the scientific and philanthropic gestures of Pinel and Tuke at the end of the classical era led to the “gradual discovery...of madness in its positive truth” (xii).

With reference to the difficulties of “speaking” madness presented by Foucault, Shoshanna Felman asks: “might not literature indeed be defined as that which speaks, precisely, out of what reduces it to silence?” (17). In this regard, Sexton, rather than attempting to speak madness itself, allows madness to manifest itself in the pathos of her poetics. As Felman recognizes, following Foucault, “Madness ... is nothing but that which the history of madness has *made possible precisely by suppressing it*: the ‘lyric glow of illness.’ Madness, which is *not* an object, is nothing other than the excess of its pathos, a ‘lyrical explosion’” (52). Sexton’s poetry of madness, by endorsing an abject, confessional style that openly chronicles the experience of madness without attempting to rationalize that experience, speaks in precisely such pathological terms. In poems such as “For John” and “Kind Sir,” she mediates experience through psychopathology; in so doing, she posits the abject self as uncontainable, as a “complicated lie” projecting its “cracked and shining stars.” While her poetry, through its very implication in “rational” language, remains incapable of speaking the “truth” of madness, the paradigm of alterity constituted by its pathological metaphors works to expose and deconstruct the cultural discourses responsible for maintaining boundaries between madness and normalcy through strategies of containment. As the “Silenced,” mad individual, the voiceless object of psychiatric discourse and moral authority, Sexton chronicles her experiences without rationalizing them and without directly analyzing her own inability to conform to the bourgeois rational order.

As she writes in “Ring the Bells,” a poem about musical instruction at the asylum,

this is how the bells really sound,

as untroubled and clean  
as a workable kitchen,  
and this is my bell responding  
to my hand that responds to the lady  
who points at me, E flat;  
and although we are no better for it,  
they tell you to go. And you do. (*Complete Poems* 29)

By chronicling a common scene at the asylum, one aimed at giving patients a sense of creativity that is derived from conforming to the orders of the group's leader, Sexton creates an allegory for the subversive potential of aestheticizing her madness. The emphasis created by the caesura in the middle of the final line "they tell you to go. And you do," puns on the idea of conformity—cynically suggesting that by obeying orders, she will simultaneously be able to use art, in this case the musical bells she is instructed to play, to transgress responsibility within the institutional setting. The assertive nature of the statement "And you do" indicates that Sexton sees poeticizing the experience of madness as imperative. By confessing her madness artistically, she allows for a convergence between the voice of unreason and the literary. As Felman argues, "To speak about madness is to speak about the difference between languages: to import into one language the strangeness of another; to unsettle the decisions language has prescribed to us so that, somewhere between languages, will emerge the freedom to speak" (19). The mad bells of Sexton's pathological state of mind ring and reverberate in counterpoint to the appeal to conformity made by the figure of psychological authority. They also imply an ironic reversal of Pavlovian bells that, in behaviourist psychology, cause a predictable,

and predictably conformist, behaviour. In these reverberations Sexton unsettles conformist language and opens a new space for the mad, irrational, speaking subject.

Responding to a question about the link between madness and genius in the works of such midcentury poets as Roethke and Lowell, Sexton confidently states that “their genius is more important than their disease” (qtd. in Marx 31). She continues “I think there are so many people who are mentally disturbed who are not writers, or painters or whatever, that I don’t think genius and insanity grow in the same bed. I think the artist must have a heightened awareness” (qtd. in Marx 31). It is precisely this distinction between a tragic desire to confess madness for purgative reasons and her “heightened awareness” of the repressive political environment that must be made when considering Sexton’s poetry. While her craft may have begun with therapy in mind, it developed into an important exploration of the relationship between psychiatric recovery and the construction of normalized identity. The abject nature of Sexton’s confessional voice, an abjection that earned her intense criticism throughout her career, manifests itself as a pathological voice capable of countering psychological constructs of Cold War normalcy; as such, and in spite of its lack of overtly political commentary, it remains an important gesture of defiance.

Sexton, like Lowell and Berryman, challenges Cold War ideology’s impositions upon individual identity by formulating a poetics of madness and loss. By using her confessional voice to reposition the subject as inherently fractured and alienated, Sexton, like her counterparts, exposes the impossibility of stable identity within the postwar paradigm. While her aesthetic of madness works to identify the distinct correlation between containment ideology, psychological practice, and the construction of

normalized identity, her personal struggle with mental illness continued throughout her adult life. That struggle culminated with her suicide on 4 October 1974, two years after Berryman stepped off the side of a Minnesota bridge, and eleven years after her friend Sylvia Plath took her own life in a London flat.

For Sexton, Plath, Berryman, and Lowell, suicide was a major literary preoccupation. While Lowell died of a heart condition in 1977, the question of suicide appears in many of his works, including "Skunk Hour." Plath's suicide shook each of the other writers; each wrote elegies that empathized with Plath and even expressed jealousy over her decision to take her own life.<sup>38</sup> In "Sylvia's Death," for example, Sexton calls Plath a "Thief" for crawling "down alone / into the death I wanted so badly and for so long" (*Complete Poems* 126). The consideration of suicide in these poems, and more explicitly in the poems of Plath, often signifies a desire to experience death as an essential Otherness that exists beyond the proscriptive limitations of society. Just as anxiety and madness are used by Berryman, Lowell, and Sexton as a means of attempting to signify the irretrievable loss at the core of Cold War experience, suicide is used by Plath as a metaphor for a more intimate encounter with that loss. While the tragedy of the suicides of Berryman, Sexton, and Plath has contributed to the mystique (or stigma) that surrounds the confessional paradigm, the literary implications of their desire to step beyond the rational realm still demands critical investigation. This investigation will be the focus of the following chapter.

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<sup>38</sup> See, for example, Berryman's "Dream Song 153," Sexton's "Sylvia's Death," and Lowell's introduction to *Ariel*.

## Towards a Poetics of Terror: Sylvia Plath and the Instant of Death

The fact that Sylvia Plath perhaps comes as close to a household name as is possible for a mid-twentieth-century American poet is a testament to the contradictions that surround her literary legacy. While scholars have praised Plath's raw, intense style and her vitriolic denunciations of paternalistic relationships, her fame arguably derives more from sensationalized biographic accounts of her relationship with Ted Hughes and her subsequent suicide in 1963. The publication of *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath* (2000), her *Letters Home* (1975), several unauthorized biographies, and even the production of *Sylvia* (2003), a feature film starring Gwyneth Paltrow as Plath that claimed in its trailer "life was too small to contain her," have all contributed to a cult of celebrity more devoted to Plath's tragic biography than her poetry.

In scholarly accounts of Plath's work a similar tendency towards sensationalism often manifests itself. While Plath has received thoughtful and even rigorous attention from critics such as Susan Gubar, Stephen Axelrod, and Jacqueline Rose, much of the criticism devoted to her has chosen to focus on the more overtly scandalous elements of her work and life.<sup>39</sup> In particular, Plath's visceral appropriation of Holocaust imagery in poems such as "Daddy," "Lady Lazarus," and "Getting There" has raised the ire of critics concerned with protecting the memory of Holocaust victims against reckless and exploitative acts of desacralization.<sup>40</sup> By focusing on the ethical issues posed by Plath's

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<sup>39</sup> Along with Gubar, Axelrod, and Rose, recent work by Laura Frost, Deborah M. Nelson, Pamela J. Annas, and Harriet L. Parmet, among others, has sought to reassess Plath's poetry from a perspective that attempts to take its midcentury context into account.

<sup>40</sup> For a clear account of the debate surrounding Plath's Holocaust appropriations, see Susan Gubar's "Prosopoeia and Holocaust Poetry in English: Sylvia Plath and Her Contemporaries."

use of Jewish genocide as a metaphor for personal suffering, such analyses call into question the relevance of her work. For many, Plath's appropriation of Holocaust imagery bears no ostensible relation to the domestic suffering she professed to have endured at the hands of an oppressive father and thoughtless husband. As Irving Howe scoffs, "it is decidedly unlikely" that the experience of Jews in the concentration camps "was duplicated in a middle-class family living in Wellesley, Massachusetts, even if it had a very bad daddy indeed" (qtd. in Gubar 210n). In relative terms, Howe is correct. However, it also seems "decidedly unlikely" that Plath, a well-published, intellectual, and socially engaged young poet, was oblivious to the fundamental disparities of her Holocaust allusions. To assume otherwise is to position Plath as either a naïve (woman?) poet incapable of comprehending the horror of the Holocaust, or as an opportunist interested in exploiting mass death for personal literary gain.

Critical perspectives that argue Plath's incorporation of such imagery is characteristic of the extremist nature of "confessional" poetry tend to overlook the complexity of her engagement with philosophical issues. Against common contentions about the cathartic nature of her confessional style, such as that it "perfected ... a literarily acceptable way to exorcise the demons that traumatize inner lives" (Moramarco 141),<sup>41</sup> critics such as Plath's friend A. Alvarez have cautioned that she would have rejected such purgative accounts of her poetics: "I don't think she would have found it

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<sup>41</sup> Jeffrey Meyer's *Manic Power* (1987) is exemplary of the critical perspective that posits madness, suffering, and tragedy as essential to Plath's art. From this line of thinking, one must derive the notion that Plath looked to depression for inspiration and productivity. An analysis of primary documents, including her journals, provides evidence to the contrary. Plath's journals are filled with references to the frustration endured trying to overcome depression in order to write productively, such as the following entry from 27 July 1958, which details a period of productivity that has finally been enabled by the departure of a long depression: "The strangling noose of worry, of hysteria, paralysis, is miraculously gone. Doggedly, I have waited it out, and doggedly, been rewarded.... I have written four or five good poems this past ten days, after a sterile hysterical ten days of no-production" (410).

much to her taste, since it is a myth of the poet as a sacrificial victim, offering herself up for the sake of her art, having been dragged by the Muses to that final altar through every kind of distress" (40).

In *Ariel*, the volume of poetry composed mainly in the months leading to her death, Plath's poetic intensity and her recurring fascination with the connections between poetry, death, and suicide reveal a poetics that extends beyond catharsis and domestic revolt. The poems convey a fascination with the terror of death that defies accusations that Plath trivialized the suffering of the Holocaust to voice her personal grief. She invokes the Holocaust less as a means of anathematizing her own domestic trauma than as a way of evoking the moment of Terror that instigates a confrontation with the limits of experience within a social totality. Plath conjures the "Terror" conveyed by the traumatic associations of the Holocaust in order to signify a sovereignty beyond the dialectic of politics and culture, a sovereignty contained in the momentary, existentialist recognition of the instant of death. This association between the Terror of the Holocaust, death, and sovereignty reveals that from within the confines of containment America, the only true sovereignty resides in the individual's recognition of his or her right to death.

Plath's implication in the cultural politics of 1950s and 1960s America informed her poetics directly. Her status as a woman contributed to her "sense of entrapment, her sense that her choices are profoundly limited" in a "physically luxurious, mentally oppressive and impoverished" (Annas 131) environment that hegemonically promoted conformity to ideals of feminine domesticity. While at times explicitly concerned with issues of feminine subjugation, Plath's fascination with the sovereignty afforded by the instant of death indicates that her poetry conveys more than exclusively gendered

concerns. Her style reflects Maurice Blanchot's assertion that, when faced with threats to individual autonomy, "any writer who is not led by the very fact of writing to think 'I am the revolution, freedom alone makes me write,' in reality is not writing" ("Literature" 40). It is this connection between revolution and freedom that compelled Plath to explore the dark interstices between terror, death, and solitude in her work. Recognizing a fundamental lack of autonomy within an increasingly standardized containment culture, Plath saw writing the instant of death as a means of reclaiming an ephemeral sovereignty.

Plath's poetic fascination with death is often read as a foreshadowing of her actual suicide. This reading is tempting from a critical perspective because it offers a biographical correlative for her poetic methodology; however, it also takes analysis further than the concrete insight provided by her poetry and journals. What Plath's poetry and journals do indicate is her realization that the right to death offers a final vestige of sovereignty in a repressive cultural environment. On the level of writing, Plath's fascination with death amounts to what Blanchot refers to as a form of Terrorism. According to Blanchot, "Terrorists" are those who are "conscious of their death which they realize, and consequently ... behave during their lifetime not like people living among other people, but like beings deprived of being" ("Literature" 39). Plath's poetry registers this deprivation of being within containment America. Whereas Blanchot saw the Marquis de Sade as the exemplar of eighteenth-century literary "Terrorism" because of his abject and violent style, Plath's appropriation of Holocaust imagery and her violent evocations of victimization and suicide mark her as a twentieth-century Terrorist. The principle is straightforward: in an age of containment, an age in which individuals are deprived of "being," or of agency as autonomous actors, literature must find a language

powerful enough to disarticulate a culture that has grown increasingly complacent and homogenous. Such an act of literary Terrorism requires both a consciousness of one's own death and a terrifying language. For Plath, a consciousness of death appears in her repeated evocations of suicide, while her terrifying language comes in the form of her Holocaust imagery. As a symbol of unthinkable—and indeed unnameable—atrocities, the Holocaust signifies a fundamental dehumanization, identity emptied of autonomy save for the recognition of a final sovereign right: the right to death. For Plath, Holocaust imagery signifies the acknowledgement of the right to death as a final, compromised means of maintaining an essential autonomy within an environment of exploitation, persecution, and repression. It is this compromised sovereignty signified by the right to death that she routinely attempts to evoke with her Holocaust poetics.

This attempt to reclaim a sovereignty located in the Terror of dehumanization manifests itself as an almost compulsive desire to access the freedom afforded by the instant of death. It foregrounds the notion that in a repressive environment the instant of death is “the positive side of freedom” (Blanchot, “Literature” 40). Ironically, her recognition of death as a liberating gesture negates the authority of containment reality and allows her to momentarily revel in the solitude of absolute negation. According to Blanchot, this is literature's moment of revolution. He finds an allegory for literature's revolutionary recognition of death in the Reign of Terror: “Literature contemplates itself in revolution, it finds its justification in revolution, and if it has been called the Reign of Terror, this is because its ideal is that moment in history, that moment when ‘life endures death and maintains itself in it’ in order to gain from death the possibility of speaking and the truth of speech” (41). The Reign of Terror foregrounds the fact that in a moment of

dehumanizing oppression, the right to exercise one's own death represents a final vestige of sovereignty. Literature's "revolutionary" ideal, in Blanchot's terms, is to retrieve that moment, to "maintain itself" in its freedom. Its ephemeral sovereignty requires writers to return compulsively in their quest to gain from death the possibility of a speech and truth that counters oppressive reality.

Plath actualizes a similar compulsion in her poetry. Whereas Blanchot cites the Reign of Terror as a historical moment when "life endures death and maintains itself in it," Plath turns to the Terror of the Holocaust and she foregrounds her status as a literary "Terrorist" through her appropriation of Holocaust imagery. Recalling Kafka's claim that "a book should serve as the ax for the frozen sea within us," a statement she likely would have seen as the epigraph to Anne Sexton's *All My Pretty Ones* (1962), Plath characterizes her own words as

Axes  
After whose stroke the wood rings,  
And the echoes!  
Echoes traveling  
Off from the centre like hours. (*Ariel* 95)

Here she conceives of writing as an act of violence and aggression. The initial stroke of the pen attempts to capture the precise, violent instant. It is posited as the swift heft of the axe, an act of negation that is directed at the destructive transformation of a familiar object, and that maintains itself only for a moment. Following that initial act, the reverberations travel centrifugally from the point of violence, echoing and multiplying in a dissipated fashion the initial trauma and inviting an inward gaze towards that central

point of violence. While Plath recognizes the impossibility of enduring the instant of the initial stroke, the reverberations that the moment of chopping creates suggests that she has gained from her confrontation a knowledge that can be communicated, even if in dissipated and echoed terms, to an audience beyond herself. The image recalls images of ciphers in Sexton and Lowell. In Sexton's "Music Swims Back to Me" and Lowell's "Myopia: A Night" the moon is configured as a cipher, an absence ringed by a thin presence. Lowell extends this allegory to register the experience of nuclear reality by figuring postwar society as a marginal presence that faces the hollow absence of the nuclear hypocentre. For Plath the cut of the axe signifies an ephemeral encounter with absence, with the nothingness at the core of society. The Terror of this violent encounter deconstructs the nullifying repression of containment. The swift, striking motion of the axe indicates both a compulsive, violent desire to encounter the instant of death and the impossibility of maintaining oneself in that moment. While the impact of this Terror is ephemeral, it nevertheless reverberates into the presences beyond essential absence. In this regard, the act of Terror implicit in encountering the instant of death is a revolutionary gesture: it demonstrates literature's desire to reclaim authenticity by recovering a space between containment and death. While it is an ephemeral gesture, the agency required in the swinging of the axe indicates a desire to embrace Terror and violence as a means of recovering sovereignty.

While in "Words" Plath evokes an image of violence that is primarily personal, in many of her other poems she extends into the cultural and political by evoking the Holocaust as a signifier of Terror. As an historical event, and as a source of trauma, the Holocaust suggests a realm of chaos and persecution, one in which individuals are

deprived of the right to a private existence and emptied of their subjectivity by the state apparatuses responsible for their exploitation and murder. In this state of absolute oppression, and physical and psychological vulnerability, the victim is left with no recourse for the reclamation of an objective identity. It is in this moment of terror that the recognition of death as the only sovereign gesture manifests itself as a vestige of freedom. As she writes in "Mary's Song," "it is a heart, / This holocaust I walk in, / O golden child the world will kill and eat" (52). Here the figurative juxtaposition of "holocaust" and "heart" suggests that the concept of Holocaust extends into the core of quotidian human experience.

By referring to holocaust in lower-case in this instance, Plath alludes to its Greek root, which has connotations of both a great disaster by fire and of a sacrificial offering. She attributes a more generic connotation to the word while allowing it to maintain its associative links to the genocide of World War II. This association allows Plath to extend the concept of Holocaust beyond its connotations in World War II iconography and to imply a correlative sense of objectification in containment society. The speaker positions herself as prey, or as a sacrificial victim, within her own personal holocaust. Here she recognizes that her belief in a single and stable "golden child" has been levelled by a world that "will kill and eat" her. This recognition registers her comprehension of the essential insignificance of human existence in a culture that has recently witnessed the unspeakable traumas of World War II. While such cultural persecutions threaten to devour her, Plath's speaker nevertheless embraces her personal holocaust by walking in it. This direct encounter with Terror indicates that she must accept the insignificance of

existence within a hostile environment in order to gain the possibility of freedom, a freedom that stems from reclaiming the right to death.

For Plath, appropriating images of the Holocaust provides a means of signifying a moment of terror with connotations violent enough to defamiliarize the stifling appeals to conformity that pervade containment ideology. Her violent Holocaust imagery functions as an anarchic principle in much the same way that Blanchot argues words such as “cancer” embody a revolutionary potentiality:

Of mythical or hyperbolic “cancer”; why does it frighten us with its name, as if thereby the unnamable were designated? It claims to defeat the coded system under whose auspices, living and accepting to live, we abide in the security of a purely formal existence, obeying a model signed according to a program whose process is apparently perfectly normative. “Cancer” would seem to symbolize (and “realize”) the refusal to respond: here is a cell that doesn’t hear the command, that develops lawlessly, in a way that could be called anarchic. It does still more: it destroys the very idea of a program, blurring the possibility of reducing everything to the equivalent of signs. Cancer, from this perspective, is a political phenomenon, one of the rare ways to dislocate the system, to disarticulate, through proliferation and disorder, the universal programming and signifying power. (*Writing of the Disaster* 86-87).

In Plath’s poetry, the Holocaust functions in the same manner. She uses it as a means of confounding the social order anarchically. The objective experience of Holocaust, an experience that left no survivors to record it, can never be objectively

signified. The term “Holocaust” therefore traumatizes the social order. It anarchically refuses to conform to models of bourgeois normalcy. It is precisely this type of “disarticulation” that Plath aims for in poems such as “Getting There”:

How far is it?  
How far it is now?  
The gigantic gorilla interiors  
Of the wheels move, they appal me—  
The terrible brains  
Of Krupp, black muzzles  
Revolving, the sound  
Punching out Absence! like cannon.  
It is Russia I have to get across, it is some war or other.  
I am dragging my body  
Quietly through the straw of boxcars.  
Now is the time for bribery.  
What do wheels eat, these wheels  
Fixed to their arcs like gods,  
The silver leash of the will—  
Inexorable, And their pride!  
All the gods know is destinations. (*Ariel* 41)

Plath begins this poem with an ambiguous question about destinations. It is written from the perspective of a victim of Nazism being transported in “The gigantic gorilla interiors” of a train whose destination is unclear to the speaker, but is recognized by readers as the

terror of Nazi death camps. Employing violent imagery, Plath describes the sound of the wheels as “Punching out Absence! like cannon.” This image posits absence as a positive value: it has been “punched out” by the repressive machine of Nazism. In other words, its value as a sovereign space has been subsumed by the violent machinations of a repressive ideology. By figuring absence as a positive value, Plath sets it up as something that must be reclaimed in order to overcome violent repression.

Plath immediately juxtaposes this image of absence with her speaker’s own struggle to overcome the confines of her situation by evoking Russia both as a locale from which many Jews were transported and as a vast, nearly insurmountable landscape. This juxtaposition indicates that her desire to escape the confines of the train refers to both her immediate, physical reality and to her ontological situation; the containment of absence figures it as a state that must be reclaimed, a neutral space beyond the fascist social totality. Thus the desire to drag her body towards physical escape is a figure for the difficult process of dragging her mind to an unnameable site of solitude and absence. In a world where “All the gods know is destinations,” it is the absence, the non-destination that Plath’s speaker desires to get to. It is the “There” to which her title ostensibly refers, but never directly identifies except through its connotative reverberations, that is conveyed by its more immediate referent, the Nazi concentration and death camps. In short, the space of absence is the space opened up by her speaker’s recognition of the sovereignty afforded by the instant of death, the Terror which is symbolized by the destination that awaits the imprisoned passengers.

Aware of the difficulty of conjuring the sovereign instant of death, and the paradoxical impossibility of maintaining that instant, Plath evokes writing as a means of

accessing it. In so doing, she overtly merges the political with the poetic, an act that is testament to the political praxis of her art. For Plath, writing becomes the primary means of “getting there.” Literary creation opens a space in which she can achieve the solitude and sovereignty afforded by an encounter with absence. The recognition of the essential unfreedom of existence means that writing offers the possibility of accessing a space beyond oppression: it is a sovereign gesture. As Blanchot argues, this is how the “writer sees himself in the Revolution” (“Literature” 40).

This encounter with absence can occur only while in the process of writing, exiling Plath in a state of perpetual “getting there,” always close to but never quite master of the moment of fascination alluded to by her work. While each attempt at writing draws her closer to the control of that instant, she also becomes exiled from it once her work is completed. The completed work takes on a life of its own; it enters into the wider cultural economy and no longer offers its author the possibility of commiseration with the sovereignty beyond the Cold War dialectic. Since the possibility of that instant exists only in the act of writing itself, Plath has no choice but to begin again, to attempt to reclaim the sovereign moment with each new creative act: writing becomes a compulsive and perpetual gesture of “getting there,” of trying to reclaim a space of sovereignty. As she writes in “Kindness,” “The blood jet is poetry, / There is no stopping it” (*Ariel* 91). Poetry is both a vital source of life and a compulsion that bleeds and strains her psychological health.

This compulsion means that in “Getting There” it is “The time for bribery” even if that bribery demands appropriating images of a Terror that exists beyond the range of her personal experience. The act of appropriation is the bribe itself; it allows Plath’s speaker

to pass off her own experience as one associated with the Holocaust in order to access a Terror capable of opening up the space of sovereignty. While the term “bribery” indicates that she recognizes that there is something illicit about her activity, she also sees it as a necessary means of circumventing a repressive ideological order. Continuously “Pumped ahead by these pistons, this blood / Into the next mile, / the next hour” Plath’s speaker asserts that “There is a minute at the end of it / A minute, a dew drop.” Evoking a cleansing purity, and a sovereign vessel of containment, the minute and the dewdrop each convey a place of essential solitude. Each is a contained unit. The combined image of the “minute” and the “dew drop” conveys a sense of purity and rejuvenation contained within a transient temporality. The solitude they proffer is opened up by the sovereignty of the right to death symbolized by the encounter with the Terror of the Holocaust. The train, “An animal / Insane for the destination, / The bloodspot,” conveys Plath’s own desire to be transported to this moment of freedom. It also signifies the act of writing, of moving the pen ruthlessly forward on the page towards the “Bloodspot,” or violent fissure opened by the terror of her imagery. It is this compulsion to move the pen forward that Plath hopes will “get her there” to the place where she will step “From the black car of Lethe, / Pure as a baby” (43).

While these final lines are often read as a rebirth that can take place only in death, they more accurately allude to a freedom and purity obtained by accepting the will to die as a gesture towards sovereignty. As Gubar writes, “The Final Solution, toward which all events rush, transforms Plath’s victim into a being as innocent, but also as naked and defenseless, as an infant” (196). This innocence, however, is conflated with the agency that caused her to “get there” in the first place. The compulsion of Plath’s speaker allows

her to step into an innocent place beyond the dead whose “souls writhe in a dew,” and be momentarily reborn as a sovereign agent. As she reclaims a sense of sovereignty from her encounter with Terror and death, she steps “from this skin / Of old bandages, boredoms, old faces.” This rebirth suggests that she is healed and rejuvenated by her encounter with death, and that she is no longer constricted by the “boredoms” and “old faces” of containment culture.

Plath’s desire to access a space beyond the Cold War dialectic can be read as an overt rejection of containment culture. The politics of Plath’s poetics lies in the reclamation of this sovereign space. Her attempt to step beyond containment ideology indicates an engagement with repressive postwar social structures, one that extends far beyond middle-class concerns about, in Howe’s words, a “mean daddy.” As Laura Frost notes, Plath’s “representations of fascism are not limited to a particular gender or sexual orientation but are rather part of a larger response to [her] culture’s strategic constructions of fascism” (141). As both her extensive journals and her novel *The Bell Jar* reveal, Plath was acutely aware of the relationship between the containment of the communist threat and threats to civil liberties.<sup>42</sup> *The Bell Jar* opens in a “queer, sultry summer, the summer they electrocuted the Rosenbergs” (1), which attests to her awareness of the repressive sanctions of American anti-communism and connects it with the repression of civil liberties also engaged by her Holocaust poetry. Her journals contain even clearer denouncements of the American mythology of democratic freedom:

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<sup>42</sup> Plath was by no means the only author drawing correlations between totalitarianism and feminine subjugation. Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) contains a chapter that explores domestic, suburban living to Nazi oppression called “Progressive Dehumanization: The Comfortable Concentration Camp.” Susan Sontag’s “Fascinating Fascism” and Adrienne Rich’s *Of Woman Born* also explore the link between fascism and femininity. As Laura Frost notes, Virginia Woolf was one of the first to make this connection in *Three Guineas*. Anne Frank also makes connections between her father and Hitler in *The Diary of Anne Frank*.

Why do we electrocute men for murdering an individual and then pin a purple heart on them for the mass slaughter of someone arbitrarily labeled “enemy”? Weren’t the Russians Communists when they helped us slap down the Germans? And now. What would we do with the Russian nation if we bombed it to bits... How could we control them under our “democratic” system, we, who even now are losing that precious commodity, freedom of speech. (qtd. in Frost 142)

Plath here recognizes both the paradoxes and hypocrisy of American policy, and the encroachment of containment culture on such fundamental American rights as the freedom of speech. Her poetic speakers, often bearing the burden of victimization, “stand out in sharp relief against the Cold War rhetoric of the United States in the 1950s, smug with postwar prosperity, extolling democracy’s triumph over fascism and crowing its ethical imperative to do battle with the next monster, Communism” (Frost 144). For Plath opposing the American rhetoric of prosperity meant subverting containment by engaging the myth of feminine domesticity. Her “female speakers inhabit a world of violence and brutality colored by vicious sexuality.... They replace romantic myths of love with a carnal imbalance of powers where the torturer and his victim ... are bound together by hate, resentment and lust” (Frost 144). However, Plath’s reasons for making this connection between oppressed femininity and fascist patriarchy are not meant merely to expose the exploitation caused by this “carnal imbalance of power”; rather, she focuses on the relationship between torturer and victim as a means of demonstrating how in a totalitarian scenario the victim, bound together with her oppressor, must actively engage

the instant of death as a means of reclaiming sovereignty. This configuration of the victim/oppressor dynamic is most evident in Plath's controversial poem "Daddy."

The controversy surrounding "Daddy" stems from what many see as Plath's galling anathematization of German Nazism as oppressive patriarchalism. As Gubar has noted, such analysis fails to "understand how the dependencies of a damaged and damaging femininity shape her analysis of genocide" (203). Written in a lilting, nursery rhyme cadence ("You do not do, you do not do / Any more, black shoe / In which I have lived like a foot" [56]), the poem dramatizes the psychological trauma experienced by a daughter who has struggled throughout her life to overcome the scars left by the death of her father when she was young<sup>43</sup> and to find a sense of identity beyond the oppression signified by living, in Mother Goose fashion, in his powerful "black shoe." The confessional style of the poem, combined with the biographical fact that her father died as a result of refusing to be treated for diabetes, has led many to read it as cathartic and narcissistic. While Plath's father was of Prussian heritage, neither he nor Plath had any direct contact with German Nazism, nor does Plath's assertion "I think I may well be a Jew" (57) have any basis in reality.

It is this blatant appropriation of the iconography of Jewish victimization that has angered so many commentators. Throughout the poem, Plath positions herself as deprived of agency, at the violent mercy of an oppressive, fascist force. "Ich, ich, ich, ich, / I could

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<sup>43</sup> Plath's father Otto was born in Grabow in the Polish corridor in 1885 and educated in America. A noted biologist, he authored the influential study *Bumblebees and Their Ways*. In 1936, he began battling an illness that he self-diagnosed as cancer. For the next four years he suffered but refused to seek proper medical treatment. After injuring his toe and developing a gangrenous infection in the summer of 1940, a doctor was finally called. As Plath's biographer Linda Wagner-Martin notes, "The diagnosis was not cancer but diabetes mellitus, a treatable ailment. But by this time the disease was far advanced and on October 12, 1940, Otto's leg was amputated at the thigh.... Late on November 5, Otto Plath died of an embolus in his lung. Hospitalization practices were such that he had been kept nearly immobile after his surgery, and this postoperative care led to his death."

hardly speak” she writes, conveying both a stuttering towards agency and an inability to make herself heard in a language described as “obscene” (57). As in “Getting There,” Plath employs train imagery to indicate containment and a loss of control as her character is mercilessly transported towards a final destination: “An engine, an engine / Chuffing me off like a Jew. / A Jew to Dachau, Auschwitz, Belsen” (57). While on one level Plath here posits herself as a concentration camp victim, on another she invokes the Terror of both the Holocaust and the impending moment of death that it connotes. Placed in this position of dehumanization, one in which she has been stripped of identity and can no longer express her autonomy in outward actions, she is forced to recognize the right to death as a last vestige of sovereignty.

To mediate the experience of the Holocaust, as Jean-Francois Lyotard has cynically observed, is in itself an impossibility: “in order for a place to be identified as a gas chamber, the only eyewitness I will accept would be a victim of this gas chamber; now ... there is no victim that is not dead; otherwise, this gas chamber would not be what he or she claims it to be. There is, therefore, no gas chamber” (3-4). In the absence of a witness capable of providing a subjective account of the Holocaust, Plath, with her “tongue stuck in [her] jaw” (56), seeks an idiom capable of defining it as an experience of the limits of existence. In “Daddy” she asserts that the only means of articulating the Terror of dehumanization on the scale of the Holocaust is negative: by embracing the Terror signified by her totalitarian oppressor.

Plath signifies this negation by addressing her patriarchal oppressor as “Not God but a swastika / So black no sky could squeak through” (57). The black, impenetrable swastika, used here in terms of Nazi iconography, signifies an impenetrable totalitarian

oppression that blocks out the purity symbolized by natural light; with the light blocked out, she is contained within a fascist totality. As a figure of Nazi oppression, Plath's daddy is responsible for the perpetuation of this oppressive blackness. By confronting the oppression of her "Daddy" in this poem, Plath's speaker is by extension confronting the "impenetrable" fascist oppression she sees as part of containment culture. The domestic figure of her father and the nursery rhyme cadence of the poem, when merged with the Terror of the Holocaust, reveal that within her oppressive cultural paradigm, such Terror has been domesticated and naturalized.

Plath further merges the domestic with images of an oppressive fascism by connecting her father with the phallic machinations of a military industrial complex. By associating him with the German "Luftwaffe" and calling him a "panzer-man" (57), she conveys a sense of anxiety and a fear of persecution that stems from sources beyond her control. It is the reclamation of control that she desires to gain by acknowledging the freedom of the right to death. Therefore she paradoxically welcomes the dehumanizing violence of patriarchal oppression: "Every woman adores a Fascist, / The boot in the face, the brute / Brute heart of a brute like you" (957). The ironic suggestion of feminine complicity with fascist domination reveals its paradoxical antithesis: to achieve a compromised vestige of freedom from servility, Plath's speaker must confront the Terror of oppression, a Terror signified by the Holocaust. The violence of Plath's language signifies literature's revolutionary potential. By "loving" and welcoming a violent death at the feet of fascist patriarchy, Plath's speaker acknowledges the right to death as a final sovereign gesture, one capable of destabilizing the conventions of her bourgeois

social totality by resisting its containment by embracing the moment of the “dew drop,” or death.

As “Daddy” progresses, Plath moves from the Terror evoked by her appropriation of Holocaust imagery towards the condition of annihilation. In a simultaneous autobiographical allusion to her father and to her husband Ted Hughes, Plath proclaims “If I’ve killed one man, I’ve killed two” (58), indicating a metaphorical need to remove herself from the crippling sphere of oppression. The assertive manner in which Plath conveys this murder indicates less a passive victimization than an active movement towards sovereign agency. Plath ambiguously confirms the relationship between her desire for agency and death in the final lines of the poem with the emphatic proclamation “Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I’m through” (59). The tone of these lines, considered along with the violent Holocaust imagery that precedes them, indicates that Plath’s declaration of being “through” is as much a literal as a figurative declaration—she is not merely finished dealing with this scenario, or with the writing of the poem, but she is “through” with her own life. She “kills” off the vampiric, fascist patriarchal relationships in her life only by murdering herself rather than murdering those responsible for her oppression. It indicates a conflation of the sovereignty of the right to death and the physical act of suicide. For Plath, exercising this right is an act of negation, one capable of momentarily retrieving an autonomy uncompromised by oppression. “Daddy” therefore functions less as an exposition of feminine exploitation and victimization than as an active and determined gesture towards the impossible autonomous instant. However, her conflation of suicide and sovereignty signifies that such a reclamation carries potentially dangerous

repercussions. To escape a vampiric culture that drains her of her autonomy, she must venture to the precipice of life in search of agency.

Plath's pursuit of the Terror of the Holocaust in this instance is not meant to draw a literal parallel between her personal suffering and the suffering of millions of Jews and Eastern Europeans during the war. Certainly Plath would have recognized the gross imbalance of such a methodology. Rather, the dehumanizing nature of containment within the camp scenario she conjures is meant to reflect what Plath sees as the dehumanizing nature of Cold War containment culture, a culture that, by its appeal to conformity, deprives individuals of the inclination to act against repression. For Plath, the Terror of the Holocaust is an essential metaphor for this experience of repression and containment because it evokes the instrumentalization of humanity. The extreme nature of Plath's appropriation heightens the sense of experience within postwar culture as one of victimization. It also speaks to Adorno's assertion that there "can be no poetry after Auschwitz" ("Cultural Criticism and Society" 210). However, as Gubar notes, "the same year Plath wrote 'Daddy' and 'Lady Lazarus,' Adorno qualified his famous injunction against the barbarism of composing poetry after Auschwitz" (191). That qualification clarifies the aim behind Plath's methodology. As Adorno asserts,

Perennial suffering has as much right to expression as a tortured man has to scream; hence it may have been wrong to say that after Auschwitz you could no longer write poems. But it is not wrong to raise the less cultural question whether after Auschwitz you can go on living—especially whether one who has escaped by accident, one who by rights should have been killed, may go on living. His mere survival calls for the coldness, the basic principle of

bourgeois subjectivity, without which there could have been no Auschwitz.

*(Negative Dialectics 362-63)*

According to Adorno, the very possibility of living in a society based on the principle of bourgeois subjectivity is tainted after Auschwitz because of that principle's implication in wide-scale atrocity. Plath's Holocaust appropriations manifest a similar critique of bourgeois subjectivity and also address the question of how one can live contained by a culture responsible for the perpetuation of repressive ideologies. By alluding to the Terror of the Holocaust, Plath attempts to dramatically disarticulate the conformist, contained nature of bourgeois reality in Cold War America. Evoking the traumatic experience of the Holocaust defamiliarizes the conformity of bourgeois existence. While poems such as "Daddy," assert patriarchal oppression as the central figure of victimization, the coupling of that oppression with Holocaust imagery evokes a wider persecution, one imbricated with the bourgeois principles that have perpetuated patriarchal oppression at large. For Plath, the containment of trauma and anxiety in postwar culture illustrates the "coldness" of the bourgeois subjectivity to which Adorno alludes. Plath's disruption of that containment with images of Holocaust victimization demands recognition of the dehumanizing and destructive elements of containment ideology and identifies postwar culture as responsible for domesticating, and perpetuating, Terror.

Plath's desire for the moment of autonomy proffered by the instant of death also remains fundamentally compromised by the impossibility of maintaining that moment beyond its precise instant. In "Lady Lazarus," the manner in which she uses writing as a means of exploring death and of recovering, Lazarus-like, the self that has been lost asserts the integral link between the act of writing and the longing for the impossible

instant as a source of sovereignty. Adopting the Biblical story of Lazarus as her controlling metaphor, Plath here poeticizes her own suicide attempts, referring to herself as

A sort of walking miracle, my skin  
Bright as a Nazi lampshade,  
My right foot  
A paperweight,  
My face a featureless, fine  
Jew linen. (6)

Here adapting images from horrific stories describing the uses Nazis made of the remains of their victims in order to describe her own patchwork, resurrected state, Plath's persona figuratively dons the imagery of death. As the poem continues, she suggests that this relationship between the self and death is a recurring, almost obsessive one: "I am only thirty. / And like a cat I have nine times to die. / This is Number Three" (7). The repeated death attempts, while biographically referring to her encounters with suicide, also reveal a compulsion to return to the impossible instant of death. She sees death more as a myth—like that of a cat and its nine lives—than as an endpoint. The fact that she is "only thirty" means that she can repeat her compulsion to approach the instant of death for several years. This compulsion indicates that for Plath, suicide is not the solution; rather, the reclamation of the sovereignty afforded by approximation of the instant of death is the goal. The compulsion to write this instant is what allows her to repeat this gesture. It is in this manner that Plath's poetics refutes oversimplified readings that position her aesthetic as cathartic and escapist. By continually attempting to claim the sovereignty of the instant

of death, the absence that precedes commitment to language, she demonstrates a critical use of private concerns to challenge constraints against autonomy made by repressive Cold War institutions.

Plath performs this literary search for release from containment reality in front of the surveillance of “The peanut-crunching crowd,” revealing awareness that with each poetic gesture towards death, she anxiously puts herself on display for the mass public to gaze at as it

Shoves in to see

Them unwrap me hand and foot—

The big strip tease.

Gentlemen, ladies,

These are my hands,

My knees. (7)

The “strip tease” signifies both a desire to exceed the constraints of social containment and a concomitant desire to craft a poetics capable of stripping away these layers for the audience, revealing a more essential, sovereign truth. Plath implies that death and Terror are integral to this project in “Lady Lazarus,” proclaiming “Dying / Is an art, like everything else. / I do it exceptionally well” (8). This desire to die continuously invokes, as in “Getting There” and “Daddy,” a desire for a continual connection to the impossible, sovereign instant of death as a space for the expression of poetic dissent uncompromised by containment reality.

In Plath's poetry, this desire to access the instant of her death contains both her most revolutionary gesture and the seeds of her own destruction. Allowing the voyeuristic crowd to signify the loss of control of her own subjectivity, or the lack of a private life in the surveillance culture of containment America, death becomes for Plath a means of escaping that gaze, a gaze that becomes fixed on her again with each subsequent resurrection. However, the lull of the sovereignty afforded by the impossible instant of death also contains the possibility of dwelling within that moment for too long, of mistaking suicide for the anarchic, sovereign instant.

The act of writing functions as a means of mediating her fascination with the instant of death by searching for the sovereign moment that precedes language, a mediation that allows her to continually approximate the sovereign instant while still returning intact. As Blanchot writes,

The language of literature is a search for this moment which precedes literature. Literature usually calls it existence: it wants the cat as it exists, the pebble *taking the side of things*, not man, but the pebble, and in this pebble what man rejects by saying it, what is the foundation of speech and what speech excludes in speaking, the abyss, Lazarus in the tomb and not Lazarus brought back into the daylight, the one who already smells bad, who is Evil, Lazarus lost and not Lazarus saved and brought back to life. ("Literature" 46)

Plath's "Lady Lazarus" is plagued by a similar tension: she seeks to reclaim the "moment that precedes literature. . . . Lazarus in the tomb and not Lazarus brought back into daylight." The act of writing Lazarus, however, implies that it is only in his resurrected state that he can be represented. Her obsession with death, coupled with her continual

return, indicates that although it is the “Lazarus in the tomb,” the Lazarus that “precedes literature” that she seeks, it is the Lazarus “brought back into the day light” that continuously manifests itself. In other words, Plath’s poetic language is unable to sustain its search for the “moment which precedes literature” and the product of the search is the poem itself—the poem as “Lazarus brought back into the daylight.” However, her desire for “Lazarus in the tomb” compels her to keep writing, to try again.

Plath draws a correlation between her recurring suicide attempts and writing itself: each poetic attempt (and failure) to maintain the sovereign instant, means a brush with death. Her recurring fascination with the instant of death suggests that while she realizes she must continue writing in order to broach that moment, maintaining it through writing is ultimately impossible. It is at this point that the boundaries between literary and actual suicide seem to blur. Indeed, Plath recognizes the psychological repercussions of her fascination. In her poem:

There is a charge

For the eyeing of my scars, there is a charge

For the hearing of my heart—

It really goes.

And there is a charge, a very large charge,

For a word or a touch

Or a bit of blood

Or a piece of my hair or my clothes.

So, so, Herr Doktor.

So, Herr Enemy.

I am your opus,

I am your valuable,

The pure gold baby

That melts to a shriek. (9)

The charge to which Plath here refers, while immediately recalling the price that needs to be paid to view her suffering by the “peanut-crunching crowd,” also suggests a more personal “charge” or trauma suffered as she both physically, and through her literature, courts the impossible instant. The “charge” also suggests an electric charge reminiscent of the shock therapy used in institutions to help coerce individuals back into normalized patterns of behaviour, an experience Plath underwent during her own hospitalizations.

The fact that for Plath’s persona there is a charge for both “a word” and “a touch / Or a bit of blood” evokes a merger between word and flesh, or the desire to claim the instant of death through writing, and the desire to do so through physical violence. Plath furthers this connection by referring to herself as an “opus” within a patriarchal culture controlled by “Herr Doktor” and “Herr Enemy.” Plath posits herself as a commodity controlled by oppressive patriarchal forces. However, her status as an “opus,” or a masterwork, signifies that through her writing she is able to transcend that position of subordination as she “melts to a shriek,” an act that implies both a burning away of

objective identity and a final cry of freedom recognized in the ephemeral instant of death.

This disappearance of the self leads to a commensuration with a more essential, non-material moment: "Ash, Ash— / You poke and stir. / Flesh, bone, there is nothing there"

(9). Reduced to ash and bone, Plath's *Lady Lazarus* is emptied of her subjectivity.

Alluding to the burning of corpses in concentration camps, she once again reveals an affinity between sovereignty and the right to death. However, she is ultimately incapable of maintaining this pure moment, saving a final Lazarus-like return for the poem's

emphatic conclusion: "Out of the ash / I rise with my red hair / And I eat men like air"

(9).

This statement is most often regarded as "an image of transcendence—poetic, psychological, political—in which Plath finally takes off from, burns herself out of, whatever it was (false self for Hughes, Hughes himself for feminism) that had her in its thrall" (Rose 144). As Jacqueline Rose argues further,

This reading ... tends to be teleological—the rest of Plath's poetry is then read back for the gradual emergence of this selfhood.... Thus the taking off of Plath becomes an allegory, not just for female self-emergence but for the flight of poetry and, by implication, for the transcendence of high art. (144)

However, as Rose recognizes, this figure of emergence in Plath's "later poetry provides no basis for identification, either because it propels itself beyond the (gendered) framework of the world ... or because it can rediscover itself—pure, self-generating ego—only in the place of God" (145). It is more likely that Plath's final return suggests an inability to sustain her transcendence of an oppressive social totality. The poem's suggestion that this return comes only after a Holocaust-like burning of both the literal

and figurative self further invokes Plath's commiseration with the instant of death. It is precisely the desire to be completely absorbed by this moment that poses a specific risk to the artist. As a poetic allegory, her return from death reveals her desire for a revolutionary freedom from the confines of the social totality; as a physical reality, it suggests a fascination with the instant of death that is as dangerous and potentially damaging as it is liberating.

Evidence that Plath was ultimately influenced by such a fascination resides both in her poetry and her biography. As several friends and contemporaries have commented, Plath wrote with a ferocious, Keatsian intensity in the months leading to her suicide; it was in these months that many of the poems of *Ariel* were composed. Alvarez recalls a visit from Plath during this time period:

I remembered the last time I had seen her, in that overflowing Devon garden, and it seemed impossible that anything could have disrupted the idyll. But I asked no questions and she offered no explanations. Instead, she began to talk about the new drive to write that was upon her. At least a poem a day, she said, and often more. She made it sound like demonic possession. (*The Savage God* 15)

Though the ultimate motives of Plath's suicide are, of course, buried with her, Plath's obsessive writing habits in the last months of her life mirror the obsession with death and rebirth, Terror, and the desire for sovereignty that pervades *Ariel*.

The penultimate poem, "Edge," directly addresses this link between writing and suicide, often conflating the two. As in "Lady Lazarus," the poem begins by evoking the image of a corpse:

The woman is perfected.

Her dead

Body wears the smile of accomplishment,

The illusion of a Greek necessity

Flows in the scrolls of her toga,

her bare

Feet seem to be saying:

We have come so far, it is over. (*Ariel* 93)

The sense of exhaustion conveyed here contrasts starkly with the sense of perfection. The finality of “it is over” signifies that Plath, submitting to the suicidal impulse, has given up on her struggle for the pure, sovereign moment. However, the opening lines indicate that for her speaker, “perfection” is found in death. In the poem, her fascination with writing the instant of death, combined with her desire to possess the sovereignty it affords, becomes conflated with the act of dying.

In this regard, Plath confuses her desire to preserve this instant—and the sovereignty it offers through writing—with her desire to domesticate death through the physical act of suicide. Trying to actively make death her own, she is ultimately turned to death’s passivity. The sovereignty possessed by the instant of death disappears when she passes from that ephemeral instant of recognition into being dead. As John Gregg explains,

The perpetrator of suicide sets out with great determination to conquer and possess death, to make it his or her own, but ... it is just the opposite that occurs.... In a similar way writers, although they may initially feel confident in their ability to have control over the raw materials of their craft, undergo the same kind of dispossession.... The English phrase "suicide victim" aptly describes this transformation from active to passive: whoever resolves to kill him-or-herself ultimately becomes one who submits passively to death and awaits its approval. (36)

In "Edge," it is this image of passivity before death that Plath conveys. The passive nature of the poem contrasts with the active, aggressive fascination of "Lady Lazarus," "Daddy," and "Getting There." The idea that perfection resides in death communicated in the poem's early lines suggests a conflation with the desire for mastery over death, and the impossibility of such mastery ever taking place. As a "perfected" dead woman, Plath's subject "wears the smile of accomplishment," signifying that in her death, she has achieved freedom. However, the "smile of accomplishment" cannot be recognized by the dead subject, only by the spectators of her art. Nor is she truly perfected—she can no longer challenge the containment of cultural ideology and her death indicates a submission to it and not the notion that she has overcome it. The biographical fact of Plath's suicide, combined with her literary fascination with the moment of death, does indicate that the desire for the possession of the instant of death was both a driving force in the creation of her work, and ultimately linked to her personal demise. While the praxis of Plath's poetics is predicated upon an active, revolutionary engagement with the violence of the instant of death and the ephemeral sovereignty it affords, the physical act

of suicide reveals a passive submission before death, a movement beyond the space of radical exteriority that her poetics repeatedly seeks commiseration with. Having “come so far,” Plath conveys a sense of exhaustion. The passive acceptance communicated in the poem’s final lines “The moon has nothing to be sad about... / she is used to this sort of thing. / Her blacks crackle and drag” evokes how the struggle for the sovereignty has been replaced by a passive acceptance of, even desire for, actual death. The suggestion that the “moon” is “used to this sort of thing” positions her death within a cosmic cycle of events and conveys the idea that it is “nothing sad.” The “blacks” of the moon, while affording the poem a dark tone, will nevertheless continue to “crackle and drag” after the death is complete. In this transference of literary suicide for actual suicide, the revolutionary nature and reception of Plath’s poetics ultimately loses its potency and gets displaced through biographical sensationalism.

To speculate on the actual motives behind Plath’s suicide in 1963 is to risk applying a biographic or diagnostic reading to her literature. However, the concern with Terror, violence, and suicide that repeatedly manifests itself in *Ariel* indicates that Plath was keenly aware of the tacit relationship between evocations of the instant of death and the pursuit of sovereignty in an oppressive culture. This awareness adds a political dimension to Plath’s work that indicates her confessional poetics were meant more to elucidate and overcome pressures placed on individuals by the apparatuses of government in the early Cold War era and not to simply express her feelings of persecution as a woman in the tranquilized and domesticated 1950s and 1960s. Plath’s aggressive pursuit of the instant of death through her appropriation of Holocaust imagery stands as a bold

gesture of resistance and defiance against impositions upon the sovereignty of the private self.

While Plath sought to overcome containment by possessing a single, sovereign instant, her contemporary Delmore Schwartz sought a more pluralistic, if equally rigorous, response to Cold War culture. Rather than attempting to overcome the anxiety and repression of containment ideology as Plath does, Schwartz adopts a poetics of the quotidian that posits the multiplicity of daily experiences as a means of countering the totalizing tendencies of ideological dispositions. Straddling the dominant literary ideologies of Marxism and New Criticism throughout his career, Schwartz's poetry resists conforming to either school. As a measure of his poetic praxis, it indicates a recognition that appeals to literary conformity are linked to, and even symptomatic of, appeals to cultural conformity in the early Cold War era. To counter this conformity, Schwartz positions himself as an alien within his literary milieu, a satellite figure who both physically and poetically remains on the margins of dominant ideological trends. Poetically, he maintains this sense of marginalization by focusing on a quotidian reality that deconstructs conceptions of cultural value and knowledge and challenges political and epistemological constructs. By focusing on the quotidian as a space from which he could produce a poetics capable of maintaining a sense of autonomy, Schwartz mounts an important poetic and political stand against the tyranny of systematization. While his itinerant, transgressive, and often irrational personality led, ultimately, to his physical exile in New York's underbelly and his psychological exile in dementia and addiction, his alien poetic style helped secure his status as an important midcentury poetic voice.

**Critical Menace: The Anti-Establishment Poetics of Schwartz and Jarrell**

## Delmore Schwartz and the Poetics of Everyday Life

While Delmore Schwartz is often considered in relation to the “confessional” poets of midcentury America, his literary career was beleaguered by a qualitative inconsistency and itineracy that mirrors those qualities in his actual life. Schwartz burst onto the New York literary scene with the publication of *In Dreams Begin Responsibilities*, a collection that included the titular story and an impressive collection of lyric poems. Published when Schwartz was just twenty-five, the collection earned him wide praise, including F. W. Dupee’s claim that “Since Auden’s early poems appeared there has been no verse so alive with contemporary meaning” (qtd. in Atlas 130).<sup>44</sup> The book solidified his position as a major writer on the New York intellectual scene of the late 1930s and 1940s and earned him friends and allies in each of the competing Marxist and New Critical factions of literary thought. While Schwartz took a job as poetry editor with the historically Left-leaning *Partisan Review*, his ideological allegiances were largely noncommittal and his letters indicate that he was equally attracted to the scientific, ahistorical approach being developed by the New Critics as he was to *Partisan*’s advocacy of revolutionary Leftist literature. This intellectual itineracy, as Ross Wetzstein notes, earned Schwartz a reputation as an alien within his own community:

In Greenwich Village bars and on Ivy League campuses, he became the archetype of the “alien in residence”—witty, quarrelsome, lyrical, despondent, extravagant in both his gifts and his flaws, the exemplar of an entirely new

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<sup>44</sup> Critic R.P. Blackmur noted its “inexhaustible quality in the perception which the associations of image and statement reveal,” and Mark Van Doren, writing for the New Critical vehicle *Kenyon Review*, called it “as good as any poetry has been for a long while, say at least a literary generation” (qtd. in Atlas 130).

sensibility, the urban, ironic, cosmopolitan, mockingly self-analytical outsider, at home only in the realm of ideas. (488)

While Schwartz's itinerant inclinations earned him wide acclaim from a disparate group of literary critics early in his career, they also contributed to his slow and tragic decline. Afflicted in his middle years by severe psychological maladies that appear to have been heightened by a dependency on alcohol and drugs, Schwartz's later output never achieved the rank or acclaim of his early work. His fall from literary success also contributed to his psychological decline (and vice versa); Schwartz tragically died alone in a decrepit New York hotel of heart failure in 1966.

Like the decline of his contemporaries Berryman, Lowell, Sexton, and Plath, Schwartz's decline has often made his personal instability, rather than his poetic achievement, the focus of critical investigations. While there is little doubt that the quality of Schwartz's work waned significantly as his personal turmoil increased (a fact that counters conventional notions of the tragic poet who suffers for his art), his early work demonstrates a radical break from Modernist stylistics. Schwartz's itinerant personality is reflected in his poetry, which refuses to conform to either the Marxist or New Critical methodologies common to the New York intellectual scene of which he was a part. Instead, Schwartz adopts a poetics that is thoroughly autobiographical. While his early literary achievements chronologically precede the other poets included in this study, his poetic legacy, and his legacy as a "confessional" poet is substantially less pronounced. His inclusion in this final section on the relationship between poetry, literary ideology, and Cold War politics will position his work as an attempt to use a more private style to destabilize the impersonal, subjugating propensities of literary, and by extension political,

ideology. It will demonstrate how Schwartz's poetry anticipated the "confessional" aesthetic of his later contemporaries. His work is a bridge between impersonal Modernist ideology and the "confessional" poetics of his later contemporaries Berryman, Lowell, and Randall Jarrell, each of whom he considered amongst his personal friends. As an early progenitor of the autobiographic style, Schwartz anticipates and influences the later, often more nakedly "confessional," works of his peers. Like the styles of his contemporaries, however, Schwartz's autobiographic style is far from narcissistic or cathartic. Rather, it foregrounds confessional poetry's implicit political engagement by demonstrating an allegorical relationship between psychological and cultural repression.

Breaking from the ideological perspectives of his 1930s literary milieu, which was dominated by the influence *Partisan Review* Marxism and New Criticism, Schwartz posits a subjective identity that is intrinsically heterogeneous. By adopting an autobiographic voice to demonstrate the plurality of identity, Schwartz exposes *Partisan's* brand of Marxism and the formalism of the New Critics as containers that seek to normalize a single ideological perspective while repressing the multiplicity of daily experience. Schwartz locates his autobiographic poetics in a quotidian cultural geography in order to recover the psychological cultural realities that have been repressed by ideological discourse. For Schwartz, in the same way that the stable ego is constantly troubled by the return of repressed psychic trauma, the authority of cultural ideology is destabilized by the return of repressed discourses of the quotidian. Schwartz poeticizes the everyday realities that escape the generalizing surveillance and mass statistical analysis of government institutions. By emphasizing the plurality invested in daily gestures, including the transient incursions of work, traffic, eating, childhood play, and a

myriad of other common events, he portrays culture as intrinsically heterogeneous and ultimately beyond the surveillance and codification of ideological discourse. His poetics demonstrates that the plurality of the everyday offers a fertile locus for the cultivation of resistance to ideological conformity. By using an autobiographic style to draw this correlation between psychological and cultural repression, Schwartz situates the roots of confessional poesis firmly in psychoanalytic historiography. He blends elements of psychology and quotidian culture to challenge the veneers of ideology and to demonstrate the destabilizing potentiality of autobiographic poetics in an era of both socio-political and literary containment.

Schwartz's alien, itinerant, and often mad personality has, on several occasions, been evoked by his contemporaries in works that aim to uncover the rationale behind his idiosyncrasies. In "Dream Song 155," for example, John Berryman recounts a particularly strange surprise visit from Schwartz:

He drove up to my house in Providence  
ho ho at 8 a.m. in a Cambridge taxi  
and told it to wait.

He walked my living-room, & did not want breakfast  
or even coffee, or even even a drink.

He paced, I'd say Sit down,  
it makes me nervous, for a moment he'd sit down,  
then pace. After an hour or so I had a drink.

He took it back to Cambridge,

we never learnt why he came, or what he wanted.

His mission was obscure. His mission was real,

but obscure. (174)

Berryman's elegy, one of over a dozen he wrote for his friend, portrays Schwartz as a restless wanderer involved in a "real but obscure" mission that often alienated him from his friends and the wider literary community. While full of reverence for Schwartz's talent and friendship, Berryman's elegiac testimonials have contributed to the almost mythic status of Schwartz as a tragic poet whose loss of talent corresponded with his loss of mind. The portrait of the ruined Von Humboldt Fleisher, Saul Bellow's thinly fictionalized stand-in for Schwartz in *Humboldt's Gift*, corroborates Berryman's account of a man whose early, successful poetry made him "just what everyone had been waiting for" (1), and who then degenerated over the years into a "gray stout sick dusty" man with "death all over him" (7). Memoirs and recollections provided by members of the *Partisan Review* crowd such as William Barrett and Dwight Macdonald have rendered Schwartz in similar terms, often describing a skilled man of letters whose possession of immense wit, learning, and antagonistic energy fled, leaving behind the drunk and paranoid poet laureate of Greenwich Village's White Horse Tavern, where, as Barrett recalls, "he had become a barroom raconteur ... willing to tell stories to anyone who would stand him a drink" (233).

Schwartz's very real and tragic decline into alcoholism, drug dependency, and mental illness (the extent to which the three were linked was hardly recognized during his lifetime) has made him an ideal candidate for the role of American *poète maudit*.

Certainly the tragic and early deaths of Theodore Roethke, Sylvia Plath, Dylan Thomas, and Randall Jarrell, all of whom died before Schwartz, contributed to such common formulations as Dwight Macdonald's claim that "poetry is a dangerous occupation in this country" ("Introduction" xix). However, as Schwartz's close friend William Barrett un sentimentally points out in *The Truants*, his memoir of the New York Intellectuals, abandoning Schwartz to such a mythology has potentially damaging consequences for the maintenance and recovery of his actual literary output:

now that he is dead, the legend of the *poète maudit*—the doomed and sacrificial poet—has already claimed him. And before we submit to the distortion that current sentimentalities are likely to inject into this kind of legend, we had better attempt a cooler glimpse at the work he has left. It may, surprisingly enough, provide some very strong imperatives to revise our stock notions of the alienation of poetry and the poet today. (233)

Renowned at the height of his career not only for his poetry and fiction, but also for his criticism, Schwartz was more than capable of taking a "cooler glimpse" at the relationship between the "alienated" poet and a modern mass society that had grown less interested in the so-called highbrow arts. It is credit to Schwartz's critical acumen that he recognized culpability among the literary establishment for this growing divide. In his essay "The Isolation of Modern Poetry," first delivered at a 1941 meeting of the Modern Language Association in New Orleans, Schwartz asserts that literary culture played a role in the decline of the significance of the modern poet:

The fundamental isolation of the modern poet began not with the poet and his way of life; but rather with the whole way of life of modern society. It

was not so much the poet as it was poetry, culture, sensibility, imagination, that were isolated. On the one hand, there was no room in the increasing industrialization of society for such a monster as the cultivated man; a man's taste for literature had at best nothing to do with most of the activities which constituted daily life in an industrial society. On the other hand, culture, since it could not find a place in modern life, has fed upon itself increasingly and has created its own autonomous satisfactions, removing itself further all the time from any essential part in the organic life of society. (*Selected Essays* 7)

While Schwartz's tendency to blame the "whole way of life of modern society" for the obscurity of the poet is something of a polemical overstatement, his recognition of the growing divide between mass and intellectual culture speaks to his own experience within the New York intellectual scene of the 1930s and 1940s. From a literary perspective, Schwartz's time in New York, and later at Harvard, brought him first-hand experience of the growing tension between the two governing ideologies of the world of letters in his epoch: the revived, radical socialism of the anti-Stalinist *Partisan Review* and the organicist focus on the text as an independent object promoted by New Criticism. It also provided him with insight into the manner in which each ideology sought to either contain or ignore "the activities which constituted daily life in an industrial society." For Schwartz, these activities would ultimately prove a source for the cultivation of a dissenting poetics capable of circumventing dominant ideological perspectives.

Schwartz was first recognized as a provocative new writer with the 1937 publication of his story "In Dreams Begin Responsibilities." The story appeared at a

turbulent time in American letters, when the Marxist criticism promoted by the likes of Edmund Wilson, Philip Rahv, William Phillips, and Dwight MacDonald stood in opposition to the Formalist and New Critical models of writers such as T.S. Eliot, John Crowe Ransom, I.A. Richards, and Cleanth Brooks. Schwartz's story appeared as the lead piece in the revised *Partisan Review*. The original *Partisan Review* emerged as an organ of the New York chapter of the communist-sponsored John Reed Club. Phillips and Rahv, *Partisan Review's* founding members, had grown frustrated with *New Masses* and, with the blessing of the Communist Party, they started *Partisan Review* as a magazine devoted to the synthesis of Marxist principles and a literary criticism sensitive to the complexities of proletarian art.<sup>45</sup> The *Partisan Review* editors were encouraged by such contemporary contributions as Edmund Wilson's *Axel's Castle*, which provided an important critical model by advocating the integral relationship between the literary, cultural, and social.<sup>46</sup> William Phillips, in his memoir *A Partisan View*, explains the complicated stance adopted by the new *Partisan Review*, one that sought to mitigate a radical Marxist stance without conforming to the totalitarian principles of Soviet communism or capitulating to the conservatism of New Critical protocols:

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<sup>45</sup> The decision to rethink the mandate of *Partisan Review* was instigated in part by Trotsky's exile from Russia, a move that helped confirm the editors' suspicions about Stalin's totalitarian position and also placed the editors under closer scrutiny from the Communist Party, which sought the reaffirmation of their allegiance to party lines in the wake of such turmoil. The turbulence amongst American communists caused by the Moscow trials led to the decision to resurrect *Partisan Review* as a magazine devoted to the promotion of radical literature and culture from a Leftist, anti-Stalinist, perspective, one that maintained devotion to cultural issues, countering the privileged aesthetic formalism of New Criticism.

<sup>46</sup> First published in 1931, *Axel's Castle* is a study of modern authors such as Yeats, Joyce, Eliot, Stein, Proust, and Valery. Analyzing the movement from Naturalist to Symbolist methods in modern literature, Wilson, in his preface, describes his "idea of what literary criticism ought to be" as "a history of man's ideas and imaginings in the setting of the conditions which have shaped them." It was the combination of literary scholarship and historical context that appealed to the Marxist sympathies of the New York Intellectual crowd, and that jarred with the organicist approach of Formalism and New Criticism.

Stalinist lies and shenanigans were exposed constantly, as were double-talking liberals, nor were Trotsky and the Trotskyites spared any criticism. At the same time, our opposition to conservatives was always clear. It was evident, for example, that we did not accept the unhistorical approach of the New Critics. (51)

Schwartz's story, a Kafkaesque narrative about a young man who watches his parents' doomed courtship unfold on a movie screen, fit the *Partisan* editors' conception of a radical, socially engaged and conceptually disruptive work of literature.<sup>47</sup> It did not, however, position Schwartz as a specifically Marxist writer. As a figure in New York's intellectual milieu, Schwartz appears to have been equally attracted to New Critical formalism as to the Marxist ideals of *Partisan Review*. The powerful influence of New Criticism, much of which derived from the rigorous scholarship of its primary advocates, established itself as a dominant literary ideology in midcentury America. Though Schwartz remained affiliated with *Partisan Review* throughout the 1940s, and even took a job as its poetry editor in 1948, he was unable to ignore the influence of New Criticism on American letters. As a writer and critic, he maintained an itinerant status, refusing to align

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<sup>47</sup> In the story, Schwartz's narrator is overwhelmed by the vertiginous feeling of watching history unfold on the screen before him without being able to act to alter its course. As the individual frames of film coalesce to form a totalized historical vision of the awkward courtship that took place between his parents, his narrator develops a sense of paralysis, one that leads to his infamously futile and disruptive cry: "Don't do it. It's not too late to change your minds, both of you. Nothing good will come of it, only remorse, hatred, scandal, and two children whose characters are monstrous" (6). Schwartz's narrator, by crying out against the screen, seems to be objecting as much to his own interpellation as a subject within that historical paradigm as to the travesty of his parents' marriage. It is this resistance to subjugation that invigorates Schwartz's opposition to the totalizing gestures of *Partisan's* Marxist politics and of New Criticism. The manner in which Schwartz displays his personal history on screen works to separate that history from the subject whose composition it is tacitly imbricated with, and for whose development it is, at least in part, responsible. By accomplishing this separation, Schwartz establishes a recognition of the impact of ideological discursivity on the construction of individual identity. The screen, in this instance, functions as the vehicle for the dissemination of ideology.

himself specifically with the ideological dictates of either of the era's dominant schools of thought.

Schwartz makes his resistance to both *Partisan's* Marxism and New Critical ideology clear in his fiction and critical prose. In the 1938 story "New Year's Eve," for example, he depicts a thinly veiled *Partisan Review* crowd at a New Year's party.<sup>48</sup> Schwartz lampoons the party as "full of abstractions" (96) and "theoretical conversations" (96) and satirizes the inflexible personalities of his friends. In each unsympathetic portrait, he depicts the members of the *Partisan Review* staff as one-dimensional, political for personal reasons, and obsessed with theoretical issues. The fact that the party takes place on New Year's Eve, a night of celebration and resolve for new beginnings, implies that Schwartz is pessimistic about the potential for the Marxist ideology of his friends to affect positive human change. Instead, he sees their exhaustive theoretical and personal wrangling as characteristic of "what was soon to be a post-Munich sensibility: complete hopelessness of perception and feeling" (113).

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<sup>48</sup> Set at the home of Arthur Harris, a stand-in for then *Partisan* editor William Phillips, "New Year's Eve" amounts to a host of arguments and embarrassments caused by what Schwartz sardonically depicts as his friends' inability to function normally in a non-theoretical environment. Phillips, along with Philip Rahv, helped steer *Partisan* away from the Stalinism common to the Leftist magazines of the thirties and towards a less ideologically based Marxist criticism. It is the debate surrounding the degree of commitment to Marxist politics that Schwartz has in mind when he lampoons the frailties of his friends. Grant Landis, Schwartz's version of the editor, essayist, and antagonist Dwight Macdonald, possesses a "pathological excess of energy" (100) and spends the evening on the phone securing signatures for a petition protesting the suppression of civil liberties in the activities of labour leaders with the "same intonations, giggles, and implications of intimacy to each of the different human beings, and this suggested that perhaps each of them existed only in a limited sense as a unique individuality" (107). Arguments between Landis (Macdonald) and Harris (Phillips) are described as "full of abstractions" (96) and when Harris fails, prior to the party, to return home on time, his wife assures everyone that it is because "He is holding a theoretical conversation somewhere" (96). The critic, former party organizer, and original *Partisan* editor F.W. Dupee, cast as Oliver Jones, is described as an "interesting and unfortunate human being" whose "native gift for understanding other human beings was often annulled by his need to deny that other human beings were unlike himself; and thus he suspected everyone of everything because he suspected and convicted himself of many wrongs" (102).

This recognition of the emptiness of ideological thought in the postwar era is similarly reflected in Schwartz's critiques of New Criticism. Commenting on what he sees as the darkness of early Cold War culture in his 1952 essay "Our Country and Our Culture," he argues that "It is in the light of this darkness that the will of conformism, which is now the chief prevailing fashion among intellectuals, reveals its true nature: it is a flight from the false affirmation of stability in the face of immense and continually mounting instability" (400). For Schwartz, the institutionalization of poetry promoted by New Criticism reveals a disturbing conformist trend among intellectuals. It paradoxically claims to democratize access to literature by focusing on the organicism of the studied text while relegating the legitimation of such readings, and the instruction of proper methodologies, to experts hired by state-run universities.

As an alternative to the totalizing visions of both *Partisan Review* Marxism and New Criticism, Schwartz posits the need for a critical nonconformism predicated upon the ability to resist the "temptations and the insidiousness of the most powerful social and psychological pressures" (*Selected Essays* 401). For Schwartz, this resistance depended upon the cultivation of a poetics of the quotidian. Schwartz understood, as Henri Lefebvre did, that "the everyday, established and consolidated, remains a sole surviving common sense referent and point of reference" in an environment where "'Intellectuals' ... seek their systems of reference elsewhere: in language and discourse, or sometimes in a political party" (Lefebvre 9). Schwartz focused on the everyday in order to assert a "common sense referent" against the ideological containment espoused by literary ideology. He posited individual subjectivity, rather than literary or political ideology, as the locus for political praxis in a burgeoning era of containment and conformity.

By developing a poetics grounded in everyday life, rather than in the impersonality of formalist or Marxist ideology, Schwartz mines a field of production defined not by its opposition to systemic forms of poiesis, but by its lack of visibility within larger poetic and historical conceptualizations. He recovers repressed elements of daily experience as analogues for the repression of subjectivity by containment ideology and does so in a manner that avoids the monitoring and measuring of surveillance culture. In poems such as “In the Naked Bed, In Plato’s Cave,” Schwartz mines the repressed quotidian as a mode of knowledge production capable of destabilizing totalizing ideological visions. The poem maps an allegorical distinction between the speaker’s naïve perceptions within the sheltered “cave” of his hotel room and the intellectual awakening that he undergoes as the flux of quotidian activity taking place beyond his sanctuary begins to filter into his consciousness:

In the naked bed, in Plato’s cave  
Reflected headlights slowly slid the wall  
Carpenters hammered under the shaded window,  
Wind troubled the window curtains all night long,  
A fleet of trucks strained uphill, grinding,  
The ceiling lightened again, the slanting diagram  
Slid slowly forth.

Hearing the milkman’s chop,  
His striving up the stair, the bottle’s chink,  
I rose from bed, lit a cigarette,  
And walked to the window. (*Selected Poems* 25)

Throughout this first portion of the poem, Schwartz calls upon Plato's cave allegory to emphasize the lack of connection between individual subjectivity and the quotidian world. The speaker, in his "naked bed," is like a slave in Plato's cave, ignorant of the powers that control the course of knowledge and history beyond his own solipsistic environment. The "naked bed" signifies a state of womb-like innocence from which he has yet to awaken. Like the shadows of flames, knowledge manifests itself slowly, in the "lights on the wall," the carpenter's hammer, the wind in the curtains, the grinding of the trucks, the milkman's chop. Each noise that filters into his room exists as testimony to the plurality of quotidian experiences taking place beyond his sheltered, Platonic cave. The everyday experiences are the shadows dancing on the wall of his cave. Allowing their multiplicity to infiltrate and influence his state of mind will provide him with the knowledge that will allow him to overcome the oppression of a totalizing discursive vision.

Ironically, Schwartz here uses Plato as an ambidextrous symbol that evokes the need of overcoming oppressive intellectual conditions and conjures the roots of the philosophical and political thinking that has helped maintain those very conditions of oppression. While the cave allegory offers a blueprint for overcoming oppression, Plato symbolizes a history of Western metaphysics founded upon the search for a singular truth or ideal Platonic "form." While in his Platonic cave, Schwartz's speaker remains trapped within a metaphysical tradition that privileges the attainment of ideal forms above the discursive potential of heterogeneous reality. Such Platonic ideals, from this vantage point, are themselves containers that repress the multiplicity of the everyday and leave the subject submissive to a singular way of seeing. Ironically, Schwartz's speaker finds

himself in a scenario similar to that of Plato's cave dwellers. Just as they must learn from the shadows on the wall to free themselves from the shackles of ignorance, Schwartz's speaker must learn from the multiplicity of the quotidian to overcome the reductive biases of Western thought.

The reference to Plato also serves as connective tissue between the subjective realm of Schwartz's speaker and his external political reality. In Platonic terms, the search for an ideal truth is, in *The Republic*, enmeshed with the conceptualization of the ideal city-state. As Plato outlines in *The Republic*, the ideal city-state is one that must be governed by the philosopher-kings with the clearest notion of an ideal good. Schwartz's reference to Plato's *Republic* implicitly evokes American republicanism and thus situates America as a country governed by the vision of an elite class. Schwartz paradoxically evokes Plato's cave allegory to indicate that it is precisely the singularity of this vision that his speaker must overcome if he wishes to awaken to a more productive state of consciousness, one grounded in the multiplicity of the everyday.

His recognition of the tension between his own cave-like perspective and the multiplicity of the world beyond it is foregrounded as his speaker moves to the window. His position behind glass signifies his vertiginous epistemological perspective. The window cuts him off from the quotidian events taking place outdoors. While his vantage affords him a totalizing vision of the scene outside, it also signifies his alienation from that quotidian reality. The scene resembles a distinction made by Michel de Certeau in *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Looking down at Manhattan from the 110<sup>th</sup> floor of the World Trade Centre, marveling at how the lines of the street and buildings, from such an estranged perspective, form into one gigantic mass, one totalized vision, de Certeau asks

“To what erotics of knowledge does the ecstasy of reading such a cosmos belong? Having taken a voluptuous pleasure in it, I wonder what is the source of ‘seeing the whole,’ of looking down on, totalizing the most immoderate of human texts” (92). De Certeau questions the metaphysical impulse towards totalization, the “erotics of knowledge” that steers perception towards the implementation of a totalizing pattern.

In “In the Naked Bed,” Schwartz, like de Certeau, sees in such an estranged, vertiginous perspective the tendency to synthesize and contain—to totalize—“the most immoderate of human texts.” Perception, for Schwartz, is problematized by its containment within specific ideological discourses. Against this containment, he poeticizes the quotidian activities of the everyday, the small events that are synthesized, contained, and overlooked within wider ideological perspectives, as the locus for the cultivation of poetic resistance. The plurality of the quotidian resists surveillance and containment by dominant ideologies. It refigures reality not as mediated by a disciplined and conformist political or cultural system, but as invested in the transient and contingent ways of operating that influence perception at every instant.

Schwartz indicates his speaker’s status as a subject beneath a totalizing ideological structure with his reference to “The winter sky’s pure capital.” The sky frames, and thus contains, the early morning scene that the speaker is separated from by his window. It reveals that the multiplicity of the quotidian is contained beneath the umbrella of a bleak winter sky. Moreover, Schwartz links the oppressive sky with the “pure capital” of American economic reality. The image invokes capitalism as the sky, or ideological rubric, beneath which existence takes place. As such, the sky signifies the hegemony of a capitalist disposition, one that appears “pure” and natural to those

contained within its dialectic in spite of its hegemonic inclinations. For Schwartz, this capitalist ideology is, like a winter sky, bleak. Furthermore, its tendency towards containment alienates his speaker from the congruencies of the everyday.

For Schwartz's speaker, breaking through this ideological veneer into his "real conditions of existence" manifests itself as a necessary means of defamiliarizing the capitalist, Republican scenario.

Strangeness grew in the motionless air. The loose  
Film grayed. Shaking wagons, hooves' waterfalls,  
Sounded far off, increasing, louder and nearer.  
A car coughed, starting. Morning, softly  
Melting the air, lifted the half-covered chair  
From underseas, kindled the looking glass,  
Distinguished the dresser and the whitewall  
.....  
O Son of man, the ignorant night, the travail  
Of early morning, the mystery of beginning  
Again and Again,

While History is unforgiven. (*Selected Poems 25*)

The "Strangeness" that grows in the "motionless air" of the static, "pure capital" sky implies a gradual awakening on the speaker's behalf. By suggesting that "The loose / Film grayed," Schwartz alludes to the discursive nature of reality within a contained, capitalist paradigm. The reality he sees is filmic, which is to say grounded in a particular framed point of view. The film suggests that the individual "viewer," or participant within

capitalist culture, watches history unfold from a static, passive perspective. His agency as a participant is subordinate to the ideological apparatus that reveals itself before him. However, the fact that the film loosens and grays indicates that, within the “Strangeness” of the air, its discursive authority has become compromised; destabilization opens up interstices for the cultivation of a new epistemological topography.

As this totalizing perceptual frame of reference is destabilized, the diverse reality that it contains begins to assert itself in a multiplicity of quotidian events. Schwartz grounds this multiplicity in the scene’s material activities: the wagons, waterfalls of hooves, bird calls, the car coughing—each mundane, transient action asserts repressed daily experience against the hegemony of official History. They challenge the speaker’s epistemological understanding of the static, “pure capital” world and replace it with a vision of a world grounded in multiplicity, unpredictability, and impermanence. As such, the incursion of these haptic gestures exemplifies the quotidian details common to what de Certeau refers to as “the practice of everyday life.” According to de Certeau, analyzing everyday life amounts to an “investigation of the ways in which users—commonly assumed to be passive and guided by established rules—operate” (xi). Doing so means making “everyday practices, ‘ways of operating’ or doing things, no longer appear merely as the obscure background of social activity” (xi). From the perspective of psychoanalytic historiography, it means reclaiming repressed experience and using it to destabilize the tyranny of totalizing historical and ideological perspectives. As Schwartz’s speaker “awakens” to the destabilizing properties of the everyday in “In the Naked Bed, in Plato’s Cave,” he juxtaposes those properties against a “History” that is “unforgiven” (25). Schwartz’s capitalization of “History” invokes it as a monolithic, discursive structure.

The “morning, softly / melting the air” recalls Marx’s famous postulation in *The Communist Manifesto* that in modernity “all fixed, fast-frozen relations ... are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air” (qtd. in Bauer 214). While Schwartz’s reference to Marx evokes a world in which “objects become estranged, visible only in reflected light, sensed only in motion, as a waterfall ‘increasing louder and nearer’” (Bauer 214), his poetic vision is ultimately “irreducible to Marxist teleology: the lower-case ‘mystery’ of life as change cannot become capitalized ‘History’” (Bauer 214). The “mystery of beginning / Again and again” that Schwartz’s speaker alludes to is derived from his fascination with the haptic events taking place beyond his window. The quotidian environment provides the potential for an ongoing productive resistance, one that will always begin “Again and again,” and therefore destabilizes totalizing conceptualizations of History as fixed and static. While the “mystery” of the quotidian does not overthrow the totalizing gestures of History, it destabilizes discipline and conformity by providing a locus for the maintenance of autonomy that lies beneath the systematizing gaze of containment culture.

Schwartz’s poetry makes productive use of the quotidian by fleshing out correlations between its repression by totalizing historical discourses and the repression of individual subjectivity by containment culture. His poetry is therefore grounded in a psychoanalytic historiography: by recovering the quotidian from cultural repression, he finds an analogy for recovering subjectivity from the tyranny of containment. For Schwartz, reading identity through its relation to the quotidian demonstrates its essential instability and multiplicity. Rather than being the product of a singular identity, the unconscious subject is the product of a

multiform singularity that precisely doesn't belong to anyone but animates the peculiar binds and unbindings that hold us and rejects us in the name of culture (in all its historicity). As far as this goes the unconscious, in the study and analysis of culture, is precisely that which doesn't belong to anyone—it is multitudinous, unstopably plural. (Highmore 59)

In the multiplicity of the quotidian, Schwartz finds his analogy for the nature of the unconscious. By linking his speaker to the quotidian, he links him with a subjectivity that is “unstopably plural” and that “doesn't belong to anyone.” The quotidian therefore provides both the allegory and the locale for the reclamation of a repressed subjectivity. By highlighting the transient nature of reality, Schwartz posits a subjective poetics as a means of warding off the tyranny of surveillance and containment. His autobiographic poetics are therefore grounded in an aesthetics of resistance, one drawn from the familiar background, conventionally “unproductive,” elements of everyday life.

In poems such as “Ballad of the Children of the Czar,” for example, Schwartz juxtaposes the multiplicity of the subjective ego with an unforgiving, totalitarian history. Consisting of six sections, and written in idiomatic couplets, the poem contrasts America in 1916 with an early century Russia on the verge of revolution. Rather than analyzing the historical scenario, Schwartz narrows his scope by contrasting the innocence of the Romanov children with his own youthful naiveté. He establishes an ironic connection between an embattled Russian culture and the promise of American immigration through the figure of his grandfather who, while serving in Czar Nicholas's army,

Hid in a wine-stinking barrel,

For three days in Bucharest

Then left for America

To become a king himself (21).

The notion that his grandfather envisaged capitalist America as a potential kingdom ironically establishes both the suffering of serving in Nicholas's Army and the hardship of immigration as two equally unappealing alternatives in the grand scale of historical discourse. The barrel that he is forced to hide in signifies a very literal and oppressive containment of individuality, one where he must hide both from his own government and from the revolutionary Bolshevism that it opposed. While the monarchy of Czar Nicholas was soon to be replaced by a totalitarian communism, the promise of capitalist wealth in America signified the opportunity to be a "king" and positions America as an ironic land of opportunity and freedom.

Against these broad ideological backdrops Schwartz positions vignettes of quotidian childhood events. In Russia, "The Children of the Czar / Played with a bouncing ball / In the May morning, in the Czar's garden" (21). In America, his autobiographic self innocently eats a potato. While the two scenes are not overtly connected, Schwartz links them through historical contingency:

Now in another October

Of this tragic star,

I see my second year,

I eat my baked potato

It is my buttered world,

But, poked by my unlearned hand,

It falls from the highchair down

And I begin to howl.

And I see the ball roll under

The iron gate which is locked.

Sister is screaming, brother is howling,

The ball has evaded their will.

Even a bouncing ball

Is uncontrollable,

And is under the garden wall.

I am overtaken by terror

Thinking of my father's fathers,

And of my own will. (24)

By focusing on the events of both his own childhood in a burgeoning capitalist America and the Romanov children in relation to Russian political ideology, Schwartz engages events on the level of psychoanalytic historiography. His emphasis on the innocence of quotidian childhood events reclaims what is repressed by historical discourses. These

historical narratives are the ideologies of his “father’s fathers”; as such, they jar with his own individual “will” which desires to reclaim its autonomy from the oppression of ideology. Schwartz indicates that growth into adulthood is accompanied by the repression of childhood innocence, a fact that leaves his autobiographic childhood self in a state of alienation. His baked potato, which signifies nourishment, wholesomeness, and a staple of a lower-class immigrant diet, is plainly visible in the speaker’s memory. However, it remains just beyond his reach. It resembles what Lacan describes as *l’objet petit a*, or an object that holds the promise of fulfillment, but remains permanently displaced from the possibility of delivering that fulfillment.<sup>49</sup> Schwartz recognizes that capitalist ideology functions in a similar manner by offering the endlessly regressive possibility for fulfillment, one fetishized through its ideological precepts of democracy, security, wealth, and consumption. The fallen potato signifies not only the young narrator’s loss of innocence, but also his initiation into capitalist culture, or in short, his interpellation as an ideological subject.

In a similar manner, the ball that rolls beneath the “iron gate” symbolizes the initiation of the Romanov children into a world of ruthless authoritarianism that ultimately leads to their deaths.<sup>50</sup> The “bouncing ball,” a symbol of the transient trajectories of quotidian childhood innocence, is swallowed by the imposing “iron gate.” The gate, as a symbol of containment, conveys a powerful restraint and repression. Once inside the gate the ball “evades their will.” As such it indicates that the innocence of daily childhood events is swallowed by the containment of repressive historical discourses.

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<sup>49</sup> See Lacan’s *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* (1964).

<sup>50</sup> Czar Nicholas II and his immediate family were executed by Bolsheviks on 17 July 1918.

The poem, by focusing on the tension between ideology and the commonplace, maps a productive geography from which Schwartz can manifest his opposition to containment. This geography lies in the cultivation of a psychoanalytic historiography that posits the transience of childhood against the repression of history and reclaims repressed childhood innocence as a destabilizing entity. Children signify voices that do not participate within the official economy of government states. As symbols within Schwartz's quotidian topography, their innocence signifies a field of production that remains below the radar of official state surveillance. In Schwartz's poetics, "Just as the operations of the ego and consciousness repress traumatic material, only to find such material returning (as symptoms, coded in dreams, etc.), so the livedness of everyday life (the overflowing everyday), managed by the mechanisms of the official writing of culture, spills out surreptitiously in fragments and traces" (Highmore 72). It is fragments of the "livedness" of childhood quotidian events that spill out in "The Ballad of the Children of the Czar"; the tension these moments create in contrast to the dominant ideologies that contain them destabilizes official culture in the same manner that the repression of traumatic experience has the potential to destabilize the individual psyche. By mining both his autobiographic childhood experience and the fictionalized account of the Romanov children, Schwartz encourages this repression to surface. As it does so, it posits a counter-discourse that testifies to the constraints placed upon autonomy as it is contained by official ideology. The quotidian therefore destabilizes the authority of state ideology and highlights its status as a repressive apparatus.

Schwartz intensifies his focus on the repressed quotidian in poems such as "Far Rockaway," where

The radiant soda of the seashore fashions  
Fun, foam, and freedom. The sea laves  
The shaven sand. And the light sways forward  
On the self-destroying waves.

The rigor of the weekday is cast aside with shoes,  
With business suits and the traffic's motion;  
The lolling man lies with the passionate sun,  
Or is drunken in the ocean.

A socialist health takes hold of the adult,  
He is stripped of his class in the bathing-suit,  
He returns to the children digging at summer,  
A melon-like fruit.

O glittering and rocking and bursting blue  
—Eternities of sea and sky shadow no pleasure:  
Time unheard moves and the heart of man is eaten  
Consummately at leisure. (*Selected Poems* 34)

While Schwartz once again focuses on the seemingly insubstantial elements of everyday life, he changes the locale to a site of carnivalesque reprieve, of life “consummately at leisure.” The scenario laid out on the beach evokes a collective mass at leisure, beyond the instrumentalized regimen of work. As a collective, they convey the

polyphonic excess of life, one that Schwartz symbolizes by valorizing sound, smell, and motion over discourses that otherwise seek to contain such incursions upon discipline and rigour. The seashore's "radiant soda," its "Fun, foam, and freedom," where "The sea laves / The shaven sand," all emphasize sonority and flowing alliterative play. Focus on sensual elements, as de Certeau explains, can challenge the broadstrokes of ideological authority:

[the] valorization of sound, the key to paranomases, alliterations, rhymes, and other phonic games, seeds an oral transgression through the semantic organization of the discourse, a transgression which displaces or cuts the articulated meanings and which renders the signifier autonomous in relation to the signified. This sonorous wave spreads across the syntactic landscape; it permeates it with leeways, chasms, and meanderings something unknown.... It makes itself attentive to the poetics which is present in every discourse: these hidden voices, forgotten in the name of pragmatic and ideological interests, introduce into every statement of meaning the 'difference' of the act which utters it. (*Heterologies* 53)

In other words, emphasizing the quotidian elements grounded in sound, play, and other sensual modes awakens a discursive topography repressed by dominant ideological discourses. By valorizing an alterior poetic topography, Schwartz implicitly challenges the limitations of capitalist and Republican ideological discourses, and demonstrates the fertile possibilities of "other," often repressed, forms of reading to combat containment. As a site of leisure, the beach contains a symbolic topography that exists in opposition to

capitalist conceptualizations of discipline, containment, and work. It is also a liminal space situated where the boundaries between official life and leisure are blurred.

Schwartz makes the distinction between “normalized” existences and a bricolage poetic approach with his charge that at the beach “The rigor of the weekday is cast aside with shoes / With business suits and the traffic’s motion.” Within the beach environment, “A socialist health takes hold of the adult” and “He is stripped of his class in the bathing-suit.” It is from this neutral position that Schwartz introduces a quotidian poetic topography. The loss of class and organization undergone by the poem’s subjects suggests that they have stepped beyond the bounds of organization into a carnivalesque scene of leisure. Schwartz’s speaker takes pleasure in the “glitter and rocking and bursting and blue” of the ocean and sky, and juxtaposes the *jouissance* of those elements with the “Eternities of sea and sky” which “shadow no pleasure.” The “Eternities” and the shadows they cast recall the “winter sky’s pure capital” in “In the Naked Bed” and also convey a vision of history and reality as eternal and unchanging. As in “In the Naked Bed,” this static backdrop is starkly contrasted by the incursion of the multiplicity of a highly sensual quotidian reality. In this leisure environment, the totalization signified by the eternal sea and sky cannot repress the sensual vagaries of the quotidian.

Schwartz signifies this tension between sensual reality and the impulse to contain its abject nature through the figure of the novelist sitting on the boardwalk overhead:

The novelist tangential on the boardwalk overhead

Seeks his cure of souls in his own anxious gaze.

“here,” he says, “With whom?” he asks, “This?” he questions,

“What tedium, what blaze?”

“What satisfaction, fruit? What transit, heaven?

Criminal? justified? arrived at what June?”

That nervous conscience amid the concessions

Is a haunting, haunted moon. (*Selected Poems* 34)

From his “tangential” perspective on the boardwalk above the beach, he has a totalizing vantage, one that resembles de Certeau’s allegory of looking down on Manhattan from the top of the World Trade Center. His desire to derive a singular vision from the multitude of quotidian events taking place before him is signified by his anxious questioning. In the beach that lies before him he nervously attempts to pinpoint the “tedium,” “blaze,” “satisfaction,” or “transit” that will identify itself as a singular discursive vision.

This attempt to totalize a disparate, quotidian vision through writing suggests the manner in which literary discourse privileges writing and vision while repressing other less obvious semantic forms. The novelist’s anxious desire to contain the meanderings he sees below him suggests his search for a pure, unified meaning, one that the semantic variability of the images below him defies. He therefore becomes a “nervous conscience amid the concessions,” at once a “haunting” and a “haunted moon.” While the “haunting” moon suggests his presence as a panoptic, surveillant gaze, the fact that he is “haunted” connotes his recognition that literary vision cannot ultimately convey a totalized representation, that it can never fully signify authenticity or presence. In this recognition he sees the destabilizing possibilities of the quotidian elements that his scriptural activities attempt to repress.

For Schwartz, the act of repression inherent in the act of writing illuminates the implicit problem of ideological totalization in both the *Partisan* and New Critical literary milieus of his day, and in the trend towards containment that marked his political reality. Ideological discursive strategies privilege singular visions at the expense of heterogeneity. By emphasizing the quotidian, Schwartz recovers the plurality of experience from its repression in ideological discourse. The quotidian thus becomes the “Other” in writing and threatens to destabilize scriptural authority. Schwartz’s means of establishing the quotidian as a destabilizing force exists in his coupling of a subjective, psychologically based poetics with a cultural historiography. This psychoanalytic-historiographic perspective necessitates a turning away from the *Partisan* Marxist and New Critical discourses of his milieu. More specifically, it requires a subjective, inward turn, one that found analogues for psychological repression in the cultural repression of quotidian activities.

In this manner, Schwartz anticipates the subjective, confessional poetry that emerged more clearly in the verse of his contemporaries Lowell and eventually Berryman. However, Schwartz’s marriage of psychological heterogeneity and the cultural quotidian demonstrates that the origins of confessional verse are anything but narrow and narcissistic; in fact, they are precisely the opposite. Confessional, or autobiographic verse posits an intrinsic psychic heterogeneity that seeks to illuminate the effects of containment and repression within, and analogously alludes to repressed elements of discourse in the cultural sphere. As such, it functions as a fertile political force, one that necessitates a recognition of identity as intrinsically multiple and unstable, and therefore uncontainable by forces of cultural repression.

While it is difficult to dispute that Schwartz's breakdown in later life has left lasting impressions of him as a poet who never realized his full potential, the manner in which he uses quotidian life to open a new poetic geography that resists ideological conformity is a testament to the strength of his achievement. His development of an autobiographic style in an era dominated by the impersonal New Critics and the ideologically motivated *Partisan Review* places him amidst the vanguard of late modernist writers and solidifies his status as an important early autobiographic poet.

His influence on later autobiographic poets is visible in the works of his contemporaries, including Randall Jarrell. Jarrell, like Schwartz, occupied a complicated space within his literary milieu. New Criticism had left Marxist literary ideology in its wake and supplanted itself as the dominant ideology by the mid-1950s. Jarrell, like Schwartz, found himself circulating within the New Critical milieu throughout his career. Recognizing an inherent complicity between containment ideology and New Critical methodology, Jarrell cultivated a dialectical poetics that challenged the literary and political conformity of his era.

## New Critical Conspiracy Theory: Randall Jarrell and the Poetics of Dissent

If Delmore Schwartz's poetry represents an implicit resistance to ideological interpellation, the work of Randall Jarrell represents that resistance made explicit. Jarrell's acerbic essays on literature and mass culture have earned him a reputation as a patrician misanthrope, a defender of intellectual culture against conformity in the manner of a Frankfurt School highbrow. This reputation is not undeserved. At a time in American history when the fiction bestseller list was dominated by the markedly lowbrow, pulp, private investigator novels of Mickey Spillane, Jarrell's stance against the degradation of the arts seems understandable. Spillane's novels feature the heroics of private investigator Mike Hammer, who "chose not to become a cop because 'pansy' bureaucracy was emasculating police men with its rules and regulations" and whose "real contempt is reserved for the professional and intellectual classes, for homosexuals, and above all, for swarthy criminals like 'the Mafia'" (Whitfield 35). The popularity of such borderline agitprop artifacts represented for Jarrell the emergence of an anti-intellectual culture that reflected the persecution endured by many Left-leaning members of the "intellectual and professional classes" during the McCarthyist era and beyond. At a time "when General Eisenhower defined an intellectual as 'a man who takes more words than is necessary to tell more than he knows,'" it was not difficult for Jarrell to arrive at the caustic resolution that in America "Most of us distrust intellectuals as such: we feel that they must be abnormal or else they wouldn't be intellectuals" (*A Sad Heart in the Supermarket* 10).

While much of Jarrell's criticism is indeed aimed at conformist mass culture, a close reading of his poetry reveals his contempt for conformity to dominant intellectual trends within literary culture itself. In his prose, which is the critical, if antithetical,

equivalent to Mike Hammer's bravado, Jarrell investigates and exposes connections between the New Critical discourse that had achieved hegemony within the literary academy by the 1950s and the homogenizing cultural trends of Cold War containment. Jarrell recognizes that New Critical reading practices emphasize the importance of containing, "urn-like," textual tensions such as irony, ambiguity, and paradox. Such an isolationist focus on the text, according to Jarrell, diminishes the political potentiality invested in poetry, marginalizes its cultural position to specialized academic disciplines, and renders the poet, as a voice of critical dissent, obscure. For Jarrell, New Criticism's academic gestures towards containment presented a political problem: its concurrent relationship with English's rise as a university discipline meant that new generations of Liberal Arts graduates were implicitly equipped with the reading skills required for psychologically "containing" the geopolitical ironies, ambiguities, and paradoxes endemic to Cold War culture. From Jarrell's perspective, the ahistorical approach of New Criticism, while not officially linked to ideological containment, appeared complicit in providing liberal consciousness with critical reading practices that sought to contain textual tensions, whether literary or cultural, rather than encouraging engagement with their sociocultural complexities.

While such complicity between New Critical protocols and Cold War containment may have been purely coincidental, Jarrell recognized it as symptomatic of a cultural ethos reluctant to engage the complexities and paradoxes of postwar capitalist culture. As a dissenting critical voice, Jarrell writes back against the academy, employing a dialectical materialist poetics that challenges the literary and cultural politics of his era by exploring the constraints Cold War culture places upon the individual subject. While his

style is often less overtly autobiographic than that of his “confessional” contemporaries, Jarrell’s exploration of identity through the appropriation of the voices of women, soldiers, and other alterior subjects demonstrates the repressive, insidious, and even destructive effects of containment ideology on individual consciousness. His poetics insists on the unconditional autonomy of the Cold War subject as a discursive force against cultural and political containment.

Jarrell’s characterization of the poet as “a condemned man for whom the state will not even buy breakfast,” a sentiment that appears in one form or another in much of his critical prose, exemplifies his polemical, and often polarizing, stance on the importance of poetic autonomy. While such statements suggest the vehemence with which Jarrell opposes the anti-intellectual, conformist climate of Eisenhower’s America, his treatment of the “state” as a monolithic entity does little justice to the nuances of the dialectical materialist approach that appears throughout his criticism. In his essay “The Obscurity of the Poet,” for example, he goes beyond broad critiques of the state apparatus and specifically identifies the literary academy’s failure to cultivate a poetics capable of even being read by—let alone politically motivating—a wider public, as symptomatic of a damaging complicity between academic discourse and the hegemony of containment culture:

Since most people know about the modern poet only that he is *obscure*—i.e., that he is *difficult*, i.e., that he is *neglected*—they naturally make a causal connection between the two meanings of the word, and decide that he is unread because he is difficult. Some of the time this is true; some of the time the reverse is true: the poet seems difficult *because* he is not read, *because*

the reader is not accustomed to reading his or any other poetry. But most of the time neither is a cause—both are no more than effects of that long-continued, world-overturning cultural and social revolution (seen at its most advanced stage here in the United States) which has made the poet difficult and the public unused to any poetry. (*Poetry and the Age* 4)

By connecting the obscurity of poetry to “that long-continued world-overturning cultural and social revolution,” Jarrell grounds its neglect within a historical dialectic and counters arguments that it was the rise of Modernist “difficulty” that sanctioned an elitist, poetic exclusivity and denied common individuals access to poetic discourse. While not denying that in some cases the deliberate cultivation of obscurity common to certain Modernist sensibilities estranged poetry from a wider audience, Jarrell argues that other sociocultural trends contributed dramatically to its dismissal as a relevant form of cultural discourse.

As the essay progresses, Jarrell connects the obscurity of poetry with a vision of a world increasingly driven by consumerist and military endeavours, a world where “among the related radiances of a kitchen’s white-enameled electric dryer ... and Waring Blendor, the homemaker sits in the trim coveralls of her professions; where, above the concrete cavern that holds a General Staff, the rockets are invisible in the sky” (*Poetry and the Age* 21). Jarrell’s prescient vision, which foregrounds the “invisible” spectre of anxiety that fuels discourses of domestic consumption, anticipates the 1959 kitchen debate between Nixon and Krushchev by positing domestic consumption as a placative for the anxieties common to the age of nuclear proliferation. In so doing, Jarrell links the obscurity of poetry to the growth of a dehumanizing cultural environment in which, as

Adorno and Horkheimer argue, "Something is provided for all so that none may escape" (*Dialectic of Enlightenment* 123); or, in which anxieties are eased by the presence of a consumerist environment that provides the illusion of autonomy through the myriad possibilities for consumption.

On a political level, Jarrell recognized this focus on consumption as a form of domesticating the nuclear threat. His preoccupation with the connection between the rise of consumer culture and ominous geopolitical realities is evident in his notes. As Richard Flynn points out, the notes for Jarrell's essay "A Sad Heart at the Supermarket"

reveal the link between Jarrell's cultural critique and his struggle to penetrate the mystery of his lost poetic inspiration.... They reveal Jarrell's anxieties about nuclear extinction, where the "**\*REPRESSION**/of [the] hydrogen bomb" is linked to a generalized "**DENIAL or REPRESSION**" that serve "as great defense mechanisms of our culture" personified in "Eisenhower's beaming smile, moral rightness." (96)

According to Flynn, this entry demonstrates that sociocultural anxiety had a direct bearing on Jarrell's poetic output. It also demonstrates that Jarrell ultimately used this dilemma to his advantage. He paradoxically located his inspiration in the sources he felt were responsible for depriving him of it. By confronting the link between denial and repression as defence mechanisms in Eisenhower's America and his own inability to find inspiration in a repressive environment, Jarrell implicitly defines the need for a dialectically oriented poetics, one that is oppositional and self-reflexively critical of Cold War America and that analyzes the effects of repression on individual consciousness, one aimed at challenging containment notions of "moral rightness."

Jarrell cultivates this dialectical approach in "Next Day," a poem that exposes the bankrupt nature of such notions of "rightness" by highlighting the psychic repercussions of repressing anxiety through domestic consumption.<sup>51</sup> From his 1965 collection *The Lost World*, the poem is written from the perspective of a woman who feels trapped by her status as a participant in postwar capitalist culture:

Moving from Cheer to Joy, from Joy to All

I take a box

And add it to my wild rice, my Cornish game hens.

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<sup>51</sup> The discourse of moral rightness was audible in the address delivered to the nation by President Truman following the detonation of atomic bombs at Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Japan in early August, 1945. "It was an awful responsibility which has come to us," intoned President Truman on nationwide radio the next day. "We thank God that it has come to us instead of to our enemies; and we pray that He may guide us to use it in His ways and for His purposes" (Boyer 6). Capitalizing on the moral rightness of an American Christian ethos, Truman attempts to appease concerns about the dubious morality of his country's actions. Implicit in his address, however, is the understanding that the enemies of America may soon have the ability to invoke their own ideological sensibilities as a means of justifying similar attacks against the United States. That sense of anxiety was audible in the earliest reports following Hiroshima. As Edward R. Murrow reported for CBS on August 12, 1945, six days after the atomic detonation at Hiroshima, "Seldom, if ever, has a war ended leaving the victors with such a sense of uncertainty and fear, with such a realization that the future is obscure and that survival is not assured" (qtd. in Boyer 7). However, as Paul Boyer notes in his thorough study of American nuclearism *The Bomb's Early Light*, shortly after the detonations in Japan, and before the official rhetoric of containment had been adopted by the American government, the atom bomb's reification into capitalist culture had already begun. One such example, as Boyer notes, was found in Los Angeles, where

Within days of Hiroshima, burlesque houses in Los Angeles were advertising 'Atom Bomb Dancers.' In early September, putting aside its pontifical robes for a moment, Life fulfilled a Hollywood press agent's dream with a full-page cheesecake photograph of a well-endowed MGM starlet who had been officially dubbed 'The Anatomic Bomb.' In 'Atom Bomb Baby,' a pop song of 1947, the bomb became a metaphor for sexual arousal. (12)

Other studies, including Alan Nadel's *Containment Culture* and Stephen J. Whitfield's *The Culture of the Cold War*, have thoroughly analyzed the politicization of American popular culture in the postwar years by reading such political phenomena as the Red Scare and McCarthyism through the era's literature, film, and political policies. As Whitfield points out, the containment of anxiety in the postwar years soon manifested itself as a campaign against the threat of a communist menace; "Trying to exorcise it were legislators and judges, union officials and movie studio bosses, policemen and generals, university presidents and corporation executives, clergymen and journalists, Republicans and Democrats, conservatives and Liberals" (1). In other words, the containment of anxiety was pervasive in American culture and while not explicitly connected to capitalist ideology, it often paradoxically impinged upon the very civil liberties government's sought to preserve. Jarrell recognized the tension this paradox created in the American cultural sector. In essays such as "A Sad Heart at the Supermarket," he claims that the postwar era represented the dawn of a "new world whose space we occupy so luxuriously and precariously; the world that produces mink stoles, rockabilly records, and tactical nuclear weapons by the million" (*A Sad Heart* 59).

The slacked or shorted, basketed, identical  
Food-gathering flocks  
Are selves I overlook. Wisdom, said William James,  
  
Is learning what to overlook. And I am wise  
If that is wisdom.  
Yet somehow, as I buy All from these shelves  
And the boy takes it to my station wagon,  
What I've become  
Troubles me even if I shut my eyes. (*Complete Poems* 279)

Jarrell plays on the double-entendre of the laundry detergents Cheer, Joy, and All in order to suggest his subject's conflation of consumption with happiness and selfhood. Each product appeals to a better life by branding positive states of mind as consumable products. Ironically, Jarrell opens the poem with detergents to suggest that with this increased happiness comes a greater domestic servility, a need to return home with the detergent in order to complete the chores it was purchased for. This irony is increased by the fact that each brand name refers to states of mind linked to the politics of containment reality. "All" invokes a sense of totalization; "Cheer" signifies the crowd mentality of mass culture; and "Joy" conveys a false ideological consciousness that is perpetuated by purchasing a shallow sense of autonomy within a capitalist marketplace. The detergents also convey a sense of whitewashing; as fetishized commodities, they evoke the manner in which conspicuous consumption distracts individuals from more important political realities, or cleanses them from muddying public consciousness. The fact that Jarrell uses

a laundry metaphor even evokes a sense of civic, or juridical, responsibility: the individual who becomes too enticed by capitalist consumption in effect “launders,” or disguises, the true nature of her relationship to political reality by conforming to shallow codes of domesticity and a normalized hygienic routine.

Although the speaker purchases domestic goods from the supermarket, she feels that she is unique from “The slacked or shorted, basketed, identical / Food-gathering flocks” (279). For the speaker, these conforming individuals are “selves” she “overlooks.” Following William James’ aphorism that “Wisdom ... is learning what to overlook,” she believes that her recognition of conformity in the grocery store means that she is “wise / If that is wisdom.” The reference to James suggests that wisdom is grounded in pragmatics, or that it is contingent upon the recognition that truth is a relative and mutable concept. In an era of consumption, recognizing the relativity and discursivity of capitalist persuasion, of knowing which discourses to “overlook,” is to adapt a wise critical perspective. For Jarrell’s speaker, however, this wisdom is relegated to her participation within an economy of conspicuous consumption, of knowing which products are the best buys. Her “wisdom” is integrally linked to a symbolic construction of reality, or a notion of reality constructed according to capitalist ideology that links fulfillment to the consumption of brands such as Cheer, Joy, and All. The bankrupt nature of conspicuous consumption, however, prevents that sense of fulfillment from ever being satisfied, and therefore locks individuals into a pattern of insatiable consumption.

Jarrell’s speaker, in her wisdom, seems to recognize the emptiness of this pattern; she sees that she has “become” an individual who buys into a system that sells happiness and satiation as a branded commodity. What she is incapable of figuring out, however, is

an alternative means of satiating her desires. Her inability to recognize an alternative indicates the prevalence of consumption as a symbolic and hegemonic ideological discourse. The speaker's nascent awareness of her ambivalent status within capitalist ideology initiates the realization that her subjective identity is in part a discursive construct of that ideology. As she laments, "what I've become / Troubles me even if I shut my eyes."

Jarrell exploits poetry as a form of mediation. By engaging the cultural sphere on both symbolic and real levels, he uses his poetics to investigate the ways in which individuals are interpellated as subjects within the Cold War paradigm. The recognition of her identity as a product of capitalist ideology contains the seeds of an epiphanic realization of the difference between what Slavoj Žižek refers to as the Real real, or a traumatic, impossible reality, and the Symbolic real. For Žižek, following Lacan, reality is structured in three dimensions: the Real real, the Symbolic real, and the Imaginary real. The Real real is constituted by a harrowing experience of negation—the catastrophes, wars, deaths, and other primary instances of trauma; the Symbolic real refers to the structured codes and conventions that, while meaningless in themselves, are the basic architectures, formulae, or other codes of meaning onto which reality is mapped. For Žižek, capitalist ideology is the Symbolic real of Western culture and therefore constitutes a cartography of contemporary reality. Global capital markets, for example, provide such a Symbolic reality, one that has no meaning beyond its own system of symbols and values, but that at the same time provides an ideological schematic for contemporary capitalist society. The Imaginary real, as Glyn Daly explains, places

emphasis on an invisible-immanent twist that gives structure and specificity to the imaginary realm. The (imaginary) dream landscape is a clear example of this. In dreams there is often a sense of infinite possibility. However, where one encounters a particular image of horror-excess (an immanent marker of the Real)—where the dream turns into a nightmare—there is an immediate compulsion to turn away and escape back into reality; to wake up (9).

The speaker's epiphany in "Next Day" illustrates precisely this relationship between the Real real, the Symbolic real, and the Imaginary real. Within the capitalist backdrop provided by her "Symbolic" reality, she is pushed into a reverie about the relationship between capitalist culture and her identity. Her imagining leads her to daydream about the discrepancy between her youthful ambitions and her contemporary reality:

When I was young and miserable and pretty  
And poor, I'd wish  
What all girls wish: to have a husband,  
A house and children. Now that I'm old, my wish  
Is womanish:  
That the boy putting groceries in my car  
  
See me. It bewilders me he doesn't see me.  
For so many years  
I was good enough to eat: the world looked at me

And its mouth watered. How often they have undressed me,  
The eyes of strangers! (*Complete Poems* 279)

In her daydream, she recalls imagining a life of domestic security and containment, “to have a husband, / A house and children.” Now middle-aged, she yearns to grab the attention of the grocery boy, to be recognized as “good enough to eat” by “The eyes of strangers.” She is consumed by the surveillance of those in her vicinity. While on one level her daydream suggests a basic fear of aging, on another it indicates the limited scope of her identity. She exists between the poles of domestic housewife and object of sexual desire. In both instances, her identity is contingent upon her status within the Symbolic reality of capitalist ideology. As a middle-aged woman, she derives her identity from her participation within the contained economy of consumption. As a young woman, she obtained her sense of self from the masculine gazes that constructed her as an object of sexual desire. In both instances, she lacks autonomy as an individual subject: she is an object persuaded and driven by discourses of capitalist ideology rather than an active, autonomous agent.

Her reverie keeps returning her to a sense of her own limitations within capitalist Symbolic reality. As her reverie continues, she awakens to the limited nature of her selfhood. This realization is triggered primarily by her attendance at a friend’s funeral:

And yet I’m afraid, as I was at the funeral I went to yesterday.  
My friend’s cold-made-up face, granite among its flowers,  
Her undressed, operated-on, dressed body  
Were my face and body.  
As I think of her I hear her telling me

How young I seem; I *am* exceptional;

I think of all I have.

But really no one is exceptional,

No one has anything, I'm anybody,

I stand beside my grave

Confused with my life, that is commonplace and solitary. (*Complete Poems*  
280)

In seeing the body of her friend, whose funerary make-up signifies an objectification of feminine appearance that continues even after death, the speaker has a traumatic encounter with the Real real. The death enacts a confrontation with the impossible, the pure negation constitutive of the Real real, which, by its impossibility cannot be integrated into the symbolic order of capitalist ideology. This traumatic encounter awakens her from her imaginative reverie and forces the realization that her identity is one rooted in her specular body image. Her friend's "undressed, operated-on, dressed body" was her own "face and body," which indicates that in the literal object of her friend's death she recognizes the figurative deadness of her own identity.

By seeing that her identity is an objective construct based upon both her specular image and her participation within an economy of consumption, she realizes that ultimately "no one is exceptional." However, her epiphany does not help her transcend her situation; rather, she ends up "Confused" by a life "that is commonplace and solitary." The critical suggestion here is that she is contained by the capitalist ideology that objectifies her within her Symbolic reality. As such, she is incapable of transcending her own conditions of existence, even if she is capable of recognizing a correlation between

those conditions and her feeling of emptiness and confusion. With capitalism as Symbolic reality, she is able to find an active agency only within the rubric of its ideological dictates.

For Jarrell, this inability to challenge or transcend oppressive social conditions exemplifies existence within capitalist mass culture. While poems such as "Next Day" engage the psycho-social complexities of containment ideology, Jarrell's criticism suggests that he believed too few of his contemporaries were forging similar critiques. In essays such as "The Age of Criticism," which follows "The Obscurity of the Poet" in *Poetry and the Age*, he firmly interrogates the failure of the critical enterprise in addressing, or helping literature to address, issues pertinent to Cold War culture. By placing the two essays back to back, Jarrell establishes a connection between the rise of Cold War culture and new trends in American critical discourse, both of which, in his opinion, deny poetry its inherent social function, subordinating its relevance to academic institutions.

In "The Age of Criticism," he attacks what he sees as the trend towards an increasingly specialized, institutionalized variety of literary discourse, one that denies access to criticism to all but those initiated in its jargon:

a great deal of this [recent literary] criticism might well have been written by a syndicate of encyclopedias for an audience of International Business Machines. It is not only bad or mediocre, it is *dull*; it is, often, an astonishingly graceless, joyless, humorless, long-winded, niggling, blinkered, methodical, self-important, cliché-ridden, prestige-obsessed, almost-autonomous criticism.... For one begins to see—an age of criticism is not an

age of writing, nor an age of reading: it is an age of criticism. People still read, still write—and well; but for many of them it is the act of criticism which has become the representative or Archetypal act of the intellectual.

*(Poetry and the Age 73)*

While Jarrell does not overtly identify New Criticism as the “Archetypal” form of “*dull*” criticism to which he alludes, its hegemony by the 1950s suggests that it must, at least in part, be his target. The works of theorists such as I.A. Richards, Cleanth Brooks, W.K. Wimsatt, John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, Rene Wellek, and T.S. Eliot, while each embodying distinct approaches to formalist methods, shared similar ideas about the relationship between poetry to history and society. As Richard Ohmann observes, the ideas of these critics

fused into a catechism of denials. The ‘intentional fallacy’: to equate a work’s meaning with its author’s intention, and so connect it with his or her actual life. The ‘affective fallacy’: to locate the work in its impact on readers. The ‘heresy of paraphrase’: to associate it with any propositional content. By such maneuvers the New Critics severed poetry from historical process, distinguished it from other practical uses of language, and defined the experience of it as a peculiarly intransitive state of consciousness. Less explicit but crucial was their separation of that experience from action. (77)

Embodying W.H. Auden’s dictum that “Poetry makes nothing happen” (qtd. in Ohmann 77), the New Critics succeeded in implementing an organicist approach to textual scholarship that emphasized close-reading and text-based critical practices as a reaction against the biographic and journalistic styles that had previously dominated literary

scholarship. As a methodology, there is little question that New Criticism helped raise literary scholarship in America to the level of a serious academic discipline. Indeed, part of the New Critical mandate was to remove the “serious” study of literature from the hands of belletristic novitiates and place it in the seat of universities, where it could be properly studied by professionals trained in the discourse of literary criticism.

While appreciative of the work being performed by the New Critics, many of whom he counted amongst his close friends, Jarrell remained suspicious of New Criticism’s separation of poetry from historical action. In his words,

We do not become good critics by reading criticism and, secondarily, the ‘data’ or ‘raw material’ of criticism: that is, poems and stories. We become good critics by reading poems and stories and by living.... Even a good critic or reader has a hard time recovering from the taste of the age which has produced him. (*Poetry and the Age* 88)

Revealing his contempt for a criticism divorced from the poetics of history, Jarrell also makes subtle reference to the “taste of the age” from which New Criticism emerged. In doing so, he alludes to the inherently discursive nature of New Criticism, suggesting that rather than offering schematics for a self-contained, pure textual analysis, it is in fact influenced by, and thoroughly reflected in, the containment politics of the era. Later critics, including Terry Eagleton, have engaged New Criticism on a similar level. As Eagleton charges, in its Cold War context the disinterested nature of New Criticism can be regarded as deliberately apolitical:

Reading poetry in the New Critical way meant committing yourself to nothing: all that poetry taught you was ‘disinterestedness’, a serene,

speculative, impeccably even-handed rejection of anything in particular. It drove you less to oppose McCarthyism or further civil rights than to experience such pressures as merely partial, no doubt harmoniously balanced somewhere else in the world by their complementary opposites. It was, in other words, a recipe for political inertia, and thus for submission to the political status quo. (43)

Eagleton's assertion that New Criticism was a politically inert methodology grounded in a culture of conformity, while failing to adequately historicize the era that produced it, lends itself to Jarrell's claim that there must be connections between criticism and "the taste of the age." Jarrell appears to have recognized how the emergence of New Criticism as a historically exclusive theory was not only a reaction against, but also a consequence of, the postwar capitalist dialectic.

In an essay entitled "Levels and Opposites: Structure in Poetry," which he originally delivered as the Mesures Lecture at Princeton in 1942, Jarrell outlines his opposition to what he saw as New Criticism's containment of dialectical oppositions. In the essay, he "rejects the New Critical conception of the poem as a static unity, a 'verbal icon' and he rejects as well the corollary assumptions that the tension in poetry tends always toward a state of equilibrium—or 'balanced poise,' as I.A. Richards put it" (Travisano 171). For Jarrell, such a focus on formal containment represses the inherently dialectical nature of poetry. In so doing, it sanitizes poetry, divorcing it from the dialectical tensions implicit to its engagement with the sociopolitical.

For Jarrell, a "good" poem must strive to get beyond containment by heightening its dialectical tensions:

the organization of a good poem, so full of strain and tension, is obtained not merely by intensifying the forces working toward a simple unity, but by intensifying the opposing forces as well. A successful poem starts from one position and ends at a very different one, often a contradictory or opposite one; yet there has been no break in the unity of the poem. This unity is generated by the tension set up between strongly differing forces, by the struggle of opposites; it involves not static things, but changing processes; it is a unity that is arrived at through heterogeneity, not homogeneity. (*Poetry and the Age* 276)

The assertion that a poem's unity is the recognition of opposing forces inherent in its composition confirms Jarrell's notion of poetry as a dialectical art form without committing him to synthesizing gestures aimed at producing a single unity. According to Jarrell, "There is no static unity in a poem, no mechanical atomistic system with its fixed unchanging entities joined by its fixed eternal relationships" (*Poetry and the Age* 276).

For Jarrell, however, there is more at stake in subscribing to a dialectical poetic style than the composition of "good" poetry. While he understood the importance of close-reading and formal principles, such concepts were representative of only a portion of the poem's constitutive elements. At a historical moment that saw a direct collusion between containment ideology and the rise of a conformist mass culture, Jarrell became frustrated by the fact that literature was constructing its own containment discourse and thereby refusing to challenge the threat to individual identity posed by mass culture. More explicitly, he regarded the emergence of contained New Critical protocols as a means of rendering the politically engaged poet irrelevant.

Jarrell communicates his frustration with the poet's obscurity in the long poem "A Conversation with the Devil," which begins with a lament for his work's lack of audience:

Indulgent, or candid, or uncommon reader  
—I've some: a wife, a nun, a ghost or two—  
If I write for anyone, I wrote for you;  
So whisper, when I die, *we was too few*:  
Write over me (if you can write; I hardly knew)  
That I—that I—but anything will do,  
I'm satisfied.... And yet—

And yet, you *were* too few. (*Complete Poems* 29)

The poem begins from the perspective of a poet looking back on his artistic achievement, of which he is proud, though disappointed that his readers, amongst whom he counts "a wife, a nun, a ghost or two," were "too few." As the poem progresses, he is confronted by the voice of the Devil as it filters into his "heart / or else my belly—some poor empty part" (29). He then recalls being tempted by the Devil to enter into a poetic vocation.

—How can I forget?—EACH POEM GUARANTEED  
A LIE OR PERMANENTLY IRRELEVANT.  
(I had only to give credit to "my daemon";  
Say, confidentially, "dictated by the devil.") (*Complete Poems* 29)

Jarrell's sarcastic tone frames the Devil's temptation as an advertising slogan and thereby reveals a link between temptation and capitalist consumption. The slogan, while promising to "FURNISH POEMS AND READERS" for the aspiring poet, suggests that

such rewards come at the expense of poetic virtuosity. Jarrell's play here signifies that poetry must not be reduced to the level of mass cultural commodity even if the poems are "permanently irrelevant." Selling out, for the speaker, is akin to selling his soul to the Devil and therefore compromising his morals and integrity for the sake of gaining productivity and a readership.

While the poet refuses this bargain with the Devil in order to pursue a life of poetic integrity, he is forced to realize that in a contemporary capitalist culture, where he has "Few readers," his words have little relevance. As the Devil points out, the poet's cultural irrelevance means that the Devil no longer has any need to tempt him. As he says to the poet,

*It's odd that you've never guessed: I'm through.  
To tempt, sometimes, a bored anachronism  
Like you into—but why should I say what?  
To stretch out by the Fire and improvise:  
This pleases me, now there's no need for me.  
Even you must see I'm obsolescent.  
A specialist in personal relations,  
I valued each of you at his own worth.  
You had your faults; but you were bad at heart.  
I disliked each life, I assure you, for its own sake.  
—But to deal indifferently in life and death;  
To sell, wholesale, piecemeal, annihilation;  
To—I will not go into particulars—*

*This beats me. (Complete Poems 32)*

The anachronistic nature of the poet's vocation means that the Devil no longer needs to tempt him. The Devil recognizes that in commodity culture the obscurity of poetry means that it can no longer influence individuals to act, and therefore loses relevance as a tool in the Devil's hands. In fact, the power of commodity culture has grown so great that it has made the Devil himself obsolete. Whereas he once attempted to seduce individuals by employing the strategies of advertising, he is now overpowered by a capitalist culture that reduces individuality to the level of conformist mass. In his day, the Devil "valued each [individual] at his own worth" and "disliked each life ... for its own sake." Now, he is defeated by a postwar ideology that deals "indifferently in life and death" and sells "wholesale, piecemeal, annihilation." Jarrell here satirically suggests that a political culture that demonstrates an indifference towards its citizens as individuals, either through statistical analysis, homogenizing politics or through the "annihilation" it courts in a geopolitical nuclear arms race, is worse than the classical conception of the Devil himself.

What the Devil's obsolescence really demonstrates here is a shift in the concept of individual identity in midcentury culture. It works to corroborate Adorno and Horkheimer's claim that

The fallen nature of modern man cannot be separated from social progress. On the one hand the growth of economic productivity furnishes the conditions for a world of greater justice; on the other hand it allows the technical apparatus and the social groups which administer it a disproportionate superiority to the rest of the population. The individual is

wholly devalued in relation to the economic powers, which at the same time press the control of society over nature to hitherto unsuspected heights. Even though the individual disappears before the apparatus which he serves, that apparatus provides for him as never before. (*Dialectic of Enlightenment* xiv)

Adorno and Horkheimer also frame the incursion of commodity culture in Biblical terms, suggesting that social progress has cooperated in the “fallen nature of modern man.”

Their argument confirms the sentiment expressed by the Devil in Jarrell’s poem: the capitalist economy dehumanizes the individual; at the same time, it provides for the individual’s needs in unprecedented terms. This paradoxical formula helps to contain dissent and ensures conformity to, and complicity with, a capitalist ideology whose influence even the Devil can no longer circumvent. By pointing out that the poet in the poem is “anachronistic,” and therefore no longer worth tempting, the Devil alludes to poetry’s inert social status—it no longer carries the social weight to oppose the forces of containment effectively because, within Jarrell’s New Critical environment, it is contained by specialist protocols within a disciplined institutional paradigm.

However, the containment of poetry’s political potency is an issue that involves more than the rise of mass culture or an increase in poorly written poetry. Rather, it suggests complicity between poetic discourse and the language of dominant culture. As Adorno and Horkheimer argue, in contemporary mass culture “there is no longer any available form of linguistic expression which has not tended toward accommodation to dominant currents of thought; and what a devalued language does not do automatically is proficiently executed by societal mechanisms” (*Dialectic of Enlightenment* xii). From Jarrell’s perspective, New Criticism’s containment of heterogeneous textual tensions

exemplifies the manner in which linguistic expression has accommodated to containment ideology. Therefore, for Jarrell there is more at stake in New Criticism's lack of historical engagement than a debate about critical reading practices; rather, he sees the institutionalization of literary criticism and its concurrent emphasis on the containment of dialectical tension as thoroughly grounded in Cold War politics. Its insistence upon the importance of reading ambiguity, irony, and paradox functions as a schematic for containing the geopolitical ambiguities of the era.

Such a perspective, as Mark Walhout contends, points to a more explicit link between New Criticism and Cold War ideology:

It would be wrong ... to conclude that the only potential cultural role of the New Criticism was to sublimate Cold War anxiety and self-doubt.... For this conclusion takes no account of the fact that aesthetic experience was conceived to be an experience of ambiguity and irony, the very terms used to describe America's geopolitical situation. A second and more significant function of the New Criticism ... was precisely to educate liberal consciousness regarding ambiguity and irony, to teach Americans what they needed to know and what attitude they required in order to act effectively in a Cold War world. (868)

Walhout points out a paradox in New Critical discourse: while its emphasis on the organic, formally contained text gestures towards apoliticism, formal containment was itself a thoroughly political gesture. The institutionalization of New Critical discourse worked, whether its progenitors intended it to or not, to educate American students and intellectuals in the specifics of Cold War idiom. By learning to contain and homogenize

the ambiguities, paradoxes, and ironies in literary texts, students and intellectuals, by extension, learned to contain and homogenize the tensions of geopolitical discourse.

On a cultural level, New Critical protocols helped contain anxiety by teaching students to read cultural texts at a remove from actual events. On a political level, as Walhout observes, it equipped individuals with the skills necessary for homogenizing dialectical tensions:

The problem of Cold War foreign policy offers a concrete instance of how New Critical teaching fulfilled perceived cultural and geopolitical needs. Kissinger pointedly outlined the twofold dilemma of American diplomacy. On the one hand, he observed, we fail to comprehend 'the ambiguity inherent in Communist terminology.' Thus we are unaware, for example, that 'the concepts of war and peace, seemingly so unambiguous, have been turned into tools of Soviet political warfare.' 'That peace can be achieved by war, that a war by a classless society is a form of peace—these are paradoxes dear to the heart of dialectically-trained Leninists,' but completely foreign to the 'empiricist' liberal mind.... On the other hand, Kissinger declared, 'the major weakness of U.S. diplomacy has been the insufficient attention given to the symbolic aspect of foreign policy.' We conceive of negotiation as 'a struggle to find formulas to achieve agreement' rather than 'a struggle to capture the symbols which move humanity'. (869)

In the rhetoric of Henry Kissinger and other American policy analysts a major issue in Cold War containment was the failure of the American liberal intellectual to effectively interpret the symbols, ironies, and ambiguities of Soviet policy. New Criticism, wilfully

or not, helped rectify this problem. By offering a methodology for interpreting such a symbolic discourse, it played a role in the containment of Cold War anxiety: “Far from representing a simple aesthetic asceticism, it popularized the skills of language analysis necessary for the successful conduct of geopolitics in the Cold War and for the restoration of American spiritual superiority in the nuclear age” (Walhout 870).

The institutional nature of New Critical analysis, by removing literature from the social sphere, meant that such a connection between reading practices and Cold War politics remained largely undisclosed for scholars of literature and practitioners of New Critical poetics alike. As RC Lewontin, Noam Chomsky,<sup>52</sup> and others have pointed out, “The Cold War was responsible for an unprecedented and explosive expansion of the academy” (Lewontin 2). America’s new desire to assert its dominance meant that it had to invest in research and development strategies that would help it achieve its goals. For this reason, funding for scientific, economic, and social research increased dramatically in the postwar years and led to the expansion of academic institutions. This expansion, while focused primarily on scientific and economic disciplines, nevertheless filtered into humanities disciplines such as English, creating collusion between Cold War politics and the institutionalization of literary studies. The fact that New Criticism advocated for the importance of the institutionalization of literature indicates that its desire for aesthetic autonomy was compromised by the sanctions implicit in participation with publicly funded research initiatives, many of which, as Walhout argues, led to the development of reading principles that were applicable to Cold War cultural epistemology.

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<sup>52</sup> See *The Cold War & The University* (Noam Chomsky et al.).

While it is difficult to argue that New Critics overtly recognized their contribution to Cold War cultural discourses, Jarrell does appear to have understood the political consequences of a poetics that attempts to contain cultural ambiguities, paradoxes, and ironies. As the “taste of the age,” New Critical discourse failed to recognize the inherently heterogeneous nature of poetry. New Criticism’s status as an instrument of liberal education therefore amounts to a failure that is at once poetic *and* political. Jarrell’s dismissal of the jargonistic, socially disengaged criticism common to the period reveals his contempt for “an age of criticism” in which “There has never been ... so much good criticism ... written—or so much bad; and both of them have become, among ‘serious readers,’ astonishingly or appallingly influential” (*Poetry and the Age* 72). The point, for Jarrell, is that in spite of the fact that a large amount of criticism is being written, much of it admittedly “good,” far too little of it engages the political context from which it emerges.

The New Critical project therefore threatened to domesticate literature’s political potential in the same way that containment culture sought to domesticate and homogenize political difference. As Nelson Hathcock observes,

To Jarrell, the stymied poet, this process began to seem like a cultural ‘desertification.’ Both bomb and debased cultural production effectively obliterated the urge toward higher standards of human definition, distinction, and achievement. Rather, this culture promoted equalizing and standardizing, ‘dumbing’ everything into rubble. (121)

Against the academic hegemony of New Criticism, Jarrell argues for a properly dialectical criticism and poetics, one capable of acting as a form of mediation between the

individual and the social order: “When poetry mediates between the individual and a contradictory social order . . . it needs to use dialectical methods, methods that are not logical in the ordinary sense, since ordinary logical methods mediate only to one side of the contradiction” (“Levels and Opposites” 280-281). For Jarrell, the loss of a properly dialectical critique had dangerous consequences for the individual, ones related directly to a lack of political engagement.

The homogenizing trends of New Criticism, by participating (tacitly or not) in the discourse of Cold War containment, sanctioned an aesthetic participation that elided issues directly related to individual autonomy by creating a mode of perception that failed to account for opposing irreconcilable tensions. The estrangement of poetry from social engagement was disguised by New Criticism’s own discursive system, one that challenged individuals to pursue literary knowledge by theorizing abstract, disengaged formal principles. As Jarrell realized, such a pursuit, within the institutionalized literary academy, afforded only the illusion of intellectual autonomy while divorcing intellectual critique from an American sociocultural environment that saw unprecedented incursions upon individuality and privacy by state apparatuses. As such, the intellectual pursuits of New Criticism, while conducted in the interest of knowledge, nevertheless resemble the conformist culture which, in Jarrell’s terms, was afforded the illusion of autonomy through an increasingly invasive consumer culture.

Feeling trapped within an indifferent cultural paradigm is one of Jarrell’s primary themes. In poems such as “The Woman at the Washington Zoo,” for example, Jarrell’s subject sees herself akin to the caged animals: “Kept safe here, knowing not death, for death— / Oh, bars of my own body, open, open!” (*Complete Poems* 215). This image of

containment reflects Jarrell's own sense of obscurity as a poet in an age of criticism: while he recognizes his domestication as a poet in the political sphere, poetry's institutionalization prevents him from breaking back into life, as Robert Lowell demanded. While Jarrell's poems that deal explicitly with domestic issues function as implicit critiques of the psychological ramifications of existence within containment culture, his most incisive, dialectically motivated poems are those that deal explicitly with war and its human consequences.

In several of his war poems, including "Eighth Air Force," Jarrell challenges ideological constructs of reality by emphasizing the dehumanizing relationships between soldier and state. The poem, like most of his war poems, is set in an Air Force environment:

The other murderers troop in yawning;  
Three of them play Pitch, one sleeps, and one  
Lies counting missions, lies there sweating  
Till even his heart beats: One; One; One.  
*O murderers! ... Still, this is how it's done. (Complete Poems 143)*

Here Jarrell starkly characterizes airmen as murderers. Their "yawning" indicates that participation in the military environment has become naturalized. No longer are they concerned with questions of ethics; instead, they have grown bored with life and death, a notion that signifies a conscious awareness of their own insignificance. Three of the airmen adopt an existential posture and accept their fate as agents of the State. They appease anguish with leisure, playing a game of "Pitch" that reflects the chance and chaos of flying into battle. A fourth airman, however, grapples with the concept of conforming

to an ethically problematic State consciousness. Counting the missions he has flown, he “lies there sweating / Till even his heart beats.” The fact he has flown several missions indicates that he is one of the “murderers” that Jarrell’s speaker refers to. His sweat conveys a sense of anxiety related to his actions, one that isolates a tension between his function as an individual and his duty to the State. Jarrell represents that friction with the paratactic juxtaposition of “even” in the line “Till even his heart beats.” On one level, the “even” suggests that by lying in his bed sweating, he is able to calm himself and restore an “even” heartbeat. The mechanical nature of his heartbeat conveys the sense that his life is rhythmically falling in line with State ideology, is beating its militaristic solidarity with the totalizing gestures of State authority. This solidarity is signified by the militaristic refrain of “One; One; One.” The italicized refrain of “*O murderers*” evokes the idea that he is at least aware of the ethical implications of his actions; however, the ellipsis that precedes the capitulative “Still, this is how it’s done,” demonstrates that he defers to the State’s moral authority. The ellipsis, by concealing specifically what the pilot is referring to, represses the atrocious reality, or Real real, of war. It evokes the ideological veneer of Symbolic reality that the pilot recognizes he must conform to.

This conformity to a violent and powerful ideology leaves him stranded in a Symbolic reality that he is incapable of transcending. His scenario resembles that of the female protagonist in “Next Day.” Jarrell asserts the complex struggle to invoke a dialectical tension between the individual and State, which recurs without resolution in the poem’s final stanza:

I have suffered, in a dream, because of him,  
Many things; for this last saviour, man,

I have lied as I lie now. But what is lying?

Men wash their hands, in blood, as best they can:

I find no fault in this just man. (143)

As with the narrator in "Next Day," the airman feels caught in a dream, as though he is separated from the trauma of reality. His lies, as he recognizes, have been told in order to preserve the sanctity of mankind. However, he intrinsically recognizes the paradox implicit in lying to preserve sanctimony, a paradox that again presents him with an ethical dilemma. This dilemma leads him to question the nature of lying. Lying, like truth, becomes a matter of perspective; while it may pose problems on the level of individual subjectivity, it is justifiable if told in service of the State. This tension between lying to the self and lying in the service of State ideology is resolved for the narrator by repressing his individual ethical inclinations. This repression amounts to a deadening of his moral conscious, one that homonymically equates the idea of "lying" with lying in State, or death. The pilot recognizes that "Men wash their hands, in blood, as best they can" and is able to "find no fault in this just man." Jarrell here puns on the word "pilot" to conjure the Biblical Pontius Pilate who, in the Gospel of Matthew, washes his hands of Christ and sends him to his death. Jarrell's speaker, like the soldier who "lies counting missions" as his heart begins to beat into solidarity with State ideology, recognizes that his identity is a product of a Symbolic real that is beyond his control, and that contravenes Judeo-Christian ethics. It posits America as a cruel Roman Empire that slaughters innocent civilians in the service of its own political interests. Jarrell therefore suggests that American political ideology betrays the very Christian ethos upon which Western

democratic morality is founded. The pilot, like his government, is forced to wash his hands of the deaths that his wartime actions as an agent of the State have caused.

By subordinating his ethical considerations to the authority of the State, the narrator relinquishes his autonomy. By drawing attention to the manner in which the dialectical tension faced by his narrator is contained by the authority of the State, Jarrell demonstrates how containment culture domesticates individual anxiety by promoting conformity to a specific system of thought. Therefore, Jarrell's military poems, by analyzing the relationship between individuality and conformity, reflect the systematic containment of difference promoted by New Critical discourse.

Jarrell demonstrates this parallel in poems such as "Siegfried," which updates the Wagnerian narrative from the perspective of contemporary military discourse:<sup>53</sup>

So the bombs fell: through clouds to the island,  
The dragon of maps; and the island's fighters  
Rose from its ruins, through blind smoke, to the flights—  
And fluttered smashed from the machinery of death.  
Yet inside the infallible invulnerable  
Machines, the skin of steel, glass, cartridges,  
Duties, responsibilities, and—surely—deaths,  
There was only you. (*Complete Poems* 149-150)

Here Jarrell's speaker conveys the bomber in its "infallible invulnerable ... skin of steel."

However, inside the dragon-like machine capable of dramatic ruin sits an individual,

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<sup>53</sup> "Siegfried" is the third opera in Wagner's *Ring Cycle*. It tells the classic German story of the hero Siegfried, whose sense of fearlessness and invulnerability allows him to slay a dragon and rescue the beautiful Brunnhilde.

thinking consciousness. The contrast between the second-person pronoun “you” and the litany of military-industrial imagery that rises from the site of mass destruction caused by the detonation of the bombs emphasizes the limited status of autonomous decision-making within an environment of military rulers. From the “ruins” of a civilization under attack rises, through blinding smoke, the individual, autonomous fighter alone within his “responsibilities.” The blinding smoke figures as the veneer of a militaristic State ideology. Once the fighter has risen beyond it, he recognizes the direct correlation between his actions and the ruin taking place below. The bomber must therefore ultimately share the responsibility for the consequences of his actions, if not politically, at least psychologically.

As Thomas Travisano points out, the military-industrial structure that Jarrell conjures here “represents an impersonation of modernist infallibility—if one understands modernism in its ordering, system-building sense—that might extend to political myth-makers and the constructors of massive military machines as well as to poetic systematizers” (178). In other words, the military-industrial desire to contain a system that occludes dissent and that attempts to control the construction of meaning, or myth-making, within its own closed ideological system, resembles the literary containment that emerges in the form of modernist New Critics. Jarrell’s poem metaphorically evokes this link between poetic and political containment by emphasizing the manner in which each system stresses ideological conformity above individual autonomy or ethics. While evoking military prowess and dominance in order to symbolize a sense of modernist infallibility, Jarrell simultaneously employs a dialectical style to convey it as a system that is wholly fallible: from both a literary and sociopolitical perspective, the

consequences of attempting to divorce historical and instrumental action from personal responsibility are shown to land squarely on the shoulders of the individual. As Travisano notes, "There is no one else on the scene to blame or hold responsible for the killing described. For in this setting merely to survive and fulfill one's assigned responsibilities is to become both 'killer and victim'" (178).

It is this tension between "killer and victim" that Jarrell exploits. His bomber, as a metaphor for the individual denied agency within a contained military environment, is victimized not only by his inability to act as an autonomous agent, but also by the psychological trauma that corresponds with the consequences of his actions. The recognition that behind the "Duties, responsibilities, and—surely—deaths" is a sovereign individual consciousness, exposes the paradox of acting in a manner that contravenes ethical obligations and perpetuates victimization. The dialectical strategy employed by Jarrell extends beyond the formalist boundaries erected by New Criticism in order to challenge the political paradoxes and cultural ambiguities of the era. Instead of trying to contain these elements within a controlled system, Jarrell posits the Cold War self as the locus for the negotiation of difference within a conformist culture. In this manner, Jarrell's work resembles that of his midcentury contemporaries: each transfers the trauma of the times to the individual mind and body, where it can be read as symptomatic of a repressive political era.

Jarrell's dialectical poetics highlights the tensions between Cold War ideological discourse and the construction of individual identity. For Jarrell, as for Schwartz, poetry acts as a source of mediation. Its ability to engage the cultural and political sphere on both Symbolic and Real levels allows it to challenge and deconstruct the interpellation of the

individual as a Cold War subject. It is for this reason that being aware of not only political, but also literary, ideology is of primary importance for Jarrell and Schwartz. Recognizing the subtle interstices between the two allows the poets to maintain a vigorous critique of poetry's trend towards institutionalization and concurrent muting as a tool of political dissent. For Jarrell and Schwartz, as for Plath, Sexton, Lowell, and Berryman, the cultivation of this dissent begins with an exploration of subjective identity in an age of surveillance and conformity. In the work of these "confessional" poets, the ethical formulation of social, political, and poetic discourse demands a breaking out of the standardized positions advocated by containment reality and back into the contingencies, uncertainties, and paradoxes of postwar experience.

## **Epilogue**

On March 12, 1949, John Berryman delivered his acceptance speech for the National Book Award, which he won for his second volume of *Dream Songs, His Toy, His Dream His Rest*. Spoken in his characteristic mix of shyness, histrionics, and intense literary passion, Berryman's address offered insight into the enigmatic methodologies behind both his breakthrough long poem *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet* and *The Dream Songs*:

I set up the Bradstreet poem as an attack on *The Waste Land*: personality, and plot—no anthropology, no Tarot pack, no Wagner. I set up *The Dream Songs* as hostile to every visible tendency in both American and English poetry—in so far as the English have any poetry nowadays. The aim was the same in both poems: the reproduction or invention of the motions of a human personality, free and determined, in one case feminine, in the other masculine. Critics are divided as to the degree of my success in both cases. Long may they rave! (qtd. in Haffenden 352)

Ever-conscious of his own place in literary history, Berryman jokingly anticipates the critical ravings (the double-meaning of which was not lost on the poet) of studies such as this one. Yet his positioning of his work as hostile towards the American and British traditions that precede it demonstrates his intellectual awareness of the need for a new poetic methodology capable of responding to the heightened psychological pressures and increased standardization of Cold War America.

Berryman's speech touches several of the key issues addressed in this dissertation. Most notably, it positions midcentury "confessional" poetry as an oppositional discourse that is aimed at reclaiming "human personality, free and determined" from the

objectification of political and literary containment. The autobiographic aesthetic of midcentury poetry is one that saw the reclamation of personality as an inherently political gesture, one capable of implicitly destabilizing the totalizing gestures of postwar capitalist ideology in an age threatened by state-sanctioned surveillance and nuclear annihilation.

By investigating the autobiographic poetics of these six midcentury poets, this study has shown how thoroughly invested their writing is in the preservation of personality against the conformity of containment America. At a time when the spread of containment ideology extended its repressive reach into nearly every facet of American life, a poetics grounded in personality was a final vestige for the cultivation of political dissent. Although for these autobiographic poets dissent is muted slightly by being cached in a personal metaphoric, close readings of the poems reveal a body of work thoroughly responsive to Cold War political ideology.

For Berryman and Lowell, witnessing the epistemological nothingness at the core of atomic America without inviting the gaze of state surveillance meant locating new methods of articulating psychological fracture. In Berryman's case, this meant cultivating a violent, paratactic style that enacts the self's disintegration within a fractured sociopolitical infrastructure. For Lowell, it meant drawing correlations between the madness of the split atom and his own psychological fission beneath the spectre of nuclear oblivion. Sexton used the abject self to challenge constructs of psychological normalcy in the Cold War climate, while Plath sought a sovereignty beyond containment in the ephemeral Terror of the instant of death. Schwartz posited the psychological quotidian as a counterdiscourse to the cultural repression of containment, while Jarrell called for a dialectical materialist poetics capable of opposing the hegemony of politically

disengaged New Critical protocols. Each of these six poets recognized, in their own way, their implication in a hyper-politicized, and ideologically imposing, Cold War culture.

Autobiographic poetics are evidence not of a poetic recoil from the political realm, but of poetry's ability to find unique ways to respond to the pressures and contingencies of a repressive era. By poeticizing the self, these authors have demonstrated the negative, often destructive effects Cold War ideology had on individual identity and the constraints it placed on autonomy. As authors writing at the end of the modernist period, they anticipated, and often fulfilled, postmodern aesthetic concerns by rejecting the authority of ideology and refiguring identity as a constituent and heterogeneous plurality. Their interest in the preservation of civil liberties echoed more overt appeals against repression made by the Beat poets, and perhaps most notably by such African American poets as Langston Hughes, Claude McKay, Gwendolyn Brooks, and Amiri Baraka. Their concern with the politics of repression and the spectre of oblivion was taken up in many forms by a generation of postmodern poets—including John Ashbery, Denise Levertov, James Merrill, and W.S. Merwin, to name only a few—who also sought ways of responding to urgent political crises in their poems. The legacy of midcentury autobiographic poetry is visible in the mix of structural experimentation, political investigation, and personal exploration common to the postmodern aesthetic.

While the Cold War is now nearly twenty years gone, the legacy of political repression that it inaugurated lives on in new and more insidious forms, manifested in such visible American legislature as the Patriot Act. In an age of expansive technological innovation and mass consumption, the obscurity of poetry predicted by Randall Jarrell seems truer than ever. For this reason, the political aesthetics of these poets remains as

relevant and urgent today as it was during the early Cold War era. Berryman predicted the complicated place his poems would occupy in the canon, and critics remain “divided” today as they did then. Perhaps the most important thing is that they continue to “rave” about this contentious group of writers so that their autobiographic politics will continue to offer insight into the pressures political ideologies place on the contemporary subject.

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