

**“I AM MADE BY HER, AND UNDONE”: MOTHER-SON RELATIONSHIPS IN
CONFESSIONAL AND POST-CONFESSIONAL LYRIC**

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DECLARATION

An adaption of the section on Allen Ginsberg in “‘Freaked in the Moon Brain’: Ginsberg and Bidart Confessing Crazy Mothers” was presented at two conferences: Pacific Ancient and Modern Language Association (PAMLA), Honolulu, Hawaii, November 2010; and *Writings of Intimacy in the 20th and 21st Centuries*, Leistershire, England, Sept. 2010.

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation offers close readings of a representative of poems by male confessional and post-confessional writers. I examine poems by men whose construction of the mother-son relationship sheds light on the notions of confession and poetic identity. These readings are informed by psychoanalysis, primarily the work of Freud, D.W. Winnicott, Christopher Bollas, Jessica Benjamin, and Adam Phillips. I argue that the term “confessional poetry” although often critiqued is useful in highlighting the psychological dimensions of the mode and in locating the writers within a literary-historical period that begins with the publication of Robert Lowell’s *Life Studies* (1959) and marks a shift towards a colloquial, personal, and deviant poetics. By looking at one aspect of confessional poetry, the writer’s fundamental relationship to his mother, I argue for a rethinking of the seemingly masculine poetics of Robert Lowell and John Berryman and the gay sensibility of Allen Ginsberg. I discuss the ways in which male poets collaborate with their mothers, represent motherhood as transcending gender and biology, and suggest that mothers and ideas about mothers play into poetic self-fashioning. Examining cross-gender relationships and alliances as represented in a handful of poems has implications on theories of poetic influence, which tend to highlight either same-sex collaboration or, in Harold Bloom’s conception, father-son rivalry. This dissertation contributes to an understanding of confessional writing as self-exploratory, uncertain of its own status, and mediated by analysts, parents, and texts, rather than as titillating self-disclosure.

Chapter 1 examines two mother poems by first-generational confessional poets, John Berryman and Robert Lowell, and applies Jessica Benjamin’s model of intersubjectivity to explore the poet’s identification with and differentiation from the mother figure. I consider Lowell’s acknowledgment of his mother’s identity prior to his own existence; in contrast, Berryman asserts the poet’s need to banter with the mother and so discover the writing self as paradoxically reactionary and autonomous. In Chapter 2, I suggest that Allen Ginsberg’s “Kaddish” and Frank Bidart’s “Confessional” represent the poet-son’s desire to cure the mother’s madness; both writers depict soul-making and soul-searching as essential to identity and autobiography. As I consider the literary-historical place of these two poets, who anticipate and respond to *Life Studies*, I highlight their shared preoccupations with madness, crisis, and intertextuality. Chapter 3 explores poems by two post-confessional writers, Robert Hass and C.K. Williams, which revise the literary mode, and bring to the forefront the fictionality of autobiography, the trope of the maternal body, and the limitations of the child-parent, confessor-confessant, and victim-perpetrator dichotomies. In Chapter 4 and the coda, I discuss Thom Gunn’s transatlantic response to confessional poetry, and examine how his poems about his mother are at odds with his critical rejection of American confessional verse.

ABBREVIATIONS

<i>BC</i>	<i>Boss Cupid</i> by Thom Gunn
<i>CPAG</i>	<i>Collected Poems of Allen Ginsberg: 1947-1997</i>
<i>CCK</i>	<i>Collected Poems of C.K. Williams</i>
<i>CPR</i>	<i>Collected Prose of Robert Lowell</i>
<i>CPRL</i>	<i>Collected Poems of Robert Lowell</i>
<i>CPTG</i>	<i>Collected Poems of Thom Gunn</i>
<i>DS</i>	<i>The Dream Songs</i> by John Berryman
<i>IWN</i>	<i>In the Western Night: Collected Poems: 1965-90</i> by Frank Bidart
<i>SUW</i>	<i>Sun Under Wood</i> by Robert Hass

INTRODUCTION

“WHEN EVERYTHING AND ANYTHING SUDDENLY SEEMED MATERIAL FOR
POETRY”

In a letter to Robert Lowell, Elizabeth Bishop remarks upon the major poetic shift seen in his “family group” of poems which would be published in *Life Studies* (1959): “They all also have that sure feeling, as if you’d been in a stretch. . . when everything and anything suddenly seemed material for poetry—or not material, seemed to *be* poetry, and all the past was illuminated in long shafts here and there, like a long-awaited-for sunrise” (*Words* 246).¹ Bishop implicitly reflects on the universality and expansiveness of life-writing by which “everything and anything” and “all the past” define the personal narrative, rather than interiority or subjective experience. I argue that part of what gives Lowell’s family narrative its universal appeal are its psychological and archetypal underpinnings. Autobiographical poetry doesn’t begin with Lowell; yet in his time, the tropes of self-analysis, the psychoanalytic dialogue, and the case study changed conceptions of the self into a subject which “seemed to *be* poetry,” to borrow Bishop’s phrase. In the confessional lyric of Lowell and his contemporaries, the self, like a complex character in a Shakespeare play or a neurotic patient in a case study, is familiar and unfamiliar: the first-person “I” is just as evasive and malleable, closed and open, as any other subject. Appraising one’s family, lovers, analyst, and childhood as “material for poetry” erupts in a particular way after the 1959 publication of *Life Studies*.

The subject of this dissertation is mother-son relationships in confessional and post-confessional poetry, and it foregrounds complex discussions about poetics: artistic identity, relational autobiography, and collaboration. Snapshots and vignettes of family

¹ In her letter dated December 14, 1957, Bishop refers to the following poems: “Commander Lowell,” “Terminal Days at Beverly Farms,” “My Last Afternoon with Uncle Devereux Winslow,” and “Sailing Home from Rapallo.”

life that feature in confessional poems, for example, highlight the complex ways in which family history is composed of projections, mediated knowledge, and mysteries. Lowell's "91 Revere Street" voices an ambivalent complaint about the child's vulnerability and dependence on his parents: "I felt drenched in my parents' passions" (*CPRL* 127). The angle is ambivalent because the poet seizes upon his parent's conflict and desire as part of his own coming into being. Conversely, we discover how limited one's individuality is, given the haunting and imprints of family, lovers, and fellow poets, and, finally, how "heart-breaking" Lowell's work is because of the other people involved: three marriages and various love affairs, the lives and deaths of parents, conversations with literary friends, elegies for suicides Sylvia Plath and John Berryman, and the invocation of the poet's second wife and their daughter Harriet through epistles, apostrophe, and quotation.² Confessional poetry, since *Life Studies* commenced the term and the breakthrough, inspires discussion of whether one's story is really about the self or other people, and how these two subjects interact in complex ways, particularly when those others are intimately connected to the poet.

This dissertation focuses on two literary movements, confessional and post-confessional poetry. The first group includes the following poets, particularly their work in the late 1950s and early 60's: Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, Robert Lowell, John Berryman, Allen Ginsberg, and W.D. Snodgrass. The confessional poets approached subjects previously largely excluded from American poetry: intimate and sexual life, emotional wounds, family drama, and psychoanalysis. Elizabeth Gregory clearly defines the major characteristics of this poetry:

[It] draws on the poet's autobiography and is usually set in the first person. It makes a claim to forego personae and to represent an account of the poet's own feelings and circumstances, often by reference to names and scenarios linked to the poet. The work dwells on experiences generally prohibited expression by social convention: mental illness, intra-familial conflicts and resentments, childhood traumas, sexual transgressions and intimate feelings about one's body are its frequent concerns ("Confessing" 34).

² Helen Vendler says that Lowell wanted his work to be perceived as "heartbreaking" ("Last Days" 165).

New source material for new poetry emerged: familiar letters, unsent letters, transatlantic phone calls, diaries, family photographs, bedroom and living-room furniture, genealogy and ancestors, one's childhood home, personal anecdotes, dreams, and therapeutic sessions.

Though letters and "confession" feature certainly in both fiction and poetry in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, epistolary writing and confessional poetry are uniquely bound together in what Jo Gill calls the "confessional circuit of exchange" by which the audience "become[s] guilty by association [and]. . . made party to unwelcome insights and unexpected truths" ("Your Story" 71). Gill gives as examples Anne Sexton's *Words for Dr. Y.* (1978), which concerns the poet's lover and analyst and Lowell's *The Dolphin* (1976), which appropriates letters from his second wife Elizabeth Hardwick ("Your Story" 70). Focusing primarily on Ted Hughes' *Birthday Letters* (1998), addressed in the confessional mode to his first wife Sylvia Plath, Gill maintains that "the self-conscious use of the epistolary framework also works to foreground the potentially unsettling nature of confessional discourse. The letters function as a metonym for confessional writing more generally; they represent something private and indeterminate... made concrete and offered for public scrutiny" ("Your Story" 71). The confessional poets drew from their sources in different ways and for different purposes than Romantics, Modernists, or Victorians did. They consciously appropriated psychoanalytic and religious models to write their own histories, experimented with more relaxed poetic forms, and assumed that "my friends are your friends," inviting the reader to follow the life described in the poetry from one book to the next. During the same period, as we see in Ginsberg's case, the audience of poetry became more various and poetry readings reinforced the role of the audience as collaborator and interlocutor for a new poetry that defied high-brow, polite society.

Many critics have downplayed the poets' artistic skill, misreading the poets' artifice of authenticity or what Steven Gould Axelrod calls "the fiction of [being] non-fictional" (*Robert Lowell: Life* 112). The term "confessional," which M.L. Rosenthal coined in a 1959 review of *Life Studies*, continues to spark critical debate: Thomas Travisano famously abandons the paradigm because it implies a lack of craft, suggesting instead the "self-exploratory" mode ("The Confessional" 32-70) while Adam Kirsch also problematizes the term, suggesting the metaphor of the "wounded surgeon" to evince not only the poet's emotional wounds, but artistic, technical skill. Adapting this figure from T.S. Eliot's "East Coker," Kirsch argues, "The suffering that afflicted this group of poets becomes significant only because they examined it with the surgeon's rigor, detachment, and skill" (*Wounded Surgeon* xi).³ The wounded surgeon "evokes the resolve, not to say heroism, that these poets displayed by submitting their most intimate and painful experiences to the objective discipline of art" (*Wounded Surgeon* xi). Travisano and Kirsch are responding to seminal pieces such as Rosenthal's book review "Poetry as Confession" (1959) and Robert Phillips' *The Confessional Poets* (1973), which ultimately emphasized the poet's biography and openness about it rather than his or her craft. The post-confessional poets at times are at pains to separate themselves from what they see as "mere confessional poetry," that is, self-revelatory or titillating poetry. In the second chapter, I will look at Robert Howards' Introduction to Frank Bidart's *Golden State* (1973) as one such example. Denise Levertov writes of her "Olga Poems" from *The Sorrow Dance* (1967) that they are not "mere 'confessional' autobiography, but...a document of some historical value" (*Poems* 107). The term "mere confessional" misrepresents the work of the confessional poets, even if it attempts to make a distinction between Lowell and his imitators.

³ The poets in Kirsch's study include Sylvia Plath, Robert Lowell, John Berryman, Elizabeth Bishop, Randall Jarrell, and Delmore Schwartz.

The critic Alan Williamson, preferring the term “personal poetry” over confessional poetry, says he “allows himself” to use the term “confessional” only “when referring to specific literary conventions of the 1960s or to a thematic concern with disclosure or shock” (“I Am” 7). He thus perpetuates the negative connotation of confessional poetry as titillating and artless. Even when viewing the word in a positive light, when critics seek to unpack a confessional poem’s power, they locate it in the poet’s life, which usually includes hospitalizations, pills, and divorce—as if suffering in itself could produce poetry. In a different context, Bonnie Costello exposes the absurdity of reducing a poem to the poet’s biography; she wittily brushes aside criticism of Elizabeth Bishop that focuses on her lesbianism, alcoholism, asthma, eczema, and other health issues as the key to her poetry: “Bishop did not become a poet because she suffered from eczema” (“Bishop’s Impersonal” 338).

Despite the problems the confessional mode presents to critics, readers, and the poets themselves, and despite the various alternative paradigms that have been proposed, the term “confessional” still circulates in useful discussions of Mid-century and Post-war American poetry; furthermore, the term “post-confessional” signals the endurance, diversity, and malleability of confessional writing. Jo Gill, Elizabeth Gregory, Anne Hartman, Deborah Nelson, Jeffrey Gray, Gregory Orr, and Leigh Gilmore, use the concept of “confession” in regenerative ways.⁴ For example, Gill in discussing Hughes, comments on the key to all successful confessional writing: “*Birthday Letters* . . . should be understood as a confession which is as preoccupied with its own status, with its own discursive processes and with the nature and limitations of the mode as it is with the true story or ‘secret’ ostensibly at its heart” (“*Your Story*” 69). In Gill’s estimation, the speaker in Hughes’ volume “is a subject testing the nature and limits of self-knowledge” (68); she points to the “repeated use of questions and negative constructions” as evidence

⁴ See Gill (2006 and 2007), Gregory (2006), Hartman (2005), Nelson (2002), Gray (1993), Orr (1993), and Gilmore (2006).

that the speaker is “uncertain of his own history” and “make[s] no claim to privileged access or insight” (68).

In confessional poets, again and again, we see not only self-doubt, memory lapses, explicit self-invention, or mediated knowledge, but meditations on the limitations of language and its inability to represent trauma or bring us into deeper self-knowledge or understanding of intimate others. In John Berryman’s *The Dream Songs*, the persona Henry returns to the question of whether confession is a solvent or like salt to his emotional wounds. On the one hand, confessional speech seems to be purgative: in Song 332, Henry exclaims: “O there was a fearful loss,/ we could have talked the whole week’s journey through” (*DS* 354). Yet, the emphasis is on the conditional “could have.” Perhaps, precisely because there was such a “fearful loss,” the speaker doesn’t talk about it. Again and again, the speaker refuses self-revelatory speech: “No typewriters/ For I have much to open, I know immense/ troubles & wonders” (Song 83, *DS* 98); “I have said what I had to say” (Song 11, *DS* 13); and “I can’t say what I have in mind” (Song 37, *DS* 41). Berryman by no means accepts the premise that language is a cure for pain; *The Dream Songs* doesn’t imply that poetry is cathartic. Consequently, Berryman’s use of the conditional, hyperbole, litotes, personae, quotation, and multilayered voices adds to the experience of the poetry as deeply ambivalent about the rhetorical situation of a confessant pouring out his heart to his audience—of wearing his heart on his sleeve. The style fragments both form and performance, ensuring the reader’s encounter with the biographical material is always framed and mediated.

Michel Foucault’s work suggests the term’s continued relevance and broader contexts. Foucault notes, “The confession became one of the West’s most highly valued techniques for producing truth. We have. . . become a singularly confessing society” (*The History of Sexuality* 59). He explores a variety of contexts in which confessions are manufactured, extracted, ritualized, or offered: “One confesses in public and private, to one’s parents, one’s educators, one’s doctor, to those one loves; one admits to oneself, in

pleasure and pain, things that would be impossible to tell to anyone else” (59). His conclusion is that “Western man has become a confessing animal” (59). According to Foucault, confessional discourse always occurs in power relationships by which the interlocutor listens to the confessant and has the agency not only to weigh but to create truth, a truth that the confessant may be blind to. The confessant’s own concept of truth is “present, but incomplete, blind to itself” and can “only reach completion in the one who assimilate[s] and record[s] it” (66). Foucault also pinpoints the need for interpretation: “The revelation of confession had to be coupled with the decipherment of what it said. The one who listened was not simply the forgiving master... he was the master of truth” (66-67). Such an understanding of confession, one which draws attention to issues of power, truth-making, and collaboration, helps explain why the term still circulates in the 21st century. *The History of Sexuality*, however, offers a polemical critique of this confessional culture, representing it as a form of social control and surveillance. This is very different from the way I approach confessional poetry in this dissertation, yet Foucault’s concept of truth production is relevant to the poet’s self-telling.

Rather than view confession as an embarrassing acknowledgement of weakness—compromising self-revelation or the admission of guilt—we might consider the term’s positive associations with psycho-sexual development, self-examination, and identity formation. The Catholic rite of confession produces shame over supposed sins of the flesh; however, in confessional poetry, sex and sexuality fit within the framework of one’s history, unconscious thought, and self-concept. Additionally, many poets flout societal norms, reveling in their ability to make the reader experience discomfort, not only because the material is private, but because it is actually universal, however unacknowledged. Ginsberg invents the term “subjective archetypes” (“How *Kaddish*” 233) to discuss the way in which parental figures are familiar to all of us, even in their craziness and sexuality. Similarly, secular confession revises the religious practice of self-examination, by emphasizing the process as more exploratory than evaluative. Frank Bidart in particular

draws from the spiritual writings of Saint Augustine, representing his own family drama through Augustine's *Confessions*, which also handles the themes of soul-making, the mother-son relationship, and crisis within a cinematically intense narrative. In the context of confessional literature, we see at times self-vindication rather than the penitence or resolve one might associate with religious self-examination. Bidart appropriates the saint's mother issues to justify his anger towards his mother: "Augustine too/ had trouble with his mother" ("Confessional" *IWN* 58). Since Augustine essentially had to convert to Catholicism to placate his mother, Bidart suggests why a return to one-ness with the mother may not be desirable, or even possible. Bidart, while envying Augustine's spiritual union with his mother, maintains his individuality by his very refusal to forgive his mother and thus deny his own past feelings and his own history. Self-examination leads him in precisely the opposite direction as it led Augustine, yet Augustine plays a crucial role in the poet's process.

Finally, the word "confession" evokes the idea of a personal worldview, which becomes relevant to the poets' artistic identity. The term refers to "a formulary in which a church or body of Christians sets forth the religious doctrines which it considers essential" (*OED*). Thus, confession can be seen as "an authoritative declaration" or "a creed" (*OED*). In the best of confessional and post-confessional poetry, we witness the speaker in search of a psychological, artistic, genealogical, or religious identity. There is no one authoritative, self-defining confession or personal statement in the poems I will be looking at; however, many of the poets are seen in the process of repeating or reliving childhood experiences that form part of their identity. Confessional poetry dramatizes the play between the limitations and possibilities of the self—although one doesn't ask to be born in a particular time and place to specific parents, the poems I examine showcase the various dimensions of poetic self-fashioning, which involve other texts, ideas, and people. I use the term "confessional" in this dissertation to locate poetry within a literary-historical period, to emphasize the psychological dimension of confession, and to offer close

readings of individual poems concerned with issues of confession such as intimacy, guilt, sexuality, loss, and family drama.

Post-confessional poetry encompasses a looser group of writers who engaged directly with the confessional lyric and who began publishing between the late sixties and the eighties; among them are Stanley Plumly, Sharon Olds, Mark Doty, Robert Hass, C.K. Williams, and Frank Bidart. They respond in a variety of ways to some of the chief concerns of confessional writing, such as formative childhood experiences, sex, and parent-child relationships. However, post-confessional poetry emphasizes thought, discussion, and ideas more so than confessional poetry does. Jeffrey Gray argues that Frank Bidart creates “a ‘thinking’ voice”: “Bidart is able, in the face of wide readerly skepticism toward the confessional mode, to sustain what seems a figuration of pathos” and “he does so not through the language of affect but largely through that of thought, abstraction, discussion” (“Necessary Thought” 733, 718). He asserts that Bidart rescues confession by emphasizing the urgency and significance of philosophical thought in the midst of crisis. Yet, I would suggest that the cerebral poetry represents a continuation and revision of the confessional mode, rather than a wild departure. Reena Sastri defines Lowell’s *Day by Day* (1977) as “conversational thinking” (“Intimacy” 461). In post-confessional poetry, intertextuality represents the poet’s conversational reading.

It is striking that in many instances, post-confessional poets seek to move beyond the so-called self-absorption of confession, while actually engaging much more directly with intimate life. Stephen Berg’s *Shaving* (1998) takes its title from Lowell’s poem “Shaving” and includes a “Self-portrait” of Lowell (*Shaving* 70-71) as well as reflections on blow jobs, men in skirts, suicide, shrinks, and a moving elegy for the poet’s father (“In a New Leaf” 5-7). It wants to have it both ways: to flaunt societal norms as confessional verse did, yet manage to define itself as anti-confessional. According to the book jacket, Berg’s poems are not the ones you

read aloud in polite company. But what a refreshment that is, given the gentility and restraint in American poetry.... There has been a justly strong reaction against the Confessional, suicidal poetry of the Sixties. But Berg's work, while deeply autobiographical, is not confessional. It is meditative, 'metaphysical': it presents profound psychic knots and tries to untie them or at least show us their shape... *Shaving* is more presentational and objective (a la Chekhov) than anything by Lowell, Plath, or Sexton. The self is certainly a similar amphitheater for Berg, but it isn't inexorably at center-stage; its sympathies and boundaries are wider. And it is this expansiveness (precisely what is lacking in Confessional poetry) that is so exhilarating.

I argue, however, that confessional writing is "presentational and objective (a la Chekhov)," a fact any reader of Lowell's "91 Revere Street" would acknowledge—the sense of place, the idiosyncratic characters, the eye for odd, striking detail, and the ear for a character's hyperbolic language and perception of reality are all absorbed "a la Chekhov" and transformed in *Life Studies*. The claims for Berg's uniqueness here, like that of other writers emerging after confession, depend upon straw man fallacies, which travesty confessional verse as "suicidal poetry" and navel-gazing.

Confessional poetry had already addressed the ways in which personal writing can embrace objectivity through journalistic narrative details, character studies, and intertextuality, as well as engagement with political, psychological, or religious thought. In contrast to Berg, Stanley Plumly notes the continuity between first generation confessional poets and his own work. In an interview with David Biespiel, he is the only poet-critic to notice Ginsberg's understatement and connect it to the otherness of post-confessional writing:

I feel that there's a certain power in being conservative with my presence, that that power gives me not just permission to speak more absolutely, but permission to see with a more philosophical eye, more latitude, that I can include more. I'm thinking about Ginsberg's "Howl." I think the only "I" to speak of in that poem is in the first line. It's the first word in part 1. And I don't know that it comes up after that, except in that moment when he refers to Carl Solomon. That was when I and maybe others misread Lowell. We thought that the poems were only autobiography--we took them too literally. In a way the best autobiography is all of that which is not you, but that which you have passed through, passed among, been within, you know what I mean. And I think the best autobiographies, in the most literal sense, real autobiographies, are those that are able to put the protagonist, the hero of the autobiography if you want, in a real world, filled, peopled, objectified, completely outside the self, so that the self becomes a kind of refraction of others ("Stanley Plumly").

In addition, I will argue in what follows that part of what makes “a real world” within a poet’s body of work are the ghosts of his or her parents.

Confessional poetry begins with Lowell’s relational self, a multi-generational cast of characters, and a conception of “all the past” as a universal experience of psychological pain. Although Bishop notes that *Life Studies* causes “everything and anything” to “be poetry” or appear to be, she is fascinated not only by Lowell’s new subject matter, but with the illusion he creates that one’s own life is inherently meaningful. It is the distinction of psychoanalysis that we can confer meaning to everyday dialogue, stray thoughts, and childhood. The lens through which *Life Studies* views the past is markedly Freudian. Lowell’s “family group” explores intimate relationships in a way analogous to psychoanalysis, by which “everything and anything” could matter, especially seemingly insignificant or half-remembered events. Freud claims, “Further investigation of these banal childhood memories has taught me that...an unsuspected wealth of meaning usually lies hidden behind their apparent harmlessness” (“Screen Memories” 546-547).

According to Marion Milner, psychoanalysis is “the means by which past experiences can be compared with and brought into relation to present ones” and, as such, the “vehicle of memory, recognition, judgement, [and] knowing” as well as “a substitute for the action in the external world” and a means of “conjuring up wish-fulfilments” (“1945: Some Aspects” 42). Milner declares psychoanalysis both a “form of knowing or interpreting experience” and a “substitute for action” (42). These dual functions of psychoanalysis correspond to the poetic project of writing one’s story; the Freudian poet invents her past by reflecting stories piece-meal, manipulating images to stand in for a traumatic memory, projecting desires onto others, and blurring the identities of child and adult.

I view psychoanalysis as integral to both the confessional poets themselves and their work. Lowell, Berryman, Plath, and Sexton discover two methods in what Adam

Phillips calls “the genre of self-telling” (“Notes” 66) or “autobiographical performance” (“Notes” 74): therapy and life-writing. Phillips points out the significant difference: “Psychoanalysis is self-telling to, and in the presence of, a particular other person, the analyst” (“Notes” 71). What is interesting about confessional poetry, as opposed to autobiography as Phillips describes it, is the presence of another person or more often, the present absence of the other. The mother’s role mirrors that of the analyst; both are co-authors in the poet’s self-telling.

Within the contexts of autobiography and psychoanalysis, the smallest detail from one’s childhood experience might shed light on one’s current sexual hang-ups, broken marriage, or inability to grieve. For Lowell and the confessional poets, Freudian ideas function not merely as isolated concepts like infantile sexuality, the death drive, the Oedipal complex. Rather, a Freudian framework opens up new possibilities for narrative, drawing on psychoanalytic models of free association, symbolism, and the tension between latent and manifest content within the poem. Freudian techniques could be applied to the poet’s self-analysis and case-studies of friends, lovers, or parents, to cast everyday conflicts in new ways. Fragments of everyday life, unconscious thought, and dreams shape one’s autobiography: childhood games, the sexual life of one’s parents, jokes, slips of the tongue, shame, phobias, or one’s associations to inanimate objects become more meaningful than dates and data. The task of the analyst in Freud’s description mirrors that of the confessional poet: “From this raw material—so to speak—we must produce what we want” (“Constructions in Analysis” 78). What both patient and analyst want, in Freud’s account, is to construct the patient’s previous history. In psychoanalysis, the patient is “supposed to be induced to remember something he has experienced and repressed” whereas the analyst is “to guess what has been forgotten, or more accurately, to construct it” (78). The raw material might consist of the patient’s dreams, narration, free association, and even lapses in his or her memory. Out of these

fragments, the analyst formulates “a reliable picture of the forgotten years of the patient’s life” (78). Out of comparable fragments, a poet creates a reliable fiction.

Adam Phillips, in another context, defines psychoanalysis as “a treatment [that] is itself about the possibility and, indeed, the value of biographical truth—psychoanalysis as the biography that is supposed to improve the biography” (“The Mirror”). In a similar way, psychoanalysis improves autobiographical poetry in the 20th century by providing a theory of selfhood that emphasizes sexuality, parent-child relationships, and early childhood. Lowell attests to the way psychoanalysis transforms the self into a “goldmine” for poetry; after spending two weeks with his newly widowed mother and “gulping” Freud, Lowell writes that he has become a Freudian, “a slavish covert”: “Every fault is a goldmine of discoveries—I am a walking goldmine—with ten (sinisterly) forgotten names or impressions to one I remember. It’s all too much (especially while staying with mother)” (*Letters* 200). For Lowell and other confessional poets, psychoanalysis includes Freud’s writings, the notion of “the talking cure” (Freud and Breuer 34), and the presence of the past—all of which are “at the center/ of how I think my life,” to borrow Frank Bidart’s phrasing (“Golden State” *IWN* 152). Helen Vendler adopts the term “Freudian lyric” to discuss John Berryman and Robert Lowell’s poetics, and I will discuss this further in the first chapter (“John Berryman” 32). Psychoanalysis was a key motor in generating the confessional lyric in the era of *Life Studies* and beyond.

It is worth remembering that the personal lyric of the 20th and 21st centuries was in fact a “long-awaited-for sunrise”: this dissertation begins with one instance of the breakthrough, the emergence of personal poems about one’s own mother. I will address a key, but neglected area of the confessional lyric: the male poet’s fundamental relationship to his mother, as represented in a handful of poems. Consider that earlier periods did not produce “mother poems,” that is, works which draw upon memories of the poet’s childhood, mediated knowledge of the mother’s girlhood and dating life, and the mother’s own sayings, inner thoughts, mental health, or death. American poetry of the late fifties

and early sixties, as practiced by Lowell, Berryman, and Ginsberg explores private life in the home; such intimate writing places the poet within his or her childhood home. The psychological space or experience of childhood haunts these poets, re-emerges in uncanny and new ways, and changes repeatedly. This dissertation will look at “mother poems” by male writers from the late 1950s to 2000. By “mother poem,” I refer to poems whose central concern is the mother-child relationship and the mother’s history. Some of the poems I look at are elegies for the poet’s mother. I argue that each of these mother poems addresses the triangular relationship between poet-child, mother, and language. In different accounts, the mother’s voice is linked to suicide, paranoia, the Muses, internal music, insanity, silence, argument, or interruption. Understanding the link between the mother’s and the poet’s voices sheds light on several aspects of the creative process: the importance of the past and the role of collaboration. First, the poets’ relational autobiographies reinforce Phillips’ insight that “family history shows up in one’s most intimate exchanges with other people. The lost—the literal and more figurative losses from one’s past—are never...quite as lost as one feared, or indeed hoped” (“The Lost” 254). Second, the poetry I examine suggests the mother’s presence, however internalized, in the poet’s intimate bonds, childhood memories, sense of home, colloquial speech, understanding of lyric itself, or in some cases, in his own experience of parenting.

Male poets deal with several aesthetic problems in writing about their mothers. In contrast to poems written by daughters, which have attracted more critical attention, men don’t literally relate to the mother’s knowingness about her physical potential to carry another life. Yet, this otherness is also an advantage. Adam Phillips writes, “There is, clearly, a kind of knowledge borne of the absence of experience” because “there is a freedom to imagine it”; there are ways in which “we know more about the experiences we don’t have than about the experiences we do have,” Phillips notes, recalling “Winnicott’s remark that only a man knows what it’s like to be a woman, and only a woman knows what it’s like to be a man” (“On Getting Away” 201). The poets I am discussing handle

the sex difference in a variety of ways; they authenticate their voice in this foreign yet familiar territory by creating a shared identity with the mother as a creator. By redefining mothering as an act that transcends gender and age, several poets seek to mother their parents and lovers. Moreover, each poet composes an *ars poetica* implicitly or explicitly that pays homage to the woman who bore him, emphasizing the difference between creator and created; yet, the various “mother poems” question whether the poet is a self-made man or not, suggesting ways in which the poet has defied, moved past, erased, or simply countered the mother. Finally, these male poets also engage with the work of contemporary female poets Plath and Sexton, particularly their meditations on women’s bodies and motherhood. Elizabeth Gregory asserts that these female poets provide “biographical details” and “narratives” which are “pivotal metaphors for the operation of confessional poetry overall, which dares to speak of the nexus of physical, emotional, and personal relations that has long been understood as woman’s province” (“Confessing” 38). The confessional genre opened up the poetic terrain of “personal relations” such as the mother-child relationship, which was approached from a range of angles, not just personal experience.

Chapter 1 focuses on two mother poems by first-generation confessional poets: Robert Lowell’s “Unwanted” and John Berryman’s Song 14. Most discussions of confessional poetry begin with the breakaway *Life Studies*, yet by focusing on a poem in Lowell’s last volume, *Day by Day* (1977), my analysis reflects on it from the vantage point of a work that questions allegiance to fact and dwells in uncertainty even further. “Unwanted” is willing to go where *Life Studies* didn’t, imagining the mother’s free will to abort the poet or not. Lowell and Berryman, though often thought of as rival poets, share in common an interest in (and perhaps a fear of) the mother’s agency; they both illuminate her authorship and creative potential. One of Berryman’s most heavily anthologized and memorable *Dream Songs* concerns the creative writer’s existential boredom and search for the creative self. Song 14 turns upon a mother’s wisdom, or rather haranguing, to launch

self-discovery. Chapter 2 focuses on a poet thought of as preceding confession, Allen Ginsberg, and a post-confessional poet, Frank Bidart. Ginsberg and Bidart, despite obvious formal differences, are both interested in madness and crisis as well as the potential cure of words; they could be said to represent different aspects of Lowell. I offer close readings of Ginsberg's "Kaddish" and Bidart's "Confessional," both of which are long elegies for mentally-ill mothers. Chapter 3 takes up the post-confessional writers Robert Hass and C.K. Williams; it is built around an extended discussion of Hass' discursive, sensual long poem, "My Mother's Nipples" and C.K. Williams' antagonistic, self-dramatizing pieces, "My Mother's Lips" and "The Cup." Hass and Williams are perhaps the poets most self-consciously aware of the legacy of confession and psychoanalysis. The last chapter explores the Anglo-American poet Thom Gunn's response to confessional poetry by looking at two late poems about his mother, "The Gas-Poker" and "My Mother's Pride," which engage with confession despite the poet's long-standing rejection of American confessional poetry.

In my study, various psychoanalytic models of the mother-child relationship have been helpful in understanding definitions of mothers, mothering, maternal care, and even what a "mother poem" might entail. The most important models stem from Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, in which language emerges out of loss, Lacan's "Mirror Stage," Jessica Benjamin's theory of intersubjectivity, and more broadly, the work of object relations theorists, D.W. Winnicott and Melanie Klein. More recently, Adam Phillips' writings, which incorporate both object relations and Freudian psychoanalysis, have shaped my understanding of the psychological dimension in all of the poetry I discuss. As a literary critic, student, and poet, I do not attempt to offer a comprehensive gloss of psychoanalytic thought; rather, my readings are guided by the poetry itself and the various psychological traces within the poems. For this reason, I discuss Lacan in relation to Hass, Jessica Benjamin in connection to Lowell and Berryman, and Klein in

conjunction with Williams, while the voices of Freud and Phillips can be heard throughout the dissertation.

Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920) interprets his eighteen-month-old grandson's imaginative play as a symbolic representation of a painful experience, the temporary absence of his mother. When the child's mother would leave him for a few hours, the child didn't cry, but would throw his toys under the bed or into the corners of the room. As he did this, he would shout, "o-o-o-o" (*Beyond the Pleasure* 140), which Freud and the child's mother interpreted as the word "fort" meaning "gone." Freud later observes his grandson developing this game of disappearances into one of "disappearing and coming back" with his wooden reel, which is attached to a piece of string: the child flings the reel out of sight and exclaims "o-o-o"; he then draws the reel back out, using the string, and says, "Da!" ('Here!')" (*Beyond the Pleasure* 140). This Fort-da game comprises "the child's immense cultural achievement in successfully abnegating his drives... by allowing his mother to go away without his making a great fuss. He compensated for it, so to speak, by *himself* re-enacting this same disappearance-reappearance scenario with whatever objects fell to hand" (141). Through creative play, the child moves from a "passive" role to "an active one" (141); rather than being the one left alone at home, the victim of powerful parents, the child fancies himself "the master of the situation" and "abreact[s] the intensity of the experience" (142). In his game, he takes "revenge on his mother," as if telling her "'Alright, go away! I don't need you; I'm sending you away myself!'" (142). Elsewhere, Freud compares the "child at play" to the "writer" who also compensates for his suffering through symbolic representation "by creating a world of his own or, to put it more correctly, by imposing a new and more pleasing order on the things that make up the world" ("The Creative Writer" 25). Similarly, the lyric poet's use of language has been understood as compensation for the loss of the first love object, the mother. Theorists have focused on elegy and apostrophe, which in different ways address the poet's relationship to absence. Peter Sacks asserts,

“An elegist’s language emerges from, and reacts upon, an originating sense of loss” (*The English Elegy* 1). Sacks reads English elegies from Spenser, Milton, Jonson, Hardy, and others in the light of Freud’s analysis of the Fort-da game. Sacks interprets the episode: “By a primitive form of mourning, the child not only comes to terms with otherness and absence of his first love-object; he also learns to *represent absence*, and to make the absent present, by means of a substitutive figure accompanied by an elementary language” (11). In Sacks’ account, the child creates and uses signifiers to represent his mother, thus “advanc[ing] his entry into language” (11).

At the heart of Freud’s reading of the Fort-da episode is the Oedipal complex: the male child’s desire to marry the mother and murder the father. This theory emerges from Freud’s interpretation of Sophocles’ *Oedipus Rex*, in which Oedipus, who is abandoned, picked up by shepherds, and raised by another royal family, unknowingly murders his father King Laius and marries his mother, Queen Jocasta. Freud explains that although we repress our incestuous desire, “it is the fate of all of us, perhaps, to direct our first sexual impulse towards our mother and our first hatred and our first murderous wish against our father” (*Interpretation* 296). Freud argues that “in taking care of the child’s bodily needs, she [the mother] becomes its first seductress” (*An Outline* 43). When the male child is between the ages of two and three, these feelings for her intensify: as he masturbates, he “becomes the mother’s lover” and “desires to possess her physically in the ways he has divined from his observations and notions of sexual life” (*An Outline* 44). The child views the father as his rival. In Freud’s account, this normal complex is resolved by the mother’s threats of castration; out of fear, the boy “renounces all ownership of the mother” (*An Outline* 45). Hugh Haughton links the family romance to the “numinous and terrible idealizations of and disappointments with our parents which lie behind most of our stories of identity” (“Introduction” xxvi).

Chapter 2, which reads poems by gay poets Bidart and Ginsberg, will tease out Leo Bersani’s contention that “The Oedipal rivalry—which ‘should’ end with the boy giving

up his passionate attachment to his mother in order to avoid threatened castration at the hands of the father—has simply been bypassed by an identification that is neither a loss nor object-love in the usual sense” (“Sociality and Sexuality” 54). Bersani offers an interpretation of Freud’s Leonardo da Vinci essay on homosexual desire to expose “the heterosexual inability to think of desire other than as lack or loss” (54). I do not argue that all gay poets identify with their mothers while all heterosexual poets search out substitutes for their lost mothers; Bidart and Ginsberg’s rendering of a mother-son pair is the result of many factors. Both poets had mothers who were mentally ill and fathers who left them; for a range of reasons, they both developed an early sense of caring for and identifying with their mother’s suffering. Lowell and Berryman also identify with the feminine and seek to understand the state of pregnancy from different angles, as I will show; it is in fact a heterosexual poet, Berryman, who imagines mothering in the most literal sense of giving birth.

Both the Fort-da episode and the Oedipal complex have previously been discussed in terms of language and poetics, as we saw in Sacks’ definition of elegy. In similar ways, Jonathan Culler, Barbara Johnson, and Ann Keniston discuss apostrophe as a demand made to an absent other; additionally, they identify apostrophe as the distinguishing characteristic of lyric poetry. Culler argues, “To apostrophize is to will a state of affairs, to attempt to call into being by asking inanimate objects to bend to your desire” (“Apostrophe” 141). Johnson links all forms of apostrophe to the mother, so that an invocation of the Muses, nature, or a ghost recalls the infantile cry: “If apostrophe is structured like demand, and if demand articulates the primal relation to the mother as a relation to the Other, then lyric poetry itself—summed up in the figure of apostrophe—comes to look like the fantastically intricate history of endless elaborations and displacements of the single cry, ‘Mama!’” (“Apostrophe” 298). What is problematic about this perception is that Johnson implies that lyric poetry is spoken from the position of children. This is certainly not the case in the poems I will read closely; while many of the

poets do address a deceased or absent mother, they also embody her own cry of suffering as they narrate her mental illness, suicide, last breath, death-wish, or anxiety. Other poets represent their mother's desire to be heard, to have her children listen to her instruction, read her letters, and remember her voice as they write.

Along similar lines as Johnson and Culler, Keniston draws on Lacanian theory in her discussion of the absent addressee in poems of the 1990s; she interprets apostrophe as a demand, however futile:

According to Lacan, the infant begins to speak because the mother is absent; the removal of her breast or body impels the child to "demand," in Lacan's terms, that she reappear. . . . The analogies between the child's entry into language and apostrophe suggest that both are motivated not merely by a "demand" . . . but by a desire. The child's wish is to restore the mother's presence, yet this wish is rendered impossible because language is, in Loeffelhotz's terms, "an *inadequate* substitute" for a presence that is "*always already* lost." Thus utterance can only articulate a desire for closeness ("Fluidity of Damaged" 300-301).

In Chapter 3, building on these suggestions, I will look at Lacan's reformulation of the triangular relationship between mother, infant, and language. In Robert Hass' "My Mother's Nipples," the speaker resists Keniston's deterministic argument by revealing the mother and poet's re-entry into language to discover and co-author a song that tells their story. In fact, in Hass' formulation, it is the mother's suffering and identity as a non-poet that demands that her poet-son write her song. The speaker evokes pity for a woman whose glory days were high school, and whose trajectory since then has been towards alcoholism, mental illness, and the loss of her spouse. Although, for Hass, language does center around loss, it is not his own loss that he is preoccupied with, but his mother's. Keniston is quick to point to the now over-quoted line in Hass' poem, "Meditation at Lagunitas": "All the new thinking is about loss./ In this way it resembles all the old thinking" (*Praise* 4). While Hass pays homage to the cliché that language is essentially elegiac, because it invokes absent others, reveals echoes of the past in the present, and recalls an infantile demand for intimate contact, he complicates this paradigm. In fact, his reflection on language is ironic: by playing on the "old" colloquialism about the old and

the new—"Meet the new boss: same as the old boss," which purports that the new regime is exactly the same as the old—he adds the qualifiers that suggest slight changes: "in this way" and "resembles." While the new thinking reflects a single aspect of the old, this aspect is the whole nature of "all" thinking: a preoccupation with loss. In "Mediation at Lagunitas," Hass tries to have it both ways: he exposes the fixedness or stasis of this paradigm, distancing himself from "all" of this thinking, yet reveals ways in which he might revise the poetry of loss, by placing himself in a role other than survivor-elegist, child, or victim. One of the problems "My Mother's Nipples" explores is whether his mother then becomes child-like in her own need for the balm of words.

Yet the very attempt to collaborate with his mother rather than demand or blame her is what distinguishes Hass' work from the narcissistic, infantile cries of the apostrophizing poet theorized by Keniston. I agree with Reena Sastri's response to theories of language as merely a "marker of loss and absence, a poor substitute for something that cannot be recovered" ("Intimacy" 465). Rather than define "lyric address" as "the infant's demand for the mother, or more specifically for an original experience of 'oneness' with the mother that can never be recovered," Sastri turns to Jessica Benjamin's theory of intersubjectivity to explore intimacy and mutuality in Lowell's last volume: "Address in *Day by Day* functions differently: it functions intersubjectively to construct new relationships" ("Intimacy" 465).

In the first chapter, I will discuss Benjamin's rejection of the child's one-ness with the mother and her alternative model of two active subjects, mother and child, who, rather than merge, share in an experience of "being with" (*Bonds* 48). Benjamin focuses on the preoedipal rather than the Oedipal and provides a way of viewing mother-child intimacy such that the child has agency to achieve differentiation from the mother while recognizing her individuality and identifying with her (*Bonds* 12). Her model sheds light on what both Lowell and Berryman suggest in poems about their mothers; becoming a poet is one way to begin the process of differentiation, to strike out on one's own while

seeking to identify with one's mother as a fellow creator. Benjamin departs from Freud's Oedipal Complex because she asserts that its "subject-object structure," in which the mother is the boy's love object, "misses the possibility of a mutual adoration, in which the mother is actually the boy's ideal, as well as hers" (*Shadow* 42). What Benjamin offers is not only an escape from "the logic of the One and the Other" (43), but the possibility of human contact and intimacy that is not tissue and structured with fatalism. In terms of the poetry I read, the mother-son relationship can be seen as "between subjects" rather than between the "empowered" poet and the lost love object (*Shadow* 28). Modifying Lacan and Freud who emphasize alienation and loss respectively, Benjamin redefines language as "speech between subjects": "Speech no longer figures as the activity of a subject empowered to speak, but as a possibility given by the relationship with a recognizing other. Or, we could say, speech is conditioned by the recognition between two subjects, rather than the property of the subjects" (*Shadow* 28). In the two elegies I read, Ginsberg's "Kaddish" and Thom Gunn's "The Gas-poker," language is certainly not seen as the poet's privileged property; Ginsberg and his mother Naomi share in exaltations and mad prophecies whereas Gunn's silence on the subject of his mother's suicide matches her muteness in the poem.

Benjamin's notion of the intersubjective borrows from Melanie Klein and D.W. Winnicott, major players in the British school of object relations. Adam Phillips comments on the shift in psychoanalysis, which commences with Klein's work with children: "Instead of the discrete separation of subject and object, of the infant and its mother, the relational matrix became the object of attention. Different accounts of the child's emotional life began to emerge and more specific questions were asked about the place of the mother in the infant's world" (*Winnicott* 8). Klein emphasizes the child's internal mother split into the nurturing good breast and the avenging bad breast ("On the Theory of Anxiety" 31). Eventually, the child sees the mother as a unified whole and experiences anxiety about his destructive feelings towards the bad breast. Klein, in the words of

Phillips, “put psychic pain—fear, guilt, anxiety, depression—at the centre of human development”; thus, her theories about the internal mother have a particular relevance to the work of Williams, who projects anxiety onto his mother’s physical body (*Winnicott* 55). Unlike Klein, Winnicott emphasizes the mother and infant’s positive cooperation and collaboration. Phillips summarizes Winnicott’s insight into how infants and their mothers produce what we think of as childhood memories: “Winnicott was always attentive to the young child’s need for an adult to hold together the threads of his experience. The mother, for example, can keep the story of the child’s experience alive and viable by putting it together and telling it back when the child needs to know” (*Winnicott* 66). Not only is there no childhood without an adult to process it, but there is no concept of a child without the parent. Winnicott writes, “I once risked the remark, ‘There is no such thing as a baby’—meaning that if you set out to describe a baby, you will find that you are describing *a baby and someone*. A baby cannot exist alone, but is essentially part of a relationship” (“Further Thoughts” 88).

These psychoanalytic models of the mother-child relationship have influenced my thinking about mother-poems, the creative process, and the birth of the poet. I have come to the conclusion that just as there is no such thing as a baby without a parent, there is no such thing as a writer without intimate others, whether that entails other writers, family members, a mother, or readers. I agree with Richard Badenhausen who says of T.S. Eliot: “There was no way to succeed in his art alone. To write meant to converse, to cooperate, and to collaborate” (*T.S. Eliot* 61). Particularly when discussing confessional writing, which is preoccupied with one’s parents, sexual partners, children, contemporary writers, and spouses, the poet’s reciprocity is seen in quotations, apostrophe, intimate communication, poem dedications, personae, gender-role swapping, and imaginative identification.

My close readings of poems have implications for theories of poetic influence and identity. Harold Bloom’s Oedipal, masculinist paradigm in *The Anxiety of Influence: A*

Theory of Poetry (1973) claims that major poets, in their struggle for independence and recognition, battle with their precursor, paternal poet. Bloom's sequel, *A Map of Misreading* (1975) claims: "Poetic strength comes only from a triumphant wrestling with the greatest of the dead, and from an even more triumphant solipsism" (9).⁵ He presents a father-son rivalry, absorbed from Freud, to argue that all strong poets undertake "a complex act of strong misreading," and experience anxiety as a result of negatively reading their father poet (*Anxiety* xxiii). Bloom asserts, "Every poem is a misinterpretation of a parent poem" (*Anxiety* 94). I take issue with this solipsistic, sexist paradigm for a variety of reasons, which I will explore in the opening and closing chapters in particular. The coda will explore the problems of Bloom's theory in a reading for gay poets for whom collaboration can be an erotic, playful two-way street, and for any reading of mother-poems which acknowledges shared emotional states and experiences. Overall, my dissertation looks at mothers and sons as two subjects rather than a subject and an object; although Bloom's model dismisses the role of mothers and women entirely, he sets up a power struggle between parent and child which the poets I read profoundly complicate. Whereas Bidart and Williams in their poems fight their internal mothers to create space for their own uninterrupted voices, ultimately they acknowledge the ways in which they are untrustworthy narrators of their own lives. Williams dramatizes his adolescent rage against his mother, moving past it to an understanding of and identification with her that comes out of his own fathering. Bidart, in refusing facile forgiveness of his dead mother, raises larger questions about the possibilities of reconciliation and closure in a world devoid of a metaphysics; hence his failure to come to terms with his mother's wrongs symbolizes larger failures of meaning. Other poets actively seek their mother's interruptions within their texts; for Berryman, his mother's voice wakes him up from boredom and facilitates creative production. In "Kaddish," Ginsberg weaves his and his mother's voices together

⁵ Bloom provides examples of "strong poets": Hardy, Stevens, Browning, Whitman, Dickinson, and Milton (*A Map* 9).

into a polyvocal lyricism that includes paranoid speech, lullabies, and her last letter to him. In his late lyric about her suicide, Gunn's words about his mother, "I am made by her, and undone" (*BC* 9), convey his mother's agency in begetting, birthing, and raising the poet as well as devastating her children by committing suicide. Yet, the paradoxical statement assures us that the poet's nature is ultimately not done; his selfhood is incomplete. The poet, while confronting the loss, has authorship and agency to make himself through language. While not a confessional poet, Gunn's personal poems about his mother's life and death extend our understanding of the genre's malleability within an Anglo-American context. In studying single poems by such a diverse range of poets and aesthetics, this dissertation contributes to our understanding of the complexity and ambitions of the confessional mode.



CHAPTER 1

“AND MOREOVER MY MOTHER TOLD ME”: MOTHER-SON RELATIONSHIPS IN THE CONFESSIONAL LYRIC

i. *Introduction*

John Berryman and Robert Lowell, in exploring the mother-son relationship, reflect upon the poetic notion of confession. As discussed in the Introduction, confessional poetry, beginning with the publication of Lowell's *Life Studies* (1959), drew on the language of psychoanalysis to explore taboo subject matter. Diane Middlebrook argues that confessional poetry "investigates the pressures on the family as an institution regulating middle-class private life, primarily through the agency of the mother. Its principal themes are... childhood neglect and the mental disorders that follow from deep emotional wounds received in early life" ("What Was" 636). Poems about mothers shed light on one aspect of confessional poetry and on the genre overall, preoccupied as it is with early childhood experience and the child-parent relationship. Whereas Middlebrook emphasizes the mother's agency in negative ways—as the progenitor of the broken family—I look at portrayals of damaging and constructive mothers in confessional poetry. Berryman and Lowell represent motherhood, not as the cause for the child-victim's suffering, and hence, the cause for cathartic poetry later on in life, but as a way of contacting the feminine mind and body. Their poems about mothers imagine the psychological and physical experience of pregnancy and birth, and deepen links between creative productivity and the maternal body.

While I use the term "confessional" throughout this dissertation, Helen Vendler's term "Freudian lyric" is relevant to this chapter. Vendler suggests the impact of psychoanalysis on postwar poetry's subjects and forms: "Many of the poets of postwar America found in the therapeutic hour (and its textual support in Freud's writings) not only themes for their poetry but also new formal procedures shaping it" ("John Berryman" 31). She says that Lowell and Berryman "saw in the material of American daily life processed in the therapeutic hour, a subject matter relatively untouched by Anglophile literary conventions; and both followed the Muse of free association as a path to the Muse

of lyric” (32). The term “Freudian lyric” captures important dimensions of Berryman and Lowell’s oeuvre, but does not stand in as a replacement for “confessional poetry” overall.

This chapter looks at Berryman’s Song 14 from *The Dream Songs* and Lowell’s “Unwanted” from *Day by Day* (1977). Lowell and Berryman, part of the original generation of confessional poets, are natural choices as poets to discuss in this chapter. Song 14 has not been discussed in the criticism, yet it has been paid lip service, repeatedly selected in anthologies and in the lists critics have made of their favorite songs in *The Dream Songs*.⁶ Looking at a later text from Lowell distinguishes this criticism from discussions that revere *Life Studies* as what Lowell calls, “some breakthrough back into life” (“An Interview” 244), which it was, yet dismiss *Day by Day*. For example, Ian Hamilton writes of *Life Studies* as the transformation of “exuberant chatter into haunting, measured eloquence” (*Robert Lowell* 246) whereas he views *Day by Day* as “loose, chatty, confidently *verbatim*” (*Robert Lowell* 470).⁷ Rather than discuss *Life Studies* as the heyday of confessional poetry and *Day by Day* as the collapse, I trace the way the final volume revises the confessional mode.

Both poems can be understood as examples of Vendler’s conception of the “Freudian Lyric” (“John Berryman 31), as they explore and even play up the psychoanalytic dimension of confession. Berryman writes about confession as being “laid open” or an opening up, which is both surgical, as in opening up the body to operate, and psychoanalytic, as in self-disclosure during the therapeutic hour. In Song 297, Berryman evokes the patient’s resistance to opening up with an analyst: “Surely, I’ve said enough,/ my mind has been laid open/ for thirty years” (*DS* 319). It’s not always clear whether confession reopens the wound, causing more pain, or heals the wounds, even if through

⁶ *77 Dream Songs* was published in 1964, followed by *His Toy, His Dream, His Rest* (1968). These books were collected in *The Dream Songs* (1969).

⁷ Many other critics follow this same pattern as they review Lowell’s body of work. For other examples, see Vereen Bell (*Robert Lowell* 70, 210, 215, 223), William Doreski (*Robert Lowell’s* 181-182), and Richard Fein (*Robert Lowell* 84-86, 176-177).

reopening them. Lowell, too, self-consciously engages with the tropes of confession. At the end of “Unwanted,” he raises the issue of poetry as cathartic, while complicating it: “Is getting well ever an art,/ or art a way to get well?” (*CPRL* 834). Lowell carefully qualifies his question, asking if “getting well” is “ever” in any case, under any circumstance “art,” assuming that in most cases, it is not art (*CPRL* 834). He also asks if “art” is “a way” not the way to “get well” (*CPRL* 834). Lowell is suspicious of the idea of poetry as therapy since it assumes artistic passivity. Further, he implies that rarely do we perfect the art of wellness, any more than we succeed in writing healing poetry. The poem muddles any causal relationship (in either direction) between wellness and art.

The 14th of Berryman’s *Dream Songs* presents an unlikely confessional story: a mother-confessor who forbids her son to confess, and a son’s admission to boredom, which at first glance isn’t something to be ashamed of. This song changes our perception of a confession as something titillating or embarrassing. We see the poet’s persona Henry in a crisis of boredom rather than in the throes of mental illness, although the associations between depression, boredom, and alcohol are not lost on us. Henry is bored by both gin and literature. He is at a loss for words, blocked from confession, and bored because he has not yet discovered his wish or himself. The preoedipal becomes the site for Henry’s development as a poet who has ideas for poems. Henry turns to his mother’s oft-repeated words about boredom to subvert it, using boredom as a capacity for birthing the self. As Adam Phillips argues, boredom, for the child, becomes a process of learning how to “be alone in the presence of the mother” (“On Being Bored” 69). The child’s first experience of boredom reveals his “two concurrent, overlapping projects: the project of self-sufficiency...and a project of mutuality that owns up to a dependence” (“On Being Bored” 69). For the poet, boredom presents the need for interplay between internal and external resources, and between the self and the mother.

Lowell’s “Unwanted” weaves together the mother and poet’s stories, suggesting interdependence. Lowell presents himself to us in the poem as the confessor who

recognizes and understands his mother's confession. The poem stages a mother and analyst's confessions to Lowell, rather than dramatizes the self as confessant. The volume radically changes how we think about confessional poetry, broadening the role of confessional poet to a listening ear. "Unwanted" imagines the poet's pre-history, even suspends the poet's subjectivity to conceive of the mother as a woman who is afraid of motherhood and wishes to die. The poem evades autobiography by beginning before the story begins, with a prehistory he is not privy to, that of his mother's pregnancy. Rejecting sentimentality, Lowell puts himself in the position of confessor who perceives his mother's fears and chooses not to blame her. In creating the mother's story, "Unwanted" suggests that the poet accesses stories through his mother and analyst. The poem raises questions about the definition of personal or direct experience, the assumed subject of confessional poetry, by puzzling over a heavily mediated autobiography.

Berryman and Lowell harken back to the preoedipal in their poems because of the possibilities of the intersubjective, such as the chance to access the feminine in their mother's voices and experiences. Jessica Benjamin's intersubjective theory illuminates the way in which the poets seek intimacy in "contacting" the mother's "mind" (*Like Subjects* 35) while recognizing her distinct identity as well as their own. Henry, the speaker throughout *The Dream Songs*, speaks in his mother's language of repetition, repeating his mother's saying, which she repeated throughout his childhood (*DS* 16). Henry generates boring rhymes such as "so" and "no" and repeated rhymes in which words "no" and "me" rhyme with themselves (*DS* 16) until he births himself as a poet who surprises himself as much as the reader with imagery. Lowell speaks in his mother's language by voicing her death-wish, even imagining himself as a fetus uttering with his mother the desire to die. He focuses on the preoedipal not the Oedipal we have come to expect from confessional poetry, infusing his autobiography with a sense of his mother's feelings, attempting to empathize with her death wish. The poets do not limit themselves to repeating their mothers, but use their mother's voice as a point of departure and return in their poetic

process. In their poems, they are in fact alone in the presence of the mother. The speakers in these poems remain independent of their mothers, yet identify with them. They wish with them and without them, but not exactly, as in the Oedipal model, for them. Both Song 14 and “Unwanted” are about the possibilities of wishing: wishing alone, finding one’s wish and wishing self, and wishing with one’s mother as a way to understand, identify, and feel with her.

ii. *On John Berryman’s Song 14*

Berryman famously distanced himself from the term “confessional” in an interview for *The Paris Review*, although *The Dream Songs* (1969) is considered by many to be a quintessential confessional text. Berryman, when asked how he responded to the label of confessional, said, “With rage and contempt! Next question” (“The Art of Poetry XVI” 21). He elaborated, “The word doesn’t mean anything. I understand the confessional to be a place where you go and talk with a priest. I personally haven’t been to confession since I was twelve years old” (21). Berryman, like the other confessional poets, resisted the label. Yet, the term is in play in *The Dream Songs*; the word “confess” and its variants occur five times.⁸ Berryman explores both secular and religious confession, exploring the essential question of whether to speak one’s mind. At times Henry resists confession: “When I had most to say/ my tongue clung to the roof/ I mean of my mouth” (Song 112, *DS* 129). At other times, Henry is defined by his ability to talk. In Song 211, we learn that Henry “led with his tongue” (*DS* 230). One subject of the poem is the tension between speech and self-inflicted silence, metaphoric suicide: “He couldn’t say whether to sing// further or seal his lonely throat, give himself up” (Song 356, *DS* 378). The book in some sense defines

⁸ See Songs 51, 76, 110, 228, and 265.

secular confession as a negotiation about what and when to divulge.⁹ Religious confession is equally explored; Henry hides sin from God, revels in the risky pleasures of sin, laments the importance of begging for forgiveness, and returns to the question of whether he is essentially good or bad, worthy of wrath or not.¹⁰ Henry perceives that “wherever we are, we must beg always pardon/ Pardon was the word./ Pardon was the only word” (Song 108, *DS* 125). If pardon is such an essential word “wherever we are,” it has currency inside and outside the church. To bring the two contexts, religious and secular, together, I would say that Berryman is equally suspicious of both types of confession. Does confessing one’s sin only recall the delight one took in it, and render forgiveness impossible? Does confessing one’s emotional wounds make light of the traumatic experience, and become more performative than cathartic?

Berryman situates issues of confession within the framework of dreams. William Meredith coins the term “dream autobiography” to describe the framework of psychoanalysis and the effect of the poem (“Henry Tasting” 28). Berryman’s self-consciousness deployment of Freudian ideas is evident even in the book’s title, suggestive of Freud’s *The Interpretation of Dreams*, and in the way in which dreams provoke self-analysis.¹¹ Throughout *The Dream Songs*, Berryman emphasizes emotional wounds as the defining human experience; the word “wound” itself occurs eleven times, and the book circles around the wounding absence of Henry’s father and friends.¹²

Unlike other confessional poets who construct their autobiographies in poems using the first-person “I,” Berryman adopts the persona Henry in the epic of 385 songs,

⁹ The following songs focus on secular confession: Songs 38, 53, 67, 71, 74, 108, 168, and 280.

¹⁰ Many songs describe issues of guilt or a moral code: 20, 22, 27, 28, 57, 79, 86, 95, 99, 104, 113, 118, 138, 231, 239, 338, 237, and 142.

¹¹ Berryman names Freud in Song 327 and refers to his psychiatrist in Song 3. The following songs directly mention Henry’s dreams: 11, 19, 25, 42, 49, 54, 75, 77, 90, 101, 130, 131, 132, 135, 137, 177, 178, 197, 226, 248, 317, 319, 350, 356, and 365.

¹² The word “wound” and its variants occur in the following songs: 33, 36, 51, 120, 152, 174, 219, 345, and 372. Songs 29, 92, and 372 refer to Henry’s deep emotional pain.

and uses various points of view.¹³ When talking to himself or speaking about himself in the third person, Henry sometimes uses one of his nicknames: Henry Pussycat, Henry Cat, Senator Cat, Henry Hankovitch, Sir Henry, or Henry House. An unnamed interlocutor at times converses with Henry. Berryman insists that Henry is not himself; the author's note states that the poem

is essentially about a character (not the poet, not me) named Henry, a white American in early middle age sometimes in blackface, who has suffered an irreversible loss and talks about himself sometimes in the first person, sometimes in the third, sometimes even in the second; he has a friend, never named, who addresses him as Mr Bones and variants thereof (x).

Steven K. Hoffman notes that all confessional poets construct a persona, whether it is the persona of the self constructed to sound like the poet or the persona of an external identity ("Impersonal Personalism" 693). Hoffman sees Berryman's Henry as "the most notable confessional voice construction" ("Impersonal Personalism" 695), yet fails to see how notable Lowell's construction of the "*real* Robert Lowell" is ("An Interview" 247), for example.¹⁴ Hoffman also fails to see the ways in which Henry is not "constructed," but actually draws from Berryman's biography in terms of occupation, colleagues, and family.¹⁵ In Song 370, Henry is both a mask for the poet and an unmasking of him: "Naked the man came forth in his mask, to be" (*DS* 392); this tension between the mask and the poet is seen throughout the book. Henry's mother is very similar to Berryman's mother as seen in the letters: she is indulgent, obsessive, and forceful. Berryman

¹³ Many critics have labeled Berryman a confessional poet, and referred to *The Dream Songs* as a confessional text. However, Laurence Lerner claims that Berryman differs from confessional poets because he doesn't use the first person "I," thus lacking "pronoun courage" ("What is Confessional" 55). I disagree with Lerner, because Berryman dons the mask of Henry to wield the first-person pronoun even more courageously.

¹⁴ Lowell says of "autobiography:" "I've invented facts and changed things...you want the reader to say, This is true...The reader was to believe he was getting the *real* Robert Lowell" ("An Interview" 247).

¹⁵ Like Berryman, Henry teaches college students (Song 108 and Song 134) and writes (Song 75). Henry eulogizes Berryman's colleagues such as Sylvia Plath (Song 172) and Delmore Schwartz (Song 147). Henry's children take the names of Berryman's (Song 303). Berryman's father, like Henry's, takes his own life in Florida (Song 384).

complains in his letters of his mother's "stopless talking" (*We Dream* 335)¹⁶. Despite their quarrels, Berryman and his mother were very involved in each other's lives. The poet states, "I have always had a very close relation with my mother—that's very bad for me, I'm told" ("Interview" 5). As we see in *The Dream Songs*, the mother plays a critical role in shaping her son's poetic identity. The mother and poet collaborate in the artistic process, which involves severance so that the two are distinct individuals with idiosyncratic voices that interact in the poem. As we will explore in Song 14, the mother's words are quoted and then departed from, as the poet-son discovers his inspiration.

We must first deal with the father-son relationship briefly before returning to mothers and sons. The Author's Note at the beginning of the book states that Henry has "suffered an irreversible loss" (*DS* xx), and many critics assume this loss is the father's death. Song 1 implies that the loss of the father is the departure which causes Henry to suffer: "All the world like a woolen lover/once did seem on Henry's side./ Then came a departure" (*DS* 3). Other important songs about the father come at the very end of a section or towards the end, gaining more emphasis, such as Songs 143, 145, 76, and 384. Song 76, titled "Henry's Confession," establishes the centrality of the father's suicide to the book. Henry mourns his "father/ who dared so long ago leave me" (*DS* 83) and confesses the details of his father's suicide: "A bullet on a concrete stoop/ close by a smothering southern sea/ spreadeagled on an island by my knee" (*DS* 83). In the absence of the father, Henry and the mother come together in an effort to forgive the father, confess his story, and survive him. Song 174 expresses the difficulty of trying to forgive the father for self-murder, yet still imagines reconciliation: "And he shall turn the heart of the children to their fathers/ and this will not be easy. The wound talks to you" (*DS* 193). In Song 145, Henry says "I-I'm/ trying to forgive" his father who "when he could not

¹⁶ Berryman's mother, Mrs. Martha (Little) Berryman, also referred to as "Jill," demands that her adult son write her more frequently, because her health depends on it (*We Dream* 381). Mrs. Berryman makes demands, then apologizes and offers her son complete freedom from her. When Berryman confronts her for talking too much, she threatens never to speak again (*We Dream* 335).

live/an instant longer, in the summer dawn/ left Henry to live on” (*DS* 162). On the one hand, the songs highlight survival and forgiveness, yet other songs point to the anger that makes acceptance difficult. Henry says elsewhere that his father has destroyed him: “Save us from shotguns & fathers’ suicides//“Mercy! my father; do not pull the trigger/ or all my life I’ll suffer from your anger/killing what your began” (Song 235, *DS* 254). The “us” could be read as a general “us,” including all sons who ought to be spared a father’s suicide, but it could also refer to Henry and his mother who are the survivors.

The father-son relationship is very different from the mother-son relationship, because the father’s departure is final whereas the mother and son constantly negotiate the terms of their relationship. The mother at times smothers Henry, which stunts his development. In Song 270 Henry accuses his mother of smothering him: “...Some/ would like you to make room, / mother...” (*DS* 289). The mother’s omnipresence is at times seen as loyalty and security, however. The poet addresses his own baby: “Your Mommy will be with you” (Song 298, *DS* 320), and referring to himself, states, “Daddy by then will be the nearest ghost,/ honey, but won’t return” (*DS* 320). This seems to be very telling about the differences between the father-son and mother-son relationship as Henry experiences them. His mother shares loss and guilt; she is there in Henry’s grief in a way the father, the cause of his grief, can’t be. The mother is the one Henry works with, grieves with, feels with, and seeks to differentiate from. As he becomes a poet, Henry turns to his mother as a collaborator who is enough like and unlike himself. The mother is attuned to his sensibility while at times offering a counter-statement, word of advice, or obstacle, which presents creative opportunity for him. She offers advice “(repeatingly)” (Song 14, *DS* 16), which the poet publishes. Mother and son engage in baby-talk, use simple rhymes, and create signature phrases, representative of intimacy speech.

Song 14 places the mother-son relationship at the crux of Henry’s development as a poet. Henry quotes his mother forbidding him to confess that he is bored, and then proceeds to confess. His mother’s words become the impetus for Henry to find his desire,

and thus his poetic energy as he confesses his repressed boredom. Song 14 depicts Henry in the process of creative formulation; Berryman redefines boredom as the gestation period before a creative outburst. Henry waits for an idea, his idea, which is akin to waiting for himself. Song 14 is short enough to be quoted in full:

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

inner resources, because I am heavy bored.
 Peoples bore me,
 literature bores me, especially great literature,
 Henry bores me, with his plights & gripes
 as bad as achilles,

who loves people and valiant art, which bores me.
 And the tranquil hills, & gin, look like a drag
 and somehow a dog
 has taken itself & its tail considerably away
 into mountains or sea or sky, leaving
 behind: me, wag (*DS* 16).

The poem opens with Henry's general statement that everyday life is boring, followed by Henry's quotation of maternal censorship, and, finally, Henry's celebration and inclusion of boredom in his aesthetic. The poem ends with an image that is the fruit of boredom: the imaginative event.

Berryman redefines boredom as the capacity for desire, modifying the notion of boredom as the absence of desire. Berryman's poem illuminates and finally rejects the corollaries between boredom and absence, loss, and melancholy. Berryman transforms boredom into action and achievement for the child-poet. Adam Phillips defines boredom as a crisis and a capacity.¹⁷ He says "The child's boredom starts as a regular crisis in the child's developing capacity to be alone in the presence of the mother" ("On Being Bored"

¹⁷ Phillips takes the first line of Berryman's Song 14 as his epitaph to Chapter 7: "Life, friends, is boring. We must not say so" ("On Being Bored" 68).

69). This capacity to see one's self as separate from the mother is realized during the preoedipal stage, when the child realizes the mother is not an extension of his body, but an independent person who can also in turn recognize and respond to him. Boredom presents an opportunity for the child to discover his wish. However, most parents become agitated with the child's pestering during road trips, "Are we there yet?" or the child's complaint, "There's nothing to do around here!" Parents assume that the child's boredom indicates a lack of selfhood rather than a search.

Phillips argues that boredom is essential as the gestation period in which the child discovers his wish. He says, "The bored child is waiting, without the conscious representation of an object, to find his desire again. Once again he does not know what he is looking forward to" ("On Being Bored" 70). Phillips makes the suggestive argument that the child is not "waiting for someone else," but is "as it were, waiting for himself," and that this waiting period is part of "the process of taking one's time" (69). This process of gestating is only seemingly passive. The lingering, marinating, gestating stage produces a self-birthing. After Henry's waiting process, the poem ends with "leaving/ behind: me, wag" (Song 14, *DS* 16), suggesting that Henry births himself. Phillips notes that the process of finding one's wish is full of uncertainty: "In a sense, the bored child is absorbed by his lack of absorption, and yet he is also preparing for something of which he is unaware, something that will eventually occasion an easy transition or a mild surprise of interest" (72). Boredom represents the integral gestation or waiting period when the Phillipsian child or writer chews on his ideas and waits to be moved and inspired by his obsessions and desires. Boredom, then, is an active waiting or turning of the wheel. Henry recalls his mother's words about boredom, because it is in the mother's presence that the child first experiences this feeling. The child embarks on the journey to be alone in the presence of others rather than merge into them. The mother appears to be patronizing, repressing Henry's boredom, and expecting him to be happy and self-stimulating. Henry is told to draw upon his inner resources, which suggests the self distinct from the mother. In

another song, Berryman expresses the notion that “idling” is perhaps the gateway to a creative outburst:

His gift receded. He could write no more.
 Be silent then, until the thing returns.
 We have Goethe’s warrant
 for idling when no theme presents itself
 or none that can be handled suitably:
 I fall back on that high word (Song 310, *DS* 332).

The “high word” would seem to be a license for laziness; however, the more Henry reads and internalizes words, the more prepared he is to write.

Berryman rescues the child-like confession of boredom so that it is not shameful or immature. In response to the mother’s stricture not to confess it, the poet celebrates not only boredom, but the articulation of it. Song 14 confesses to boredom in language that is both impersonal and personal. The poet “concludes” he is bored, in a flourish of logical connecting words like “moreover,” “after all,” and “because.” By contrast, the poet draws from colloquial language in expressions like “...looks like a drag” and in references to the self in the third person, “Henry bores me.” Adrienne Rich sees Berryman as a poet who thrives on non-standard language: “Over and against...the security of a native tongue, of a Dictionary, we have this mad amalgam of ballad-idiom (ours via Appalachia), Shakespearian rag, Gerard Manley Hopkins in a delirium of syntactical reversals, nigger-talk, blues talk, hip-talk engendered from both, Miltonic diction, Calypso, bureaucratiana, pure blurted Anglo-Saxon” (“Living with Henry” 130).¹⁸ Berryman’s predominate code is baby-talk, as seen in the intentional grammatical errors, quirky syntax, and use of the third and first person: within this framework, the poet draws attention to the playfulness and suggestiveness of language.

Henry’s baby-talk, embodying the newness of a child’s perception, allows other voices, that of the alcoholic or the university professor, to sound idiosyncratic, strange, and arresting. Berryman plays with the definition of baby-talk, which can also mean the

¹⁸ Similarly to Rich, Vendler discusses the various registers in Berryman’s language (“John Berryman” 41).

speech of parents who feign a kind of simplicity for their children, who might actually understand their parents better if they just spoke normally. Parents often speak in high-pitched voices to their children and affect a seemingly concise, yet confusing broken English. They often speak about themselves in the third-person; for example, a mother might say, “Mommy says No-no.” Berryman uses baby-talk to create pathetic appeals at times, so that the reader feels pity for the child’s cry in the adult as well as the adult in the child’s pains, the Henry who knows the meaning of his experiences. Lowell calls Henry “Berryman’s love-child and ventriloquist’s doll” (“For John Berryman” 72). The notion of a love-child points to the need for creation, and we see Henry wish to give birth to an idea—the lyric—and create a poetic self.

The use of baby talk counters the boring language of the poem, seen in the dull repetition of rhymes. The end rhymes in Song 14 include repeating rhymes “yearns” and “yearn,” and self-rhyming words, “bored,” “no,” and “me.” Several other rhymes lack originality; for example, “so” rhymes with “no” which then rhymes with itself in the next line. There is much repetition throughout the song. The word “bored” and variants of it occur six times in three stanzas. The word “bored” occurs twice, “bores” three times, and “boring” and “bore” once. “Inner Resources” is repeated but without the capitalization, “literature” is repeated as “great literature,” and “people” is repeated as “peoples.” The conjunction “and” begins two consecutive lines in the last stanza. However, the repetition and simplicity of rhymes highlight one surprising rhyme, “plights & gripes.” The plural nouns suggest baby talk or broken English, and the internal rhyme as well as the recurring plosive “p” sound amplifies a creative burst out of boredom. Further, the poet breaks out of the mother’s confining speech.

She is implicated in the boring repetition of the poem, because her words are said “repeatingly” (Song 14, *DS* 16). Henry, like his mother, repeats words. He also repeats hers. “Inner Resources” is first introduced as part of his mother’s speech, then Henry utters the words. “Inner resources” begins the last line of the first stanza and first line of

second stanza, functioning as anaphora. The word “bored” first occurs in the mother’s speech, and then is repeated by Henry. Henry creates variation by qualifying bored with the odd adjective “heavy” as in “heavy bored” (*DS* 16). The use of idiosyncrasies such as “repeatingly” and “heavy bored” counters the use of boring rhymes and repetition. We see Henry’s struggle to vary the repetitive language his mother gives him, the poem suggests his larger struggle to be alone in the presence of her and in the haunting presence of her words.

The mother’s words are a threat to the child’s development. Henry hears his mother’s words over and over again. The mother “repeatingly,” rather than the standard adverb “repeatedly,” advises him. Henry describes how his mother would “repeatingly” tell him something, emphasizing his mother’s continual haranguing more than the content of the mother’s speech. The strange adverb evokes the mother’s “stopless talking” (*We Dream* 335). This idiosyncratic speech recalls lines from Ginsberg’s “Howl” in which “the best minds of my generation” are seen “yacketayakking” and “talk[ing] continuously seventy hours from park to pad to bar to Bellevue to museum to the Brooklyn Bridge,/ a lost battalion of platonic conversationalists jumping down the stoops off fire escapes” (*I, CPAG* 134-135). In Berryman’s usage, we see the adult or poet behind the child-like abuse of the language. We read it less as abuse of than as creative use of language. It’s the poet who wants to infuse the adverb with the sense of ongoing action, and use the present tense suffix “-ing” in addition to the adverb suffix “ly” to invent “repeatingly.” The word evokes the worst aspect of repetition: its endlessness. The word points to the way in which the poet cannot escape the mother’s harassment; her words continue to interrupt his everyday life. Yet, Henry relies on his mother’s voice for these very interruptions, because at times what she interrupts is his silence and boredom. In *Song* 298, Henry addresses his own “baby daughter,” who must rely on her mother rather than him: “Your Mommy will be with you, when Henry’s a blank” (*DS* 320). The line can also be read as self-address, as if Henry is assuring himself that his Mommy will be with him when he is uninspired. The

song situates Henry in desperate need of inspiration: “Henry in transition, transient Henry” is “troubled & gone Henry” and “the nearest ghost” (*DS* 320). Henry is “a blank” in the sense that he’s a poet with a blank page and a general lack of “inner resources” (*DS* 16). Song 298, read in conjunction with Song 14, conveys that the child internalizes and invents the mother who is intermittently “blank,” that is, absent, and when the child is a blank, that is, an unwritten or undeveloped self. In Song 14, the mother’s haranguing is at times useful to Henry, because it presents creative opportunities to respond with baby talk and a variety of other registers.

Berryman’s broken language recalls a hysteric patient of Freud and Breuer, Bertha Pappenheim, called “Anna O.” During her sessions with Breuer, Anna O spoke in French, Italian, English, and German: “As the disorder developed she could find almost no words at all, and would painfully piece them together out of four or five different languages, which made her almost incomprehensible” (“Case Histories: Fräulein” 29). On the one hand, Anna O. has access to a plurality of language, a multiplicity of words; on the other hand, she has access to no single language to express her suffering. As Anna O. would daydream and hallucinate, she became so absent that she could not even hear someone address her directly (“Case Histories: Fräulein” 40). She called her habitual daydreaming her “private theater” (45). She would return to traumatic moments from the past through a kind of self-hypnosis that she transformed into a second consciousness. Rachel Bowlby points out that the private theater can be illness or cure, depending on the audience. She argues that when Anna O. presents her traumatic scenes to Breuer “instead of being the sign of the illness, the second mental state could be made the means of the cure. . . . The one-woman show with the same person doubling as audience thus changed its register, taking on a restricted public form through the communication of words and feelings to another” (“Introduction” ix). Anna O. is credited with the invention of the term, “the talking cure” (“Case Histories: Fräulein” 34), to describe the psychoanalytic method of working through or talking through, even talking away one’s traumatic past. Henry, like

Anna O., has suffered “an irreversible loss” (*DS* x). Most critics assume that this “loss” is the father’s suicide, but this is not the only interpretation. The loss could refer to Henry’s crisis of boredom, indicating that he is as the cliché goes, “at a loss for words.” Not only is Henry unable to access the right words, he is censored for accessing the wrong ones. After his confession to boredom, he says “We must not say so” (Song 14, *DS* 16), and recalls his mother’s prohibition against confession.

Yet, Henry adopts his mother’s voice as a springboard into his own speech. The major shift in Song 14 occurs when he quotes her. Henry adopts the “stopless talking” (*We Dream* 335) of his mother at a time when he is without inspiration. He mothers himself by pushing himself to work through boredom and by eliminating the need for his actual mother to consistently harass him. The mother’s words mark the dramatic shift of the poem from the non-wish to the wish. Henry rejects the classic sources of inspiration, external sources. The poem provides a list of sources of awe, such as literature and people, which would be particularly inspiring for a poet.¹⁹ It is a testament to his prowess as a poet and literary critic that he is at times bored by bad writing. Henry gripes about literary criticism, while offering some of his own: “I can’t read any more of this Rich Critical Prose,/ he growled, broke wind, and scratched himself & left/ that fragrant area./ When the mind dies it exudes rich critical prose” (Song 170, *DS* 189). There are other references to the life of the academic: “Will assistant professors become associates/ by working on his work?” (Song 373, *DS* 373). Only an intellectual would bemoan the importance of books in this way: “Leaves on leaves on leaves of books I’ve turned/ and I know nothing, Henry said aloud,/ with his ultimate breath” (Song 370, *DS* 392). Only an academic would see a

¹⁹ Throughout *The Dream Songs*, there are many references to poets, philosophers, and writers. Some of the authors mentioned include Henry Miller (Song 65), Dylan Thomas (Song 88), Ben Jonson (Song 126), Joseph Addison (Song 177), Plath (Songs 126, 153, and 172), Matthew Arnold (Song 188), Keats (Songs 190 and 380), Yeats (Song 190 and 331), Kierkegaard (Song 192), A.E. Housman (Songs 205, 206, and 298), Dean Swift (Song 206), Samuel Beckett (Song 221), Heraclitus (Song 263), and Nietzsche (Song 378). Other references are made to reading: Berryman mentions the “dark-blue World Classics” (Song 338), The Folger Shakespeare Library, the Library of Congress, and the libraries at Columbia, Cambridge, Princeton, and the British Museum (Song 364). Critics have noted that there are more references to writing in the later songs, and there are certainly more literary allusions as well.

personal connection in terms of shared literary interests: “And now I meet you in the thinky place//...We have read the same fine writers all our lives/ & hoisted the same grave problems:/ that gives us/ somewhat in common, my dear” (Song 362, *DS* 384). He compares his “foes” to pretentious “footnotes...sought/ chiefly by doctoral candidates: props, & needed,—/ comic relief—absurd” (Song 352, *DS* 374). He wittily perceives a lanky woman as a minor poet: “Yvette’s ankles/ are slim as the thought of various poets I could mention” (Song 289, *DS* 311). Any disgust Berryman shows for literature stems out of a commitment to the craft of writing. Henry’s “o’er taxed brain.../ keeps an office hour” (Song 274, *DS* 293); Henry “bought books to have as his own/ cunningly, like extra wings” (Song 364, *DS* 386); “Henry loved,/ a scholar who swoops, who browses,// the daily routine of all his friends/ living, and he grew very good at it” (Song 277, *DS* 296).

The poem then moves onto and resists everyday sources of satisfaction: natural landscapes and alcohol. Yet, throughout *The Dream Songs*, Henry depends on these external sources to stimulate his internal resources. The natural world inspires Henry to personify or project the self onto waning moons, hills, elm trees, or cold winters.²⁰ Henry depends on intimate contact with nature: “Surely the galaxy will scratch my itch/ Augustinian, like the night-wind witch/ and I will love that touch” (Song 173, *DS* 192). When he is inspired, he reflects nature’s fecundity: “He brought.../ his grand energy,/ & flourished like a sycamore tree” Song 328, *DS* 350). The two mirror each other, a canal and a young poet’s creative overspill: “like this young man/ who only wanted to walk beside the canals/ talking about poetry and make it” Song 180, *DS* 199). Henry is moved by nature’s swift motion: “Strong winds are tossing Irish trees/ & putting my heart in a whirl” (Song 339, *DS* 361). Henry concedes in the opening of Song 14 that the “sky flashes,” “the great sea yearns” and like verdant nature, “we ourselves flash and yearn” (*DS* 16). The sea and sky return in the closing lines, but Henry’s “heavy bored[om]”

²⁰ Songs 44, 75, 116, 138, 246, and 378 suggest that nature either inspires Henry to write or reflects his lack of imagination. Songs 76, 143, and 292 connect the father’s suicide to the sea.

pushes flashing, yearning nature “considerably away” from view. What remains is drab, “tranquil hills” that “look like a drag” (*DS* 16). The word “drag” as a noun refers to “a heavy obstruction to progress,” “an annoyance,” or “a bore” (*OED*); as a verb, it denotes the slow progression on time or the act of “dragging along” in “painful or wearisome protraction” (*OED*). “Tranquil hills” are the antithesis of arduous mountain ranges; they also differ from the cliché “rolling hills” and suggest Henry’s lethargy. Alcohol, as a depressant and a metaphoric tranquilizer, is linked to these hills; however, alcoholism represents an insurmountable difficulty for the poet, as if he had to scale Mount Everest, not a hill.

In the poem, Henry lists “gin” last on his list of what bores him, as if a last resort or attempt to find mediocre, cheap pleasure. Although we know it is hardly a last thought. Alcohol figures very heavily throughout the volume, and issues of alcoholism, sobriety, and bars or Irish pubs become important subjects of Berryman’s poetry.²¹ The volume consistently satirizes drinking. Song 300, titled “Henry’s Comfort,” jokes, “Henry is feeling better,/ owing to three gin-&-vermouths” (*DS* 322), and Song 339 ironically states, “A maze of drink said: I will help you through the world” (*DS* 361). Not only is alcohol a subject, but also a symbol of intoxication or desire. Henry politely begs twice for strong drinks: “A little more whiskey please.// A little more whisky please” (Song 275, *DS* 294). We see Henry’s need to drink in relation to his urgency to write: “Women, cigarettes, liquor, need need need/ until he went to pieces./ The pieces sat up & wrote” (Song 311, *DS* 333). Yet Song 14 is about Henry’s failure to become intoxicated with any subject. Alcohol forms part of Berryman’s thematic material and voice. John Bayley speaks of Berryman’s “bar-room comments” throughout *Love and Fame* in which “people, events, feuds, and boastings...are as commonplace as the lunch-hour” (“John Berryman” 202-

²¹ References to alcohol occur in the following songs: 5, 15, 16, 44, 65, 72, 92, 97, 141, 169, 209, 210, 225, 246, 250, 256, 272, 276, 283, 292, 300, 306, 323, 343, 351, 356, 365, 366, and 369. Song 96 describes Henry’s hospitalization for alcoholism. Sobriety is mentioned in Songs 65, 76, 226, 232, 246, 350, and 269.

203). Vendler defines one aspect of his voice as “drunk-talk” (“John Berryman” 41); Robert Pinsky writes of the “extreme barroom-burlesque” in Berryman’s language (“Voices” 34). Most famously, Lewis Hyde made this hyperbolic statement: “The bulk of the Dream Songs were written by the spirit of alcohol, not John Berryman” and linked various aspects of Henry’s personality to that of the alcoholic (“Alcohol and Poetry” 215, 222).²²

In Song 14, the voices of the alcoholic (“gin”), the nature poet (“tranquil hills”), the academic (“great literature”), the boy (“as a boy”), and the mother (“my mother said”), are in differing degrees negated, yet given a hearty farewell. Jeffrey Alan Triggs argues that Berryman “satirizes in particular the middle class ecstasy over the common function of nature,” and rejects both “the artificial paradises of ‘tranquil hills’ and ‘gin,’” and “the Baudelairean stance of the alienated or adversary poet” (“Dream Songs” 59). Yet, at the end of the poem, Berryman shifts dramatically from negation to creation. The final act of the poem reveals an animal’s pure excitement but without the animal. In the poem’s last line, Henry enacts the wagging of a dog’s tail, becoming the word and action “wag” (*DS* 16). Like a dog’s tail-wagging, Henry’s wagging excitement occurs suddenly. The transition from boredom to thrill is “and somehow,” which shows the mysterious way in which desire is found: in the suspension of will, between the acts. Similarly, Walt Whitman in “Song of Myself” invites his soul in a kind of serene idleness: “I loafe and invite my soul,/ I lean and loafe at my ease” (I, lines 4-5, *Leaves of Grass* 26). Henry’s “heavy” boredom lightens by the end of the poem; no longer afraid of the doldrums, he invites and extends time by piling on the conjunction “and.” There are four instances of “and” as word or symbol. “And” is used as anaphora: “And the tranquil hills, & gin, look like a drag/ and somehow a dog” (*DS* 16); the ampersand is used two times in the stanza. The poem creates a sense of creative overflow as well as the progression of time.

²² Hyde later qualifies this essay by explaining the context in which it was written: during a time when alcoholism was a taboo subject (“Berryman Revisited” 271).

Henry speaks in spite of boredom or because of it. He is not simply bored by activities. He opens the song with this universal statement: “Life, friends, is boring” (*DS* 16). This statement recalls Martin Heidegger’s conception of “profound boredom,” which is distinct from being bored by persons, things, or the process of waiting. “Profound boredom” stems from “temporality in a particular way of its temporalizing” (158), which engages us in questions of being. Heidegger sees this type of boredom as “a fundamental attunement of our Dasein in a question, in a questioning attitude” (*Fundamental Concepts* 132), which is “a fundamental attunement of philosophizing” (80). He uses the term “Dasein,” which literally means “being-there,” to indicate “a fundamental manner and fundamental way of being” (67). Miguel de Beistegui states that, “In the face of boredom, everything becomes equal, equally indifferent” (“Boredom” 71). In Song 14, “gin” is equally boring as “great literature”; “achilles” with a lower-case “a” is as boring as “Henry”; the “hills” as “peoples” (*DS* 16). de Beistegui concludes that the “wresting of power of this or that being...is the surging forth...of existence as being-in-the-world” so that we are “no longer holding on to the world” and “existence discloses itself as pure possibility” (71). Song 14 raises issues of existence, as Berryman emphasizes moments passing through the use of “and” and adds layers to an already multi-layered persona in the poem’s final movement.

To emphasize Henry’s agency in his transformation, Berryman shows how Henry turns himself into a dog-like cat when he is excited. Henry consistently refers to himself as a cat in the *Dream Songs*: “I am Henry Pussy-cat! My whiskers fly!” (Song 22, *DS* 24).²³ Henry even has nine lives like a cat (Song 295, *DS* 37). Despite his established feline persona, Henry adopts an aspect of the dog’s movement to animate himself. For example, in Song 54, Henry sees himself as the existential image of a dog chasing his own tail and losing speed: “I have been operating from *nothing*, / like a dog after its tail/ more slowly,

²³ Songs 19, 49, 90, 108, 231, 264, 296, 322, and 365 also refer to Henry as a cat.

losing altitude” (*DS* 61). The dog chases after its own tail, and stops only when he runs out of energy, not when he discovers the absurdity of the task.

William Empson writes about various uses of the word “dog” in English literature; he links the dog figure to the cynic and to the Unconscious. First, Empson analyzes the Elizabethan’s perception of the “grin of dogs” as “part of their reputation for satire” (“The English Dog” 164). The dog’s behavior was seen as cynical, not just its’ grinning, but also its’ convulsing or writhing, and, more significantly, urinating frequently on trees, poles, or objects, which was read as a sign of “contempt” (164-165). In Song 14, there is a sense that the joke is on us, when the dog suddenly appears, then disappears, taking his tail but not the corresponding wag. Second, Empson argues for a connection between dogs and the Unconscious, which he defines as the “source of the impulses that keep us sane, but may mysteriously fail us in drought” (169). In the seventeenth century, the dog embodied “goodhumour and humility”; although the dog’s thought process was unknown, writers perceived the “results” of its thinking to be “homely and intelligible” (169). This reassured seventeenth-century writers that “what we do not know about the roots of our own minds” must be “cheerful and not alarming” (169). In the closing stanza of Song 14, we see Henry finding the desires of his Unconscious after a drought of boredom, and he turns to a dog that is both cynical and light-hearted. He has abandoned Henry, taking off with his own tail, possibly Henry’s tale. Yet the dog leaves Henry behind, which means Henry has a self. Henry is left with something. He has the very resources he felt he lacked earlier, the resources with which to write: the self, knowledge of his desires, and desire to write. The dog is seen “leaving/ behind: me, wag” (*DS* 16). The dog’s tail ironically leaves Henry and leaves behind resources for Henry’s tale: words (“me, wag”), desire (“wag”), and the self (“me”).

Henry is defined as “wag.” Henry is the wag without the dog or the tail; he is the strange synecdoche of the dog. This recreation of Henry Pussy-cat into a wag is both negation and creation. The wagging could signify poetic self-fashioning, the wagging line

of cursive script across the page of paper. Although the wagging is disembodied in the sense that there is no longer a dog or tail, the wagging is connected to Henry, who is the “me” in the last line. Henry replaces the wagging finger of the mother, who censors her son’s confessions, with the wagging line of poetry, which springs forth from him.

Berryman puns on the word “wag,” which can refer to the wagging motion of the dog’s tail as well as to a joker. The word “wag” means “a mischievous boy (often as a mother’s term of endearment to a baby boy),” and more generally, “anyone ludicrously mischievous” (*OED*). When Berryman ends the song with the word “me” followed by a comma and the appositive “wag,” he characterizes himself as a joker, and imitates his mother’s voice, her endearing voice to her child. Henry wavers, oscillates, or wags between the two poles of assertion and recognition. He acknowledges his mother’s voice in his own, defining himself in his mother’s label for him as a “wag.” He asserts himself by speaking “me” first, in birthing himself with his speech. Another pun in the final stanza illuminates this pun, “tale” and “tail.” The wagging tail could also be read as a wag’s tale. When Henry births himself, he does so through writing the tale of his relationship with his mother.

The Dream Songs suggests that the poet’s tale is not always to be believed. On the occasion of his mother’s seventy-second birthday, Henry makes a speech and toasts to her. He marvels at his mother’s character, specifically her courage: “How this woman came by the courage, how she got/ the courage” (*DS* 117). Henry “grown// but not grown used to the goodness of this woman/ in her strength, in her hope superhuman,” celebrates his mother, while subverting this praise at the same time. In the last lines, he raises his glass of bourbon for the toast, “and drank her a tall one, tall” (*DS* 117), suggesting that he has told a tall tale. Berryman points out Henry’s agency as a poet to exaggerate and create the story of his mother’s life, while at the same time recognizing her separate identity as a courageous woman.

In an earlier volume, *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet* (1953) linked with *The Dream Songs* because of the use of a dramatic persona, Berryman identifies with mothers by writing about child-birth as if from first-hand experience. Berryman, in using the persona of the American poet Anne Bradstreet, writes about childbirth. Anne marvels at her body, that she is able to bring forth a child: “I can *can* no longer/ and it passes the wretched trap whelming me I am me/ drencht & powerful. I did it with my body!” (*Homage* 137-138). In *Homage*, Berryman celebrates the way in which the maternal body can create and can endure suffering to create: “Mountainous, woman not breaks and will bend” (*Homage* 138). Anne Bradstreet is a unique figure for Berryman because she is a mother and a poet who gives birth to children and to American poetry. Bradstreet’s founding role as an American poet in the tradition becomes relevant to Berryman’s conception of his poetic identity; we see in Song 14 and elsewhere that Berryman wishes not only to be birthed, or to be derived from a mother-figure, but also he wishes to perform the birth, in his own words, with his own body. Perhaps this is why Berryman is interested in Bradstreet as a woman and mother, rather than strictly as a gifted poet. Berryman states that Bradstreet interested him “almost from the beginning, as a woman, not much as a poetess” (“One Answer” 328). He says, in fact, that Bradstreet’s work did not interest him at all, calling Bradstreet a “boring high-minded Puritan woman who may have been our first American poet but is not a good one” (328). Christopher Benfey argues that Berryman’s anxiety about poetry’s seemingly effeminate nature merges with Bradstreet’s anxiety about writing within a male-dominated literary scene (“The Woman” 165). Benfey maintains that Berryman finds in Bradstreet “a more disguised means of expression for aspects of himself that he regarded as effeminate” (165), thus participating in the tradition of outsiders Bradstreet represents for him while wearing a mask, as she did. This is the kind of literary kinship Bloom neglects because of his gender bias: the kinship based on masking and swapping genders. We have a male poet writing about pregnancy and

childbirth who is conversing across time with a female poet writing into a patriarchal tradition.

William Meredith writes in an elegy for Berryman, “In Loving Memory of the Late Author of *Dream Songs*, “For all your indignation, your voice/ was part howl only, part of it was caress./ *Adorable* was a word you threw around” (*Effort at Speech* 174). Many critics have written on Berryman’s masculine “howl,” noting the theme of dismembered female bodies in *The Dream Songs*. These critics have not only neglected the “caress” of Berryman’s language, but also the “howl” against men and women alike. Ian Gregson discusses Song 270 along with passages from *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet*, *Recovery*, and other songs from *The Dream Songs*, and argues that “at the heart of John Berryman’s work there is an image of violence against women” (“John Berryman and the Buried” 39). However, Gregson doesn’t discuss the many instances of comparable imagined violence against men, particularly Henry’s father. Henry spits on his father’s grave, digs up the casket and axes it open (Song 384, *DS* 402). There are other male dismembered bodies in *The Dream Songs*; for example, as a landlord Henry tries to collect overdue rent money and threatens the tenants with violence (Song 332, *DS* 358). He doesn’t show partiality in subordinating or violating women, as Gregson argues, but targets the human body, at times the genderless fragmented body, such as the “brains” and the “nose” (Song 95, *DS* 112). A recognition of violence is an integral part of the personality—directed at men as well as women.

In *The Dream Songs* Henry praises women as superior to men, almost as a kind of mother, as in a superior example, of the human race: “Women is better, braver” (Song 15, *DS* 17); “A woman is kinder” (Song 244, *DS* 263). Henry imagines himself as a woman: “I am the woman powerful as a zoo” (Song 22, *DS* 24). Henry recognizes himself in an emotive woman who chooses not to tell him her woes: “I am her” (Song 242, *DS* 261). In an elegy for W. C. Williams, Henry compares Williams’ role as a gynecologist to his role as a poet: “At dawn you rose & wrote—the books poured forth—/ you delivered infinite

babies, in one great birth” (Song 324, *DS* 346). The gynecologist-poet births babies, books, and future poets.

In his novel *Recovery* (1973), Berryman creates a similar mother-son struggle between protagonist Dr. Alan Severance and his mother. In his journal Severance describes his mother as “an unspeakably powerful possessive adoring MOTHER, whose life at 75 is still centered wholly on *me*” yet credits her for shaping him in constructive ways, “My debts to her immeasurable: ambition, stamina, resourcefulness, taste” (*Recovery* 80). The capitalized “MOTHER” is god-like in her dominance, both “powerful” and “possessive,” even in old age. The protagonist’s surname Severance evokes anxiety over severing ties from the mother. The first name Alan sounds like the word alone, suggesting the protagonist’s search to live up to his name by achieving independence. We see how possessiveness functions in the formation of identity, as it involves two people in a relationship with each other, whether we are looking at Henry’s mother or Severance’s MOTHER. Severance and Henry both interrogate what it means to assert one’s independence while receiving recognition from others and recognizing the uniqueness of others. Jessica Benjamin writes about the “delicate balance” of “assertion and recognition”: “This balance is integral to what is called ‘differentiation’: the individual’s development as a self that is aware of its distinctness from others” (*Bonds* 12). Benjamin asserts that recognition is what “allows the self to realize its agency and authorship in a tangible way” (*Bonds* 12). We see the balancing act in *The Dream Songs* between assertion and recognition. In Song 117, Henry recognizes the ways in which he and his mother “are for each other” (*DS* 134), yet in Song 166, he wishes to sever ties with his mother (*DS* 185).

Henry asserts that independence from his mother is the origin of his art: “Thus his art started. Thus he ran away from home/ toward home, forsaking too withal his mother/ in the almost unbearable smother” (Song 166, *DS* 185). The language recalls Christ’s words to the disciples: “If any man come to me, and hate not his father, and mother, and wife,

and children, and brethren, and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple” (Luke 14:26, *KJV*). Additionally, Christ makes this promise: “And every one that hath forsaken houses, or brethren, or sisters, or father, or mother, or wife, or children, or lands, for my name's sake, shall receive an hundredfold, and shall inherit everlasting life (Matthew 19:29, *KJV*). In both passages, Christ’s disciple is called to abandon the mother to pursue a kind of spiritual aesthetic. Berryman mimics Christ’s call to suggest a parallel pursuit of art. In Song 166, the rhyme of “mother” with “smother,” which also appears in Song 212, as noted, indicates the difficulty of forsaking one’s mother. This rhyme points us to another sight rhyme, a repeated rhyme of “home” with “home” in the previous lines, connecting “mother” with “home.” Henry’s escape from his mother is not as simple as running away from home. Henry runs toward home, seeking mutual recognition. Strangely, Henry describes his mother’s smother as “almost unbearable” (Song 166, *DS* 185), which is a kind of paradox akin to “more perfect.” The hesitation, seen in the qualifying adverb, signals the continual negotiation of the boundaries of their relationship. In Song 158, Henry relates a similar message about the separation of child and parent. The literary child admires and reads the parent “like a story, page on page,/ until it wearieth// and then the child must outgo on its own:/ outgo!” (*DS* 177). The child wearies, as if growing bored, of the parent’s story, and seeks to create his own by leaving home. Yet, the forcefulness of “must outgo” and the command “outgo!” reveal the tension between the boring familiar and the terrifying unfamiliar. To forsake his mother and outgo proves to be an ongoing process for Henry.

iii. On Robert Lowell’s “Unwanted”

In a now famous book review, M.L. Rosenthal remarks, “The use of poetry for the most naked kind of confession grows apace in our day,” arguing that Lowell’s *Life Studies*

(1959) is a “series of personal confidences, rather shameful, that one is honor-bound not to reveal” (“Poetry as Confession” 64). Rosenthal expresses disapproval of Lowell’s “public discrediting of his father’s manliness and character,” stating, “I wonder if a man can allow himself this kind of ghoulish operation on his father without doing his own spirit incalculable damage” (64). Later, Rosenthal states that the term “confessional...by now has done a certain amount of damage” (“Robert Lowell and ‘Confessional’” 25). He revises his initial reaction to suggest that Lowell’s “mastery” of the subject matter in *Life Studies* is perhaps just as “shock[ing]” now as the “self-exposing frankness” “seemed in 1959” (“Robert Lowell and ‘Confessional’” 31). Unfortunately, however, Rosenthal’s book review cemented a view of confessional poetry as self-exposure. However, *Life Studies* is not self-disclosure, but self-fashioning.

In comparison to *Life Studies*, which was credited with a breakthrough in twentieth-century poetry, *Day by Day* (1977) has been viewed by and large as a failure. Donald Hall’s review was the harshest: “*Day by Day* will remain a sad footnote to the corruption of a great poet” (“Robert Lowell” 12). Hall says he is “depressed” by the book’s “trashiness” (8), “dead metaphors” (9), and “overall tone,” which “proclaims the lassitude and despondency of self-imitation” (10). Others who reviewed *Day by Day* criticized its shapelessness. Calvin Bedient says that Lowell’s “subject bends in so many places, collapses on him so, that he cannot make a roundness of it; it is a chockablock with immediate unfinished life” (“Desultorily Yours” 287). Denis Donoghue, likewise, claims that Lowell lost his touch in *Day by Day*, “as if the joy of words had...gone sour” (“Lowell at the End” 200). He asserts, “This is probably bound to happen when a poetry of seizure, like Lowell’s in the early books, tires of itself...It is the price a poet has to pay for a hair-raising art when his energy falls off: he lapses into poses, the gesture of habit, going through the motions” (“Lowell at the End” 200). Such critics fail that *Day by Day* revises the confessional mode by returning to the old subject matter, but without caricature: instead, the depictions of his parents are more fair and his self-portraits more vulnerable.

Day by Day should not be read as the poetry of exhaustion, but, instead as the voice of a mature poet facing old age, the deaths of friends, and events previously untouched in his earlier work.

Helen Vendler is one of very few critics to praise *Day by Day*. Vendler reads the volume as “a journal, written ‘day by day,’” as a “fragment of an autobiography,” and as a “heartbreaking record” (“Last Days” 105), looking for something different than the other critics, for the meandering, interrogative, meditative texture of the final book, obsessed as it is with exile, death, and broken relationships. David Perkins speculates *Day by Day* is devoid of “a teleological perspective” evident in *Life Studies* (“Robert Lowell” 416). Whereas in *Life Studies*, the poet “assumed he knew what the events were—what had happened” (417), Perkins claims that in *Day by Day*, the poet “take[s] experiences one at a time, to perceive each only for itself” (417). I agree with Perkins and Vendler that the volume has a fragmented texture, and questions how we know what we know, but I disagree that the volume isolates experience, because *Day by Day* constantly refers to the past represented in *Life Studies*. “Unwanted” (from *Day by Day*) even takes for granted that readers know Lowell’s past, which has become literary history: the “causes for my misadventure” are by now “too obvious to name” (CPRL 831). “Unwanted” alludes to the success of *Life Studies* and the confidence with which it was written: “I was surer, wasn’t I, once.../ and had flashes when I first found/ a humor for myself in images” (CPRL 831).

Lowell questions and revises *Life Studies*’ representation of his parents. For example, unlike the mother of *Life Studies*, who together with the poet gangs up on Lowell Senior, the mother of “Unwanted” subtracts from the poet’s confidence.²⁴ In “Returning” (from *History*), Lowell demarcates the separate roles he, his mother, and father play, yet

²⁴ In *Life Studies*, the mother figures in the prose piece “91 Revere Street” (CPRL 121-150), and poems “Commander Lowell” (CPRL 172-174), “For Sale” (CPRL 178), “Sailing Home from Rapallo” (CPRL 179-180), and “During Fever” (CPRL 181-182). In *History*, see “Mother and Father 1” (CPRL 511), “Mother and Father 2” (CPRL 511), “Mother, 1972” (CPEL 512), and “Returning” (CPRL 512). In *Day by Day*, “Art of the Possible” (CPRL 746-40), “To Mother” (CPRL 789-90), “Ten Minutes” (CPRL 819-820), and “Unwanted” (CPRL 831-834) focus on the mother. The earlier poems portray the mother as strong in relation to the weak father, whereas the poems in *Day by Day* treat the parents more even-handedly.

shows how these roles are potentially interchangeable: “Mother and Father, I try to receive you/ as if you were I, as if I were you” (CPRL 512). The poem emphasizes the effort involved in the process of putting oneself in someone else’s shoes. The verb “try” and the two uses of the conditional “as if” highlight the difficulty of the task. In “To Mother” in *Day by Day*, Lowell writes, “It has taken me the time since you died/ to discover you are as human as I am.../ if I am” (CPRL 790). On the one hand, Lowell expresses how he came to see his mother as a human being, as a person with flaws, complex emotions, and a variety of life experiences. On the other hand, Lowell questions whether he is “human” to begin with. Reena Sastri reads the last line of this poem as an “unsettling instance of identification”: “The last qualifying clause unsettles (if I am human? if I exist?), preventing the poem from resting too complacently in affirmation, and precluding the smugness of positing the “I” as the measure of the human” (“Intimacy and Agency” 482). Lowell doesn’t see himself as a representative human, not even a representative Lowell. He acknowledges the limits of identifying with his parents; he emphasizes the generation gap between him and his father. In “Robert T.S. Lowell,” in *Day by Day*, a dialogue between father and son, the son laments the strange reality that he is not his father’s peer, that he could not have met his father when they were the same age. The son wishes to be his father’s equal, a member of his father’s generation, sharing life experiences and memories of historical events. He wishes for camaraderie with his father, yet the poem emphasizes the generational gap: “I futilely wished/ to meet you at my age” (CPRL 791). We see a different futile wish in “Unwanted”: Lowell seems to say to his mother, “I futilely wished/ to meet you when you may not have wanted to have me.” With the father, Lowell wishes they could be peers, equals. With the mother, the valence is vulnerable; the poem acknowledges the mother’s existence rather than the poet’s.

“Unwanted” considers whether the poet was an unwanted child and whether such a “fact” could be confirmed. The poem changes the assumption that confessional material is

either a record of the past or meant to sound like one.²⁵ In the poem Lowell tells an unknowable pre-history rather than the self-consciously edited version of an event he remembers. He formulates a story that could have happened, invoking the unknowability of the past. Lowell creates the past through imagination and through mediators such as his psychologist. In the poem “Epilogue,” also in *Day by Day*, Lowell asks the question, “Yet why not say what happened?” (CPRL 838), raising questions about whether confessional poetry does say what happened. Perhaps one can’t “say what happened” because one doesn’t know. In “Unwanted,” Lowell can’t know whether he was unwanted, not from experience. The poem refuses to stage confession, complicating the notion of saying what happened.

“Unwanted” explores how one knows what happened. In the poem there are nine questions: “I was surer, wasn’t I....? (CPRL 831), “Did he become mother’s lover/ and prey/ by rescuing her from me?” (CPRL 832), “You know/ you were an unwanted child?” (CPRL 832), “unwanted before I am?” (CPRL 832), “Was she?” (CPRL 833), a rhetorical question that elides the question mark, “How many of her statements began with,/ *But Papá always said or Oh Bobby...*” (CPRL 833), and a series of three questions that ends the poem:

Is the one unpardonable sin
our fear of not being wanted?
For this, will mother go on cleaning house
for eternity, and making it unlivable?
Is getting well ever an art,
or art a way to get well? (CPRL 834).

Not only is the poem full of questioning, it ends with more questions than those with which it begins. Use of the hypothetical and the conditional also suggest uncertainty. For example, “Carl Jung said to mother in Zurich,/ ‘If your son is as you have described him,/

²⁵Marjorie Perloff revises the notion of confessional poetry as a record of the past by suggesting that Lowell “mythologizes his private life” and juxtaposes objects in his poems to create a “metonymic mode” of writing (*The Poetic Art* 99).

he is an incurable schizophrenic” (*CPRL* 832). The conditional invites the question of whether Lowell is as his mother has described him, and the larger question of whether any of us accurately represents the self or others. Ellipses in the poem indicate the meditative texture, which is suggestive, inviting the reader to finish the sentence. There are ten uses of ellipses in the poem. For example, Lowell writes about his mother, “She was stupider than my wife...” (*CPRL* 833), which is less a statement than an idea one tries on for size, since in the previous stanza, Lowell says, “One thing is certain—compared with my wives,/ mother was stupid. Was she?” (*CPRL* 833). When Lowell says of Dr. Merrill Moore, the family psychiatrist: “Dead he is still a mystery” (*CPRL* 832), he also alludes to his mother’s mysteriousness, wondering if Moore became her “lover” (*CPRL* 832). The poet implies that such questions are “still” unanswered because he doesn’t want to know about his mother’s sex life. He both wants to know and doesn’t want to know.

In the poem, Moore tells Lowell, “You know/ you were an unwanted child?” (*CPRL* 832). However, Lowell recasts the revelation, which is not even taken as fact, by inventing a painful conversation between himself and his mother. Lowell speaks to her, offering the possibility of forgiveness for the unpardonable words she utters:

... Mother,
 I must not blame you for carrying me in you
 on your brisk winter lunges across
 the desperate, refusey Staten Island beaches,
 their good view skyscrapers on Wall Street. . .
 for yearning seaward, far from any home, and saying,
 “I wish I were dead, I wish I were dead.”
 Unforgivable for a mother to tell her child—
 but you wanted me to share your good fortune,
 perhaps, by recapturing the disgust of those walks;
 your credulity assumed we survived,
 while weaklings fell with the dead and the dying (*CPRL* 832-833).

Lowell says he “must not blame” his mother, yet calls her “unforgiveable” for telling him the story of her pregnancy. We know from the poem that the mother doesn’t tell him the story; Moore does. The motif of guilt runs throughout the poem, particularly seen in the role-reversal where Lowell wants to forgive his mother of something rather than feel that

he needs forgiveness from his mother. Rather than consider himself as a source of pain to his mother, Lowell imagines that she tells him the “unforgiveable.” Lowell feigns a kind of control by telling his mother that he will take the high road: he “must not blame” her. He speaks directly to her, shifting dramatically from the second to first person. He plays the role of confessor who could grant forgiveness to his confessant-mother if she would tell the story. He invents her explanation: the pregnancy was one of lonely desperation and a death-wish. He empathizes with his mother’s pain by imagining her words and predicament.

Although on the one hand, Lowell seems eager to forgive his mother for a story he imagines she tells him, on the other hand, he is also eager to point out that such a telling would be unpardonable: “Unforgivable for a mother to tell her child—” (*CPRL* 833). The line evokes the hypothetical, stating that it would be unforgiveable if a mother told her child. Lowell thus imagines his mother committing the unforgiveable sin of telling him. The telling is unforgiveable, not the tale. There are two possible interpretations of the mother’s imagined narration. The mother might have told her son in the sense that she spoke her death wish out loud when she was pregnant. The words are meant for the self and “overheard” by the fetus, an extension of the self. Lowell shows great understanding of her fear of pregnancy and motherhood. The mother’s “I” statement contains four uses of the first-person singular: “I wish I were dead, I wish I were dead” (*CPRL* 833). There is so much emphasis on the mother’s identity that the poet suggests his fetus-like echo of her personality in the poem. Another interpretation of the scene is that Lowell imagines his mother tells him the story after he is born. The poem suggests a knowing interlocutor who is “me” and “her child” (*CPRL* 832-833). The poem’s ending indicates that the mother is not to be fully blamed: although her narration is “unforgivable,” the poem implies that the “unpardonable sin” is, rather, “our fear of not being wanted” (*CPRL* 834). It is his fear that makes the story unpalatable.

Lowell suggests his mother could have told anyone—Moore, the ladies in her reading group, her husband—but “her child.” At first glance, the word “child” evokes the image of a young child, yet Lowell uses the phrase “her child” rather than “a child,” and he is always his mother’s child, no matter his age. The term is ambivalent about age and thus about agency. To what extent is the child responsible for being undesired? The term child denotes a lack of agency, even if the child is an adult child. One aspect of being the child and not the parent in the child-parent relationship is to have the sense that you are, in fact, child-like by comparison to one’s parent, that is, dependent and vulnerable. Philip Roth expresses the idea that one is always infantile in the presence of one’s parents; in *Portnoy’s Complaint*, Alexander Portnoy complains to his analyst, “Good Christ, a Jewish man with parents alive is a fifteen-year-old boy, and will remain a fifteen-year-old boy till *they die!*....Doctor! Doctor! Did I say fifteen? Excuse me, I meant ten! I meant five! I meant zero! A Jewish man with his parents alive is half the time a helpless *infant!*” (111). In *Portnoy’s Complaint*, the therapeutic setting is complicated by the fact that the fictional analyst Dr. O Spielvogel doesn’t speak throughout the novel until the last sentence of the book, at which point he or she says with an Austrian accent, “now vee may perhaps to being. Yes?” (274). However, the information on the back of the book tells us that the fictional Dr. O Spielvogel writes a paper entitled “The Puzzled Penis” in the respected Austrian journal, *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* (*International Zeitschrift für Psychoanalyse*), which puts forth his theory, “Portnoy’s Complaint.” We learn that Portnoy’s Complaint is a disorder in which the patient lacks ethical boundaries for his or her sexual life, and pursues gratification through voyeurism, fetishes, degradation of women, oral sex, exhibitionism, and compulsive masturbation. The patient is never satisfied sexually because of feelings of shame and the fear of castration, which is attributed to problems in the mother-child relationship.²⁶ In Roth’s novel, both parents are

²⁶ See Judith Hanlon’s essay on *Portnoy’s Complaint* for a discussion of the mother-son relationship from a psychoanalytic perspective (“Mahler’s Developmental”)

implicated in Portnoy's immorality and impotence; however, the mother receives harsher treatment than the father does. The humor in the passage is less about the stereotypical Jewish mother and more about the universal power struggle between parents and children. It stems from the idea that someone who isn't Jewish could possibly escape the fate of being forever a child, yet everyone, part of any ethnicity or religion, can relate to this fate. Lowell in "Unwanted" sees himself as forever his mother's "child." Suggesting the connotations of vulnerability and dependency, Lowell chooses the word "child" rather than "son;" he refers to himself as "her child," not her son in "Unwanted."

The word "child" and its variants are used six times in the poem: the poet is "an only child" (*CPRL* 832); the pregnant mother is "with child" (*CPRL* 832), the poet is asked if he knows he is "an unwanted child" (*CPRL* 832); the mother would be blamed if she told "her child" he was unwanted (*CPRL* 833); the mother tells her son, "'When you have a child of your own, you'll know'" (*CPRL* 833); the mother has a "dowry for her children..." (*CPRL* 833). When the mother tells her son he will only understand her when he has a child of his own, we picture a young child or teenager. Parents often threaten their children to behave by saying, "I hope you have children just as awful as you are." The word "child" in the poem always suggests the mother-child relationship: the pregnant mother "with child," the mother's "unwanted child," and the mother's use of the word "child." By contrast, when the word "son" is used in the poem, it is used directly after the word father, "father and son" (*CPRL* 833).

As Lowell defines himself as his mother's child, he raises the question of what it means to be the child of one's mother, as opposed to the child of one's father, for example. Jessica Benjamin sheds light on preoedipal identification with the mother and oedipal disidentification with the mother, in which male children view their mothers as a regressive force. In the oedipal stage, the male child denies intersubjectivity, initially experienced in the mother-infant dyad: "Emotional attachment, sharing states of mind, emphatically assuming the other's position, and imaginatively perceiving the other's needs

and feelings—these are now associated with cast-off femininity” (*Bonds* 170). Oedipal theory thus rejects the possibilities of intersubjectivity between men and women, beginning with sons and mothers (*Bonds* 181). Benjamin critiques the Oedipal complex for confining “women to a contested point on the triangle, never an other whose different and equal subjectivity need be confronted. By rejecting the false premise of paternal authority as the only road to freedom, we may recover the promise on which the oedipal theory has defaulted: coming to terms with difference” (*Bonds* 181). As we see in Benjamin’s critique of the Oedipal model, object relations offers a more nuanced, complex perspective on cross-gender relationships, particularly between mothers and sons, rather than a limited view of father-son rivalry.²⁷ Crucially, in “Unwanted,” Lowell perceives his identity in terms of the preoedipal, seen in the way he imagines his mother’s pregnancy and fears. Lowell imagines his mother’s feelings while maintaining the independence of his feelings, inflecting Benjamin’s intersubjective model.

The poem suggests that the mother’s narration of her pregnancy is imagined, because Lowell appears to be shocked (in the poem) when Moore asks him if he knows he is unwanted. The poem makes it clear that Lowell was “in college” (*CPRL* 832) when Moore asked him, suggesting she didn’t tell her son he was unwanted. Depicting the process of coming to terms with a painful realization, Lowell bombards his lines with punctuation—dashes, ellipses, and a question:

I shook him off the scent by pretending
 anyone is unwanted in a medical sense—
 lust our only father. . . and yet
 in that world where an only child
 was a scandal—
 unwanted before I am? (*CPRL* 832)

²⁷ Barbara L. Estrin adopts the Oedipal model in reading Lowell’s “Unwanted” and discusses the poet’s position as “scorned lover” and “abused child” (“Lowelling” 86). Estrin neglects the many ways that Lowell achieves agency through imagining his mother’s story and she ignores positive aspects of the mother-child relationship.

Lowell puzzles over how he could be unwanted before he existed, as if to say he understands that his mother might not want him after she had him, when he causes her grief. But how could he be unwanted before? In an earlier prose piece, "Antebellum Boston" (1957), Lowell reflects on the time before his birth as ironically the time he could not be blamed for anything: "The two years before my birth are more real to me than the two years which followed...I was often glad I could not be blamed for anything that happened during the months I was becoming alive" (*CPR* 292). The idea of a clean slate, without a record of wrongs, without guilt, is connected to the idea of a pre-history. To be alive is to be guilty, he suggests. Thus, Lowell depicts himself as shocked in the therapy session with Moore, shocked that he could be either guilty or unwanted. Significantly, Lowell says he pretends that everyone else was an unwanted child, too. The line break after the verb "pretending" heightens the speaker's sense of desperation in the moment of revelation.

As we see in the imagined scene with his mother, Lowell pretends to Moore that he knew he was unwanted. He pretends to know precisely out of vulnerability. He alters the rhetorical situation, pretending his mother revealed the secret to him, inventing his mother's confession. As if omniscient, Lowell confesses his mother's story for her and supposes he can also play the part of confessor, resolving not to blame her, but to understand her: "I must not blame you" (*CPRL* 832). Lowell not only invents his mother's narration of the story of her pregnancy, but the reasoning behind it. He imagines she tells him the story, "recapturing the disgust of those walks" (*CPRL* 833) along the beaches where she cried that she wanted to die, because she believes they survived together "while weaklings fell with the dead and the dying" (*CPRL* 833). He tells his mother, "you wanted me to share your good fortune,/ perhaps" (*CPRL* 833). While admitting that he cannot know his mother's motive in this invented conversation, he also points out that his mother couldn't have known how he would have responded to her story, no matter how positively she spun it. The mother's "credulity assumed we survived" (*CPRL* 833): the poet assumes

she would mythologize their shared victory. To the son, perhaps the story is not about glorious origins, but about the accident of his birth. By emphasizing two different presentations of the same story, the poem invites us to see both parties involved in the imaginative act.

In “Antebellum Boston” (1957), Lowell celebrates his prerogative as a memoirist to imagine his mother’s past. In the prose piece, Lowell gives a version of the story found in “Unwanted.” He describes his mother’s miserable time with Grandmother Lowell and Great-grandmother Myers during Commander Lowell’s time at sea: “The only thing she enjoyed was taking brisk walks and grieving over the fact that she was pregnant. She took pride in looking into the great Atlantic Ocean and saying, without a trace of fear or illusion, ‘I wish I could die’” (*CPR* 300). The prose suggests an ironic valor, psychic distance, and indifference that the poem sublimates. Neither version is authoritative; both explore different tones and shades of experience, yet raise similar epistemological questions. The writing of the memoir precedes *Day by Day* by two decades, which is another instance of *Day by Day* as revision. Throughout “Antebellum Boston,” as in “Unwanted,” Lowell points to the unknowability of the past and his freedom to imagine a past he was not responsible for. Lowell often uses the verb “I imagined” in conjunction with his mother. Lowell writes, “I imagined Mother waiting to be handed into her touring car, a frail, ailing, indestructible, thirty-foot, carriage-like affair which already had the distinguished and obsolete air of a museum piece or a prop in a silent movie” (*CPR* 295). He points to the way his imagination operates, springing from conversations and scrapbooks, yet moving ultimately beyond mere archives or agreed-upon facts: “From my mother’s scrapbooks and from her reminiscences, I can imagine scenes that took place in 1915. Perhaps it is fraudulent for me to describe recollections of things I did not see” (*CPR* 292). Although Lowell puzzles over whether he is plagiarizing his mother and exploiting her for her stories, he argues that these stories are his history, an internalization of his mother’s past: “More and more I began to try to imagine Mother” (*CPR* 293).

Lowell records his susceptibility to her stories as a child: “I found that all I had to do was to hold my breath when Mother talked about her girlhood and then it all came vividly to me. The large houses, the staff of servants, the immense house parties, the future—I was there, living it all” (*CPR* 293). Lowell sees himself as so connected to his mother that he can collaborate with her in constructing her past. Part of his ability to conceive of his mother’s identity involves silencing his own subjectivity, holding his breath as it were, as if he is trying not to speak, not to project onto his mother. He almost seems to wish not to be alive to free himself from seeing his mother as only his mother. Thus, he can perceive his mother as a woman who exists independent of him in a way that he, as her child, cannot exist independent of her.

The limitations of knowledge become the possibilities of the imagination. In “Antebellum Boston,” Lowell writes “I wanted to recapture the mother I remembered and so I began to fabricate” (*CPR* 293). The verbs “remember” and “fabricate” appear to be mutually exclusive; however, the verbs are linked by another verb, “recapture.” In order to recapture the past so it sounds to the reader like an experienced past, Lowell has to fabricate. Frank Bidart says that Lowell’s poetry fabricates candor, so the reader experiences the constructed poem in all its detail as real: “Autobiography promises that the walls of the house will dissolve, the veil that separates us from what is real will at last be lifted. In a Lowell poem what the reader is offered with at times startling candor is an invented world dense with the luminous opacity of life” (“Afterword” 1001). Bidart argues that a Lowell poem is paradoxically clear and mysterious; on the one hand, Lowell’s work contains narrative details such as place-names or dates. On the other hand, the work, and confessional poetry more generally, raises questions about what can’t be remembered or known. Overall, the poet constructs his autobiography, choosing the details to include, and drawing attention to the process of making. As Bidart states in a different essay, Lowell was “above all, an audacious *maker*” (“You Didn’t” 206).

Lowell goes to great lengths to explain the artifice of his new confessional subject matter in *Life Studies*. In a famous interview with Frederick Seidel, Lowell comments on the necessity of toying with autobiographical facts: “You leave out a lot, and emphasize this and that. Your actual experience is a complete flux. I’ve invented facts and changed things, and the whole balance of the poem was something invented” (“Interview” 246). He goes on to emphasize the effect of the whole poem, which is meant to be believable, to sound true. He says he wanted the reader “to believe he was getting the *real* Robert Lowell” (“Interview” 247). Lowell implies that part of affecting the “*real* Robert Lowell” is to alter the story slightly. In a letter to Peter Taylor, regarding the composition of childhood stories that would go into *Life Studies*, Lowell writes, “I want to invent and forget a lot, but at the same time have the historian’s wonderful advantage—the reader must always be forced to say, ‘This is tops, but even if it weren’t it’s true’” (*Letters* 245). In a letter to Berryman, Lowell describes the process of constructing autobiography: “‘I’ve just started messing around with my autobiographical monster’” (*Letters* 240). The illusion of truth is the result of carefully revised fabrication.²⁸

Deepening the concept of poetic confession, Lowell draws attention to how *Day by Day* seems to confess for rather than to others. In “Unwanted,” Lowell defines his mother as someone whose story he confesses, rather than someone he would confess to. He portrays his mother as incapable from the time he was a child to hear his confessional utterance. Lowell exposes his mother as unable to play the role of confessor to his child-confessant, unable to know him. The confessor’s role is to facilitate the confessant’s process of coming into being, of coming to understand and know the self. The confessor’s role is similar to the analyst’s role in the way that D.W. Winnicott conceives of it, using

²⁸ Many critics, among them Helen Vendler, Guy Rotella, and Frank Bidart, cite Lowell’s incessant revisions as evidence of his making rather than suffering, emphasizing the agency that Bloom denies. Lowell has also written about his revision process. In a famous letter to W.C. Williams, Lowell says, “I’ve been writing poems like a house on fire, i.e., for me that means five in six weeks, fifty versions of each” (*Letters* 293). Lowell describes the patient labor of his revision in his essay, “After Enjoying Six of Seven Essays on Me” (*CPRL* 999).

the mother-infant relationship as an analogy of the analyst-analysand relationship. Adam Phillips summarizes Winnicott's notion of the mother-analyst's role as one who sees; Winnicott maintains that for the infant-analysand, "'Being seen is at the basis of creative looking'Not to be seen by the mother...is not to exist. In Winnicott's account, being seen by the mother is being recognized for who one is, and what the infant is, is what he feels" (*Winnicott* 130). Like the analysand, the confessant confesses to someone to be recognized, whereas the confessor, like the analyst, participates in the confession by the act of seeing, which is a kind of knowing. The confessor is cognizant of the confessant, the confessional utterance, and the process of self-fashioning through speech acts.

In "Unwanted" the child Lowell is both seen and unseen stealing his nanny's crucifix, the "anorexia Christ" (*CPRL* 834):

It disappeared, I said nothing,
but mother saw me poking strips of paper
down a floor-grate to the central heating.
"Oh Bobby, do you want to set us on fire?"
"Yes... that's where Jesus is." I smiled (*CPRL* 834).

The mother's failure as a confessor is different from Lowell's attempt to know his mother. Lowell imagines his way into his mother's life, whereas his mother doesn't get as far in her perceptions of her son. The mother apparently misreads her son out of a lack of understanding, whereas Lowell self-consciously invents his mother, aware that invention could be seen as a kind of misreading, but one that is telling nonetheless. Lowell plays with his mother's inability to perceive or understand him by confessing subversively. Lowell as the child "Bobby," appears to be older than the infant who at "three months,/...rocked back and forth howling" (*CPRL* 833) in the previous stanza. We assume that Bobby is at least three years old since he speaks to his mother; however, it is unclear whether he speaks or smiles his utterance. The quotation marks indicate speech, so we assume that the poem jumps in time from Lowell's infancy to his early childhood. The child's answer to the mother's question, "Oh Bobby, do you want to set us on fire?" is

“Yes...” (CPRL 834). The response is funny because it suggests the child’s pleasure in confessing to a far worse desire or deed than he in fact committed. The mother doesn’t ask her son if he stole the crucifix, but if he wants to set the house on fire. It’s as if the child’s answer to each interrogation would be “Yes! I did it!” or “I did that and more!” in order to get attention. The child seems to be driven by a desire to prove his status as an unwanted child, as a bad kid. He wants his mother to see how reprehensible he is; he wants to provide a reason for her not to want him. The child would rather be unwanted after than before he was, because he wants to play an active role. Through confession, the child broadcasts to his mother that she shouldn’t want him, and, in so doing, formulates his identity as the unwanted child. In *Life Studies*, “91 Revere Street” thematizes the figure of the anti-hero; Lowell describes his mother’s father as his model in this: “A ray of hope in the far future was my white-haired Grandfather Winslow, whose unchecked commands and demands were always upsetting people for their own good—he was all I could hope to be: the bad boy, the problem child...” (CPRL 135). The role of the “problem child” is “all” the child “Bobby” can aspire to, in part, because of his genetic makeup; yet, it is seen as a glorious legacy.

Freud’s concept of “screen memories” sheds light on the childhood memory in “Unwanted.” Freud defines a “screen memory” as “such a memory, whose value consists in the fact that it represents thoughts and impressions from a later period and that its content is connected with these by links of a symbolic or similar nature” (“Screen Memories” 15). Freud argues that although childhood experiences are formative, we don’t recall them perfectly, but project onto them. According to Freud, our early experiences are covered or screened by our current desires on the one hand, and, on the other hand, covered or obscured so that we only remember the “torso” of such memories (“Screen Memories” 6). Hugh Haughton speculates “whether all stories of childhood are ultimately cover stories” and explores “a view of the past as screened—as something screened from us, but which is also a screen upon which we project memories from later life”

("Introduction" xx). He concludes that this view "makes the analyst's, the biographer's, and even the autobiographer's lives a hundred times more difficult. It also, of course, makes it more interesting" ("Introduction" xx). In "Unwanted," Lowell uses a childhood memory (stealing the crucifix) and a mediated story (being an unwanted child) as a screen to excuse, dilute, or explain his insecurity about being unwanted. The poem ends with this anxious question: "Is the one unpardonable sin/ our fear of not being wanted?" (*CPRL* 834). The childhood memory is doubly a screen, by which the poet projects his self-doubt and death-wish.

In what we might call a screen memory, Lowell as the child "Bobby" both wants to be known and doesn't want to be known. When asked if he wishes to start a house fire, he formulates the kind of answer that subverts, yet pays lip service to the act of confession. He responds, "Yes," but adds, "...That's where Jesus is" (*CPRL* 834), alluding to the crucifix, and suggesting a confession of stealing it. Although the poem suggests a will to confess, the child doesn't explicitly confess to his mother. He doesn't reveal the secret that he stole the crucifix. In this way, the poem suggests the potential treacherousness of confession. We see the child Bobby indirectly revealing a secret. He seems to throw paper over the crucifix in the floor-grate, as if to bury the crucifix. At the same time, he draws attention to himself by ripping paper and stuffing it down the grate; he reveals his hiding spot. In a moment of dramatic irony, the reader, and not the mother, knows what the child is doing. The child confesses subversively to his actions; he tells his mother what he is doing, yet he doesn't tell. He essentially says that Jesus, a synecdoche for the crucifix, is in hiding nearby and would go up in flames with the house. The child is not caught stealing the crucifix but caught hiding it. Further, the child is not necessarily caught, as the mother doesn't respond with insight, or at all. The child is not asked to confess to stealing, but he does, in his own way. This suggests the child's craftiness, the ability to make an art out of confession, to give one's self away and not give one's self away, at the same time. The child's craftiness suggests the poet's craft.

At the end of the stanza, Lowell writes, “I smiled” (*CPRL* 834). Is this the smile of guilt-ridden confession or denial? Of surrender or defiance? The smile of the amateur or the con-artist? In the earlier “Antebellum Boston,” Lowell tells the prose version of the missing crucifix episode and writes about the ambiguous smile: “I smiled and smiled and smiled, very much in the perplexing way my father smiled and smiled and smiled” (*CPR* 302). Throughout *Life Studies* when Lowell’s father, Commander Robert T.S. Lowell smiles, the smile signals denial, the denial of failure and the denial of death. The father’s smile is perplexing in that it conveys denial in a non-confrontational manner. In “Commander Lowell,” from *Life Studies*, Lowell writes that his father was always “Smiling on all” (*CPRL* 173), denying his predicament: the loss of sixty-thousand dollars in three years. Even at the moment of his death, seen in another elegy for the father in *Life Studies*, “Terminal Days at Beverley Farms,” the father smiles repeatedly, nervously, all morning before dying. The nervous smiling could be read as a kind of protest against death, although it is significantly a passive protest. On the one hand, the father dies without a fight; on the other hand, he maintains a painful smile all morning long in the grip of death (*CPRL* 176). Aligning his smile to his father’s, Lowell writes in “Antebellum Boston” that his smile was his best and worst defense: “I returned to my denying smile...” (*CPR* 302). Lowell describes his mother’s frustration over the missing crucifix and chewed rosary beads, which implicate Bobby: “I smiled and smiled, to her intense displeasure” (*CPR* 302), noting the passive-aggressive nature of the smile. Are confessions acts of surrender or acts of defiance or both to differing degrees? Poem and memoir might make us wonder: Is confession a sign of weakness, a kind of admission of debilitating guilt, or a sign of strength, an act of birthing the self through owning one’s actions and taking responsibility?

In questioning whether confession is an affirmation of or apology for one’s identity as a “bad boy,” Lowell distinguishes his craft of confession from the Catholic rite. The image of the crucifix suggests the religious connotation of confession, particularly the

notion of sin and the role of confession in forgiveness and absolution. The theft in and of itself is considered to be sin, a violation of the commandment, “You shall not steal,” (Exodus 20:15, *NKJV*). Stealing a crucifix, a symbol of one’s faith in God and trust in Jesus’ death and resurrection for the forgiveness of sins, might be considered more serious an offense than stealing a piece of bread, for example. The child not only commits sin by stealing, but steals the object which represents a potential absolution for sin, that is, the hope of reintegration and absolution that comes from faith. Lowell subverts the symbol of the crucifix by transforming it into a shiny object the child desires simply because his nanny cherishes it, perhaps more than she cherishes him. In “Antebellum Boston,” Lowell describes his fascination with his nanny Katherine’s Celtic silver crucifix, which was “heavy, intricate, and important, as I could see from Katherine’s awed and loving glance upon it. Katherine told me about Jesus and I regret to recall that my feelings were highly egocentric: I saw, with despair, that I was second fiddle even in my nurse’s affections” (*CPR* 301). In the prose version, the nanny is called Katherine, but in “Unwanted,” the nanny is called “Nellie” (*CPRL* 834). Nellie’s crucifix is depicted as the “anorexia Christ” (*CPRL* 834) whereas Katherine’s crucifix is depicted as silver and Celtic. In both versions of the narrative, what is consistent is the emphasis on the child’s “sibling” rivalry with the beloved crucifix. In “Unwanted,” Lowell declares that the object of his affections is the envied crucifix: “Then I found the thing I loved most/ was the anorexia Christ/ swinging on Nellie’s gaudy rosary” (*CPRL* 834). Lowell undermines the religious symbolism of the crucifix and reinscribes the crucifix as the child’s rival for attention rather than the child’s savior. The kind of confession we see in “Unwanted” is secular, not religious.

Yet, secular confession is also examined as problematic in the poem. The poet does not confess to Moore, his psychiatrist; rather, Moore confesses juicy tidbits that are not taken as undisputed fact. Moore is not considered the voice of truth, as Lowell deems Moore’s poetry and insight “scattered pearls, some true” (*CPRL* 832). The act of confession is complicated by the mixed motives of the psychiatrist: “Did he become

mother's lover/ and prey/ by rescuing her from me?/ He was thirteen years her junior. . .” (CPRL 832). The confessional utterance is further muddled when Lowell imagines his mother narrating her story to him. In some ways this renders the whole confessional dimension of psychoanalysis suspect by the same token.

The poem creates its own emotional truth, suggesting a mother-son legacy through desperate narratives. Lowell links his two death-wishes with his mother's death-wish in their imagined conversation. The first death-wish opens the poem, with Lowell alone and unable to purchase alcohol, both because the shops are closed for the night and because he is taking an anti-alcohol drug, *Antabuse*. Lowell writes that he almost considers drinking and dying:

Too late, all shops closed—
I alone here tonight on *Antabuse*,
surrounded only by iced white wine and beer,
like a sailor dying of thirst on the Atlantic—
one sip of alcohol might be death,
death for joy (CPRL 831).

The speaker is dying for a drink that he could die of. Although not an alcoholic, Lowell needed to avoid alcohol when he was taking *Antabuse* to control his manic episodes. He often referred to his mania with euphemisms such as “my excitement” (*Letters* 239); however, at times it was better to suffer from melancholy than mania. Often what quiets mania like the *Antabuse*, amplifies feelings of depression and suicide. The second death wish is Lowell's desire to burn himself and his mother, to set fire to the house; because the child wants to burn his mother, too, the death-wish implicates the mother. The death-wish points to the mother's own death-wish; in the scene in which Lowell imagines his mother telling him he was unwanted, he also imagines her saying to the sea, “I wish I were dead, I wish I were dead” (CPRL 833). The repeated statement could be read as half spoken by Lowell and half spoken by Lowell's mother, separated only by a comma. Lowell seems to identify with his mother's death wish, and speak with her. Lowell intuitively pre-history

based on Moore's insight and his own sense of feeling unwanted, alone, and ready to die for a moment of pleasure, a sip of alcohol.

His emotional instability seems to confirm the truth of the story about his mother. "Home," in *Day by Day* echoes the mother's death-wish from "Unwanted" with similar syntax: Lowell "as one would instinctively say Hail Mary" repeats "*I wish I could die*" (CPRL 824). He associates the Virgin Mother, Mary, with his mother in the poem, linking mother and son's death wishes. The poem's title defines home as the site where the mother confers the morbid lexicon to her son. In *For the Union Dead*, "Night Sweat" suggests the poet's death wish has haunted him since childhood: "always inside me is the child who died,/ always inside me is his will to die—" (CPRL 375). On the one hand, the childhood self has died, but Lowell himself doesn't die. The child's will to die represents a will to move beyond childhood innocence into adulthood and responsibility. On the other hand, the child though dead is "always inside me," and the child's death wish is also. Lowell is seen wrestling with his childhood self, because even its absence is a presence. In light of "Unwanted," the "the child who died" might represent the mother's loss of childhood upon becoming a parent, or her wish to die and terminate her pregnancy.

Freud's notion of *Nachtraglichkeit*, meaning "deferred action" or "after the event," sheds light on the relationship between the son and mother's death-wishes in "Unwanted." J. Laplanche and J.B. Pontalis define *Nachtraglichkeit*: "The subject revises past events at a later date and...it is this revision which invests them with the significance and even with efficacy or pathogenic force" (*Language* 112). Freud explains how his patient Emma was afraid to go alone into shops, but had repressed her memory of being molested at the age of eight. The memory resurfaced when, at age twelve, she entered the shop where she had been molested and immediately thought the shopkeeper was laughing at her clothes. Freud says of the first event and its relation to the second, "We invariably find that a memory is repressed which has only become a trauma by *deferred action*" (*Project* 356). In a letter to Dr. Wilhelm Fliess, he writes of the process: "The material present in the shape of

memory-traces is from time to time subjected to a rearrangement in accordance with fresh circumstances—is, as it were, transcribed” (*Origins* 173), and this notion of re-transcription applies to the two death wishes in “Unwanted.” The death-wish of the manic speaker re-transcribes the death-wish of the pregnant mother, and by extension, the death-wish of the unborn child. The unborn child is not conscious of a death-wish, but would have died inside the mother, had she taken her life. We learn that the unborn child, unwanted and unconscious of this fact, becomes the manic speaker of the poem. As the poet, Lowell rearranges these three moments of his life: one from his pre-history, one from his early childhood, and one from his adulthood. He suggests that he seemed to utter with his mother his initial death-wish during those desperate times; that his mental illness now reiterates, repeats, intensifies the first cry, a shared cry with his mother. That his first cry was a death-wish becomes symbolic in the poem. As an adult his sense of himself as a wreck, ship-wrecked as it were, “like a sailor dying...on the Atlantic” (*CPRL* 831), is connected to his origin as an unwanted child. The Atlantic Ocean is the same site for the mother’s death-wish.

Lowell seems to intuit he was unwanted based on these repetitions later in life. Nonetheless, “Unwanted” is the impossible story Lowell tells of his pre-history, the story of his conception and coming-into-being. Like the crucifix, the story is stolen. Lowell creates an impossible situation in which one can actually own, seem to remember, and tell his pre-history. Lowell doesn’t view his mother as the object to his subject, but attempts to see her as a subject. He returns to the mother-infant dyad rather than the father-son rivalry, and intersubjectively imagines his mother’s feelings. In this way, Lowell seems to own his mother’s story, whether through the more negative stealing or the more positive identification. *Day by Day* interrogates the sources of confessional material, whether childhood memories, pre-history, and family history really constitute personal experience if they are mediated and constructed. “Unwanted” questions the differences between life experiences one remembers and those one doesn’t remember but believes actually

happened, and analyzes the role of mothers in giving poets their childhood stories.

“Unwanted” suggests the story begins before it begins, that mothers are the ones who tell their children that they in fact had a childhood, and what it was like. Adam Phillips says that childhood has always been disconnected from children and experienced vicariously through parents. Because so-called childhood memories are dependent on a parent narrating his or her child’s early life experiences to the child, all childhood memories are mythic, invented, distant, only a “so-called childhood.” Phillips says:

It is as though there is a childhood, but not for us; that much of our so-called childhood was the experience of our parents and the adults who looked after us. They, as it were, told us about it in their own way, as if it was going on, but it was like a commentary on a programme we ourselves couldn’t see. And yet what we experience and narrate, and what seems to confirm our having had childhood experiences, are memories and repetitions (*Equals* 153).

Lowell couldn’t have remembered his infancy: “When I was three months,/ I rocked back and forth howling/ for weeks, for weeks each hour...” (*CPRL* 833). The transition from the howling infant to the crafty child who steals the crucifix is the ellipses following the word “hour” (*CPRL* 833) and the word “Then” starting the next stanza, “Then I found the thing I loved most” (*CPRL* 834). The poem reads as if Lowell howled himself through infancy into early childhood, suggesting the past is a blur of screaming. Yet even the specificity of the howling, that the howler was three months, comes from the mother who would have told her son about his infancy. The gap between infancy and early childhood suggests the gaps in the poet’s memory, his dependence on his parents to give him a past. Interestingly, the poet collaborates with his mother in the second childhood story. The mother in the poem doesn’t know that the child Bobby is the one who steals the crucifix; therefore, Lowell contributes that detail. Thus, the story is co-authored. Within the poem, Lowell creates his mother’s role as the mediator of his childhood; he conceptualizes his mother’s pregnancy as a goldmine of childhood stories. When he defines his mother’s pregnancy as an active state of “carrying me in you” (*CPRL* 832), he suggests that his mother holds more than a baby; she carries his childhood stories. In a poem concerned

with how one comes to have a childhood and an existence at all, “Unwanted” draws on mediators, the family psychiatrist and parents, not on direct personal experience, which is often assumed to be the only confessional subject. The only experience in the poem is that of not having the experience, of hearing about one’s childhood as if it were a story about someone else. When Lowell says, “Alas, I can only tell my own story—” (*CPRL* 831), this telling derives from parents and even his analyst telling stories about his mother’s stories. He emphasizes the word “own,” to suggest ownership of an impossible subject, the subject parents have laid claim to.

Writing poetry about childhood is a way of playing the parental role, of owning the subject matter of childhood. Part of owning the subject is not owning it, as Lowell emphasizes the epistemological uncertainty of childhood stories. The poet derives meaning from derived, mediated stories that are more like screen memories. There is meaning in the experience of not having the experience. Childhood repeats itself in adulthood; for example, the unwanted child in the poem becomes the unwell adult who asks, “Is getting well ever an art, / or art a way to get well?” (*CPRL* 834). The unwanted child becomes the poet who uses negative suffixes such as -un, -in, -mis, and -im in ten words in a single poem: “unwanted,” “unforgivable,” “unlivable,” “unpardonable,” “unconsuming,” “unpresentable,” “incurable,” “misadventure,” “misalliance,” and “implausible.” The word “unwanted” occurs four times in the poem, including the title. The word occurs three times in one stanza. As a variation on the repetition of “unwanted,” the poem ends with this reiteration: “Is the one unpardonable sin/ our fear of not being wanted?” (*CPRL* 834). The texture and tone of the poem repeat the sense of not belonging, of being in the dark, of being an unwanted baby, and of not even knowing it at the time. Out of the words with negative suffixes, one could construe a version of the narrative: the poet originates from a misalliance with his unforgivable, unpardonable mother, and mythologizes his implausible and un-lived experience as an unwanted child. “Unwanted” could be read as a poem about missing the experience but not the meaning,

the reverse of T.S. Eliot's statement, "We had the experience, but missed the meaning" (II, line 93, *Four Quartets* 39). Lowell misses the experience of being the unwanted child conscious of being unwanted; he misses the experience of talking with his mother about whether he was unwanted.

Lowell links what he misses with what John Berryman misses. He links two stories of absence to make one full story. He adopts the experiences of John Berryman to reflect on his relationship with his mother. Lowell says that he sees himself in Berryman, then takes his statement back:

I read an article on a friend,
as if recognizing my obituary:
"Though his mother loved her son consumingly,
she lacked a really affectionate nature;
so he always loved what he missed."
This was John Berryman's mother, not mine (*CPRL* 831).

Lowell points to "the article" about Berryman to suggest the intertwined literary history of confessional poetry. The article mentioned is John Haffenden's, published in *The New Review*; Haffenden writes, "While Mrs. Berryman loved her sons consumingly she seemed to lack a really affectionate nature" ("Biographical" 9). Haffenden quotes Berryman's first wife Eileen Simpson, who said that Mrs. Berryman was "terribly kind in a strange way" (9). He comments in a later article on his reaction to Lowell's use of his words, that he felt "gratified" and "troubled": "to think that my article on John Berryman had provoked such self-recognition in Robert Lowell; that my words had taken their place as part of his mental economy; that my frail early effort at life-writing had inspired a poem, well, part of a poem" ("What the Life" 6). Haffenden makes the larger point in his essay that biography reflects the self of the biographer. He links Lowell's Berryman in "Unwanted" with the biographer's narcissistic tendency. Lowell, however, is writing an autobiographical poem, weaving literary criticism into the confessional mode. The merging of Haffenden's Berryman with Lowell's Berryman and Lowell's projection of the "real Robert Lowell" worries the boundaries between biography and autobiography as well as fact and fiction.

Interestingly, Lowell's "Unwanted" was actually published in the same journal as Haffenden's article; the poem was published posthumously in the October 1977 issue of *The New Review*, one month after Lowell's death. Would readers of the journal recall Haffenden's article on Berryman when reading the lines taken from it in "Unwanted"? Certainly, Haffenden remembered his words.²⁹ If the readers of *The New Review* remembered Haffenden's biographical pieces, which spanned two issues in 1976, then upon reading Lowell's "Unwanted" the following year, the biographical material about Berryman would be shared knowledge. Confessional poets at times write about their family and friends as if operating under the cliché assumption that "my friends are your friends," and for Berryman and Lowell, at the end of their careers, much of their lives would have been already literary history.

Berryman and Lowell were thought of as rivals, in a love-hate relationship.³⁰ Although Lowell claims Berryman as a friend, he makes it clear that he reads an article about Berryman, and thus, comes to the conclusion that Berryman's mother lacked genuine affection for her son. This comparison between himself and Berryman is a confession of the confessional rivalry between the two poets. "Unwanted" is self-conscious of the literary history of Lowell and Berryman's reception. Again, the view is via an external authority, the "article"; elsewhere in the poem, we have seen how information is mediated. Lowell seeks to distinguish himself from Berryman, yet he does this by recognizing himself in Berryman. In "For John Berryman," also in *Day by Day*, Lowell writes, "I used to want to live/ to avoid your elegy/ Yet really we had the same

²⁹ Haffenden writes of the experience of seeing his words quoted in Lowell's "Unwanted" in *The New Review*: "To say the least, I felt dismayed. Lowell took his quotation, with little alteration, from a biographical article on Berryman that I had published" in the same journal the previous year ("What the Life" 16).

³⁰ Much has been written about the relationship between Lowell and Berryman; critics tend to emphasize their rivalry. Philip Levine's memoir compares Lowell and Berryman as teachers at Iowa Writers' Workshop ("Mine Own John Berryman"). See Paul Mariani's account of the Competition between the two poets ("Lowell on Berryman on Lowell"). Lowell and Berryman have also written about each other's work. Lowell revises his earlier negative review of *Dream Songs* in an essay written after Berryman's suicide ("For John Berryman"). See Berryman's essays on Lowell, "Despondency and Madness: On Lowell's 'Skunk Hour'" and "Robert Lowell and Others" (*Freedom of the Poet*).

life" (*CPRL* 737), creating a complex relationship where he sees himself in Berryman and doesn't see himself in him. It's unclear whether Lowell wanted to avoid writing Berryman's elegy or becoming a part of it, that is, sharing Berryman's fate, and by extension, the plot of his life and art. Lowell sees himself in Berryman, yet tries to avoid self-recognition or projection: "I.../ think of you not myself" (*CPRL* 738). The poem leaves us with the question of whether this is possible, and, if so, then why does it take Lowell a huge discovery to find the difference between him and Berryman? "Just the other day/ I discovered how we differ—humor..." (*CPRL* 738). The poem enacts the poet's struggle to discover the difference between two poets who shared the "...same life,/ the generic one/our generation offered" (*CPRL* 737). Lowell raises the issue not only of his relationship to Berryman, but of their relationship to their generation. Looking at *Day by Day* and *The Dream Songs*, like sketches of day and night, we see a more comprehensive portrait of confessional poetry as the projection and exploration of the "I" in transition, as a fetus or a bore, and in relationship to others such as mother, family psychiatrist, confessor, literary circles, social milieu, or generation. Never do we get the sense, reading these volumes, that the "I" is known, that a single story is the absolute truth, or that one self is one's only self or story.

iii. Conclusion

One aspect of the self that Lowell and Berryman deploy is that of a powerful mother's child. Biographers often cite the dominance of these mothers. Haffenden says of Mrs. Berryman's relationship to her son: "She swaddled him with feelings so intense that he could never reciprocate her insistent love, and grew to be burdened by it" (*Life of John* 15). Ian Hamilton writes of Lowell: "He was utterly enthralled by her; even to make small inroads on her appalling power would be to achieve victories that seemed quite beyond his

father's wit" (*Robert Lowell* 9). In their poetry, both men explore not only the smothering mother, but access a feminine voice, family history, and autobiography. On the one hand, these poets insist on their own agency, as narrator, performer, and editor of their own work, at times distancing themselves from their mother's words. On the other hand, Berryman and Lowell identify with their mothers as fellow creators, and collaborate with them by quoting their words and co-creating family history. We come to understand the collaborative nature of both confession and confessional poetry by seeing the presence of the mother's voice and role as mediator between poet and childhood stories. Both poems feature different kinds of self-invention, occurring in relation to the mother.

The figure of the mother in confessional poetry is important not only to daughters who become mothers such as Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, and Adrienne Rich, but to sons. As Alan Williamson has pointed out, male writers, specifically the bisexual and heterosexual male writers he focuses on, have adopted a female persona or otherwise explored feminine experience. In his Introduction, Williamson quotes two lines from Lowell's "Flight to New York" in *The Dolphin*: "I come like someone naked in my raincoat,/ but only a girl is naked in a raincoat" (*CPRL* 704). He then argues, "Certain emotions, certain basic human motives (including those that Lowell's lines rather movingly combine—narcissistic display, intense awareness of one's own body, tender self-surrender, vulnerability) are typed by our culture as "'feminine.'" So the man who experiences them...may face a crisis of gender identity (*Almost a Girl* 4). Williamson borrows from Jessica Benjamin's model of object relations to suggest that male poets can identify with women, rather than merely silence or objectify femininity (*Almost a Girl* 6).

Whereas Williamson uses femininity in positive ways, Bloom uses the term destructively. I would contest Bloom's reading of Lowell and Berryman, and other confessional writers, as passive and therefore feminine. In his review in *The New Republic*, Bloom criticizes Lowell's *Day by Day* for its "fiction of nakedness or trope of vulnerability" ("Day by Day" 220). He then asserts that the volume is "a record of human

suffering” and not “a making of any kind” (220). Bloom reads suffering as passive, and, therefore, implicitly feminine, and reads making or writing as active, and, therefore, masculine. Bloom’s general model of poetic creation is framed as strong male poets battling with their fathers to establish their autonomy. Bloom dislikes confessional poetry not only because he reads it as passive, but also because he takes the model of psycho-sexual development from Freud and maps it onto literary history, and seems to dislike the idea of confessional poets exploring Freudian concepts through creating literature. Bloom wants to see a struggle with father figures, rather than with literal fathers. In the same review of *Day by Day*, Bloom critiques Berryman’s *Dream Songs*, calling both Lowell and Berryman “heroic failures” (220), because he is looking for the rhetoric of heroism and masculinity. Although he gives them heroic status, the emphasis is on failure. The Bloomian idea of a filial struggle between great poets and their precursors is unapologetically patriarchal, and confessional poetry has had negative associations with the feminine.³¹

Alicia Ostriker takes an extreme position defining confession as feminine. She indicates that men couldn’t write about mothers before the poetry of Plath, Sexton, Rich, and Wakoski. She says that before the 1960’s, “No poems had been written on the subject of pregnancy and childbirth, first because men could not write them...Second, women had not written the poems because we all reproduce the themes of previous poetry” (“A Wild Surmise” 257). Ostriker rightly identifies the effect of female poets, particularly confessional poets Plath and Sexton, on literary notions of appropriate subject matter for poetry. Berryman and Lowell would have been very aware of the work their female colleagues were writing. However, Ostriker’s claim that men didn’t or couldn’t write about motherhood is unsubstantiated. Berryman was already exploring the themes of

³¹ Irene Gammel adds to the discussion about the linkage between femininity and confession. She makes the interesting point that “the sixties feminist slogan ‘the personal is political’ has further increased this trend” of reading confession as feminine (“Introduction” 1). Elizabeth Gregory applies Kristeva’s notion of the archaic mother and the “Real” in her discussion of gender and confessional poetry (“Confessing the Body”).

pregnancy and childbirth in *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet* (1953) before his confessional work, *77 Dream Songs* (1964), and before Sexton's confessional texts, *To Bedlam and Part Way Back* (1960) and *All My Pretty Ones* (1962). Although men can't write about their personal experience giving birth, this doesn't keep them from imagining their mothers' or wives' pregnancies, as we see in Lowell's "Unwanted," or the pregnancy of a mother figure and poet, Anne Bradstreet, as in Berryman's *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet*. I agree with Williamson's point that "feminism has been suspicious of all ideas of a positive femininity coming from men" (*Almost a Girl 2*), and would argue that the confessional moment reveals that male and female writers alike became increasingly interested in writing about birth, including their self-birthing as poets, and the experience of pregnancy, whether imagined or not. Not only were male writers free to imagine motherhood, but also female poets were free to imagine the experiences of other mothers, and were not limited by their own anatomy or roles as mothers. For example, Plath's "Three Women," which follows three women in a maternity ward, revisits motherhood as an outsider.

I take issue with Sandra M. Gilbert who, among other critics, has defined confessional poetry as essentially feminine. Gilbert says, "...The self-defining confessional genre, with its persistent assertions of identity and its emphases on the central mythology of the self may be...a distinctively female mode" ("My Name Is" 444). Gilbert distinguishes between male and female confessional poets, arguing that female poets Rich, Sexton, Plath, Levertov, and Wakoski come closer to defining their private identities than male confessional poets. Gilbert's argument is flawed, because of the essentialism implied; she argues that confessional poetry is feminine and concludes that women are the best practitioners since women see themselves as "eccentric," "peripheral," and subjective, whereas men see themselves as "self-assured," "detached," and representative of the majority (445). She maintains that Plath doesn't have access to the "detached irony of a Lowell or Berryman," but that this serves her poetry, as she seeks to define herself (445).

Gilbert, in illuminating the place of the feminine in confessional poetry, makes many hasty generalizations about male poets. She assumes that Berryman and Lowell do not identify with women, when in fact they do, particularly when they think about their mothers, and assumes that men cannot write into or against a “distinctively female mode,” when they do, and even helped create the genre (445).

Even though confessional poetry’s first practitioners were male, Bloom, like Gilbert, Ostriker, and other feminist critics, tend to portray confession as a feminine practice. Bloom, unlike feminist critics, goes on to dismiss confessional poetry because of its associations with the feminine. The feminine has no place in the Bloomian model of intra-poetic relationships, as has been documented by many of his critics. Gilbert and Gubar, in *The Madwoman in the Attic*, were among the first to take issue with the Bloomian conceptual framework because it excludes women writers. They argued that women writers tend to collaborate with each other, rather than battle with and misread a parental precursor, as prescribed by Bloom’s masculinist model.³² Several important scholars focusing on the homosexual literary tradition, including Robert K. Martin and Thomas E. Yingling reject Bloom’s model.³³ These writers take issue with the implications of Bloom’s Oedipal model, which Bloom adopts in his theory, on homosexual writers. The Oedipal model famously reads homosexuality as a phase that one overcomes by identifying with the same-sex parent.

³² Gilbert and Gubar argue, that unlike male writers, women writers wish to connect with and create a literary tradition (*The Madwoman* 50). They take issue with Bloom’s metaphor of “the poetic process as a sexual encounter between a male poet and his female muse,” and ask where “the female poet fit[s] in” (47). What is problematic about Gilbert and Gubar’s revision is the assumption that poetic influence is never experienced the same way by men and women. I agree with Jeredith Merrin who notes, “Sweeping statements about what necessarily characterizes all male or all female authorship, about so-called and neatly separated patriarchal or matriarchal traditions, are ill-advised when we are speaking about the alembic of the imagination” (*An Enabling Humility* 1).

³³ Martin says, “Bloom’s paradigm, rooted as it is in a Freudian view of competition between father and son, is heterosexual in its assumptions and inadequate for dealing with the more complex relationship between older and younger poet in a homosexual context, where there may be a significant element of erotic attraction involved in ‘influence.’ The master-protégé relationship might be a more useful model for such relationships” (*The Homosexual Tradition* 236n). Similarly, Yingling critiques the heterosexual Oedipal model underlying the Bloomian model, which “reads homosexuality as an intermediate rather than final destination” (*Hart Crane* 22).

Most recently, Piotr K. Gwiazda argues, “Bloom’s theory of the anxiety of influence is unmistakably heterosexual in its focus on the metaphor of literary paternity, leaving gay male poets little or no opportunity for meaningful self-fashioning” (*James Merrill* 19). Gwiazda examines the ways in which James Merrill identifies and disidentifies with W.H. Auden, and seeks to broaden our understanding of poetic influence by resisting the “metaphor of the family” (19). In examining Lowell and Berryman’s poems about mothers, I don’t want to discard the “metaphor of the family”—for the poems themselves closely link poetic fashioning with the Freudian family—but to revise it. Berryman and Lowell are highly self-conscious of the analytic and literary dimensions of confessional poetry, which allows them to revise the mode. They offer uncharacteristic confessions; Song 14 creates crisis out of the anti-climactic state of boredom whereas “Unwanted” confesses to experiences that may have happened.

CHAPTER 2

**“FREAKED IN THE MOON BRAIN”: GINSBERG AND BIDART CONFESSING
CRAZY MOTHERS**

i. Introduction

Allen Ginsberg and Robert Lowell read together on February 23, 1977 at St. Marks' Church in New York City. *The New York Times* printed a notice of the reading, stating that Ginsberg and Lowell came "from the opposite ends of the poetic spectrum" ("Allen Ginsberg" 36). According to C. David Heymann, Lowell mentioned the notice at the joint reading, saying that he and Ginsberg "were not that different...if anything, they were simply opposite ends of William Carlos Williams" (*American* 494). If Lowell and Ginsberg represent different dimensions of Williams, I would argue that Ginsberg and Frank Bidart represent opposite sides of Robert Lowell. Ginsberg in several important ways precedes and influences Lowell; his battle with Cold War homophobia and censorship helped Lowell and others to explore social and poetic taboos in their work. Ginsberg, like the oldest sibling in a family, took up some of the important literary battles with "Mom" and "Dad," which allowed greater freedoms to the younger Lowell, Plath, and Sexton.

Although Ginsberg's *Howl* is more closely connected to issues of censorship and sexuality, *Kaddish* resists Cold War surveillance by portraying the homosexual poet and his Russian Communist mentally-ill mother, both of which represent victims of the Red Scare.³⁴ Deborah Nelson describes President Eisenhower's position: "Homosexuality was sufficient grounds for disbarment from federal employment" since "homosexuality and political deviance were merely different species of the same crime: undermining the 'American way of life'" ("Reinventing Privacy" 13). The U.S. Senate in 1950 defined homosexuality as a "security risk" and a "crime" ("The U.S. Senate" 376). Ginsberg's work destabilizes idealizations of the family as the antidote to fears of Communism and nuclear annihilation. Ginsberg's exploration of the private realm in poems such as "Howl"

³⁴ Scott Herring argues that Ginsberg's elegy "Kaddish" suggests the Holocaust victims, not just the poet's "personal loss" ("Her Brothers" 536). The mother is therefore not a safe haven, but a reminder of the horrors of the Holocaust.

and “Kaddish” reveal the humanity of so-called perverts or deviants, while also dramatizing the pressures within the dysfunctional family.

Responding to Ginsberg’s narrative, Lowell and other confessional poets exposed what goes on in family living rooms and bedrooms, offering another layer of paranoia and chaos, rather than a solvent. Ginsberg’s creation of “possibly subjective archetypes” (“How *Kaddish*” 234) of family, friends, writers, and the self can be seen as resistance to societal norms but also as an embrace of the outcast. Ginsberg faced encounters with the law, from the 1957 censorship trial of *Howl* to his court-mandated eight-month stay at the New York State Psychiatric Institute, in lieu of jail time, for associations with petty thieves in 1956 (Morgan 2008: 112, 121) to his year-long suspension from Columbia University in 1945 for writing “Fuck the Jews!” and “Butler has no balls!” (referring to the college president, Nicholas Murray Butler) in the dust of his dorm windowpane. Not only did Ginsberg intend the pronouncements as jokes, but also as an incentive for the cleaning crew to dust. Additionally, during the investigation, Ginsberg was found lying beside Jack Kerouac innocently in bed: the dean claimed they were “fooling around” (Morgan 2008: 63). Ginsberg’s “subjective archetypes” of boy-gangs, madwoman, naked self, and Jewish mother, although linked with protest and rant, are also very much about empathy and self-acceptance.

The confessional mode in his work, seen in the detailed narratives and portraits, is not only about defiance, but also intimacy in terms of subject and audience. Ginsberg describes his aesthetic as a poetics of self-intimacy and intimacy with an audience of fellow writers and friends:

We talk among ourselves and we have common understandings, and we say anything we want to say, and we talk about our assholes, and we talk about our cocks, and we talk about who we fucked last night, or who we’re gonna fuck tomorrow, or what kind love affair we have, or when we got drunk, or when we stuck a broom in our ass in the Hotel Ambassador in Prague—anybody tells one’s friends about that. So then—what happens if you make a distinction between what you tell your friends and what you tell your Muse? The problem is to break down that distinction: when you approach the Muse to talk as frankly as you would talk with yourself or with your friends (“Interview with Thomas” 287-288).

He goes on to redefine a “suitable literary subject matter” (288), popularizing a spoken idiom and blending high and low-brow diction.

Both Bidart and Ginsberg write a spoken poetry. Bidart’s eccentric use of italics, spacing, capitalization, indentation, punctuation, and idiosyncratic syntax, reveal an attunement to voice and tone. His poetry has the odd quality of text that is inscribed with stage directions, so that the reader feels the authorial presence of Bidart directing his or her internal reading voice. At poetry readings, Bidart enunciates and gesticulates, emphasizing the rhetoric and drama of poetry. Tom Sleigh captures elements of Bidart’s physical presence: “Reading his own work, his absorption into the poem’s emotion registering on his face, now blank, now grimacing, now musingly calm” (“Frank Bidart’s Voice” 29). Sleigh notes that when Bidart “speaks, haltingly, then more fluently, qualifying further and further...I can sense his brute confidence in the primacy of emotion...in his voice’s weight and drag” (29-30). Additional elements of spectacle include dramatic action, long monologues, and extreme situations and personae. The subjects of Bidart’s poems, usually outcasts, are tormented by their aging or flawed bodies, and other givens of their existences, such as their gender, sexuality, masochism, and desire for an overarching order. Each speaks out of extreme need, often “to *feel* things make sense” (“Herbert White” *IWN* 128). This is true of the anorexic suicide Ellen West (“Ellen West” *IWN* 109-121), the poet’s mother diagnosed with breast cancer (“Elegy” *IWN* 96-105), an amputee (“The Arc” *IWN* 85-93), the necrophiliac and pedophile Herbert White (“Herbert White” *IWN* 127-131), the Florentine artist Benvenuto Cellini who commits murder and rape (“The Third Hour of the Night” *Star Dust* 37-80), and the mentally-ill ballet dancer Vaslav Nijinsky (“The War of Vaslav Nijinsky” *IWN* 21-49).

There is an eerie sense of these characters as guests on *The Jerry Springer Show*, whose inner turmoil is strangely not that different from that of the poet's, or our own.³⁵

Working against the confessional talk show, of course, is the documentary of dilemma, with its discursive texture, high diction, abstract language, and engagement with Western thought, opera, and other high brow forms of art. Paradoxically, critics have situated Bidart in different camps: he is "part of a resurgence of the 'poetry of ideas,' according to Jeffrey Gray ("Necessary Thought" 719), and his major work "Ellen West" is, in Denis Donoghue's estimation, "a heart-breaking act of sympathy" ("The Visible" 45). To understand how the "poetry of ideas" might be "heart-breaking," we might consider that this ruminating arises from personal crisis, as in Lowell, one of his presiding mentors. Gray describes the persona poems as "voices...from the margins, whether of madness, physical sickness, poverty, crime, or oppression" ("Necessary Thought" 722). Gray wishes to divorce Bidart from the "pretense to madness or to mad writing" seen in "the Ginsberg of *Kaddish*, or Robert Lowell, or Anne Sexton" (723).³⁶ I see this as a misunderstanding of confessional poetry as "mad writing" in which the writer has no agency and is likened to "the horrific brilliance of an Artaud writing straight from the asylum" (723). Gray additionally denies what I see as an affinity between "Kaddish" and Bidart's "Confessional" in terms of the mother's eloquent madness, commenting on the poet's alienation and disjointed quest for meaning. Robert Pinsky creates a more useful discourse to talk about Bidart's post-confessional poetry. Pinsky sees the work in terms of "earnestness" and discursiveness ("The Discursive Aspect" 134): "The rhythms...are based on the serious, intense speech of the poet" (139) and the overall "structure...relies

³⁵ Jo Gill writes about Anne Sexton's essay "The Freak Show," a complaint against poetry readings as freak shows, and the way in which it "anticipates the idiom of criticism directed towards present-day confessional talk shows (*The Oprah Winfrey Show* and *The Jerry Springer Show*, for example)" (*Anne Sexton's Confessional* 135).

³⁶ Similarly, David Wojahn misunderstands confessional poetry as the foil to Bidart's work: "Bidart is a supremely introspective poet, yet he rarely manifests a confessional poet's desire to wallow in his self-disclosures" ("Expansive Introspection" 15). Wojahn coins the term "expansive introspection" to delineate Bidart's work from confessional poetry; however, I argue that Lowell, Berryman, and Ginsberg also discuss broader concerns.

on a slowly expanding, inclusive form analogous to speech” in a “determination...to pursue a statement” (140). One way to connect these seeming personal and impersonal elements is to return to the definition of confession. Robert Pinsky has cited the element of “confession” that “can signify a personal declaration of belief or conviction” (139). Bidart’s work overtly expresses “a drama of process” (“An Interview with Mark” 237) which is both “animated by issues” such as “guilt” or “the ‘mind-body relation’” and by “the argument within oneself about them [the issues]” (“An Interview with Mark” 239). Bidart revises confessional tropes such as personal crisis and personal belief by bringing together self-examination and, to borrow Helen Vendler’s words, “the obstinate and tenacious dissection of Western conceptuality” (“Imagination Pressing” 74).

Bidart’s voice-driven, dramatic monologues suggest the performance dimension of confessional poetry. Staginess has been associated with some of the complaints against confession, and the argument that the performance betokens poor craftsmanship. Lowell himself wanted to distinguish between *Life Studies* as “heightened conversation” and Ginsberg’s work as a “concert” (“A Conversation” 284). While they define Ginsberg as cultural icon, critics define Anne Sexton as the epitome of the confessional talk show. For example, William H. Pritchard refers to Sexton’s work and poetry readings as “The Anne Sexton Show” (387). Pritchard recalls one of her readings: “She read with spellbinding intensity, to the extent that one wasn’t sure just what one was responding to—the poems or something else—the life that was all tied up with them” (390). In her essay, “The Freak Show,” Sexton reflected bleakly on her role as “the freak...the actor, the clown, the oddball” (*No Evil Star* 33). She recalls her fans commenting, “It’s a great show! Really a pow! She cries every time right on stage!” (34), and at times interrupting her readings: “Whatever you do, Annie, baby, we’re with you” (35). Jo Gill reads Sexton’s essay as “the culmination of a longstanding anxiety about the spectacular, theatrical, and finally exploitative nature of confession, and an expression of Sexton’s unease with the lascivious and predatory tendencies of the audience” (*Anne Sexton’s Confessional* 125). Although

Gill doesn't discuss Bidart, the notion of the freak show illuminates Bidart's construction of the freak's heartbreaking confessions. However, the poet-host of "The Frank Bidart Show" might ask questions to do with fate, conflict, and desire, thus dissolving the boundaries between freaks and everyone else. Perhaps instead of talk show host, we might refer to the poet as "Tragedian," as Cal Bedient has ("Frank Bidart" 160). When Mark Strand stated there is "a psychic space that has 'Frank Bidart' written over it," Bidart responded, "In blood!" ("An Interview with Frank" 75). Bidart mediates between the personae of outsiders and his own role as tragedian-poet, identifying with the freak.

Like Berryman in *The Dream Songs* and *Homage to Mistress Anne Bradstreet*, Bidart explores the self through masks. Bidart's personae are linked to the crises in his life, such as his parents' divorce, his mother's insanity, his father's infidelity and alcoholism, and his own outsider-status as a Harvard-educated homosexual. In the family poems in section II of *The Golden State* as well as poems about the poet's mother ("Elegy" *IWN* 96-105; "Confessional" *IWN* 53-74; "If See No End In Is" *Watching the Spring* 46-47), Bidart presents the memoirs of his parents and autobiographical anecdotes as part of an extended cinematic and philosophical enterprise. He is concerned, always and finally, with what influences, voices, and givens are "at the center/ of how I think my life" ("Golden State" *IWN* 152). His and his parents' stories are as malleable for a poetics of inquiry and intimacy as are the diaries and confessions of serial-killers, saints, travel writers, and suicides. Louise Glück writes, "Bidart's speakers are not anomalies, strange examples of life on the edge, but the means by which the issues that absorb the poet can be most richly explored. Or perhaps less issues than conditions, the givens of human life" ("The Forbidden" 60). I would disagree with Glück's claim that Bidart's personae are not strange. Bidart himself acknowledges the outsider status of his personae, connecting this to their heightened perception: "You can see necessity much more clearly if you're an outsider. King Lear, when he's in power, can't see a damn thing. Everybody sucks up to him...It's very hard to see things when you're on top. People who can see how things are

really ordered—they're perhaps always a little outside of it" ("An Interview with Frank" 72). He alludes to his own sexuality, as he cites the alienation of homosexuals (72). However, what Glück is responding to is the seamless way in which Bidart infuses the concerns of a serial killer with our concerns. Bidart explains how universal the voices and concerns of his mad speakers are: "The drive to conceptualize, to *understand* our lives, is as fundamental and inevitable as any other need...The dramatic monologues I've written since *Golden State*, insofar as they are animated by 'arguments within myself,' don't seem to me any less (or more) 'personal'" ("An Interview—With Mark Halliday" 239). This assumption of intellectual intimacy, a shared search for a metaphysics, and a kind of universal interiority, has both a confessional and anti-confessional cast. It is a more cerebral revision of Ginsberg's "subjective archetypes" ("How *Kaddish*" 233) and Lowell and Berryman's "generic" lives (*CPRL* 737).

Whereas Ginsberg's work helped create the artifice of the personal "I" as a confessional poetic mode, Bidart extends the scope of autobiography through intertextuality, psychic-histories, and dramatic monologue. Dan Chiasson discusses Bidart's post-confessional poetry as "a parable of selfhood" ("Presence" 63). The narrative details, subjective experience, and early childhood trauma, which have been linked to confession, are reframed in Bidart's work in terms of an intimate connectivity with misfits, perpetrators, and victims, who test societal and moral values. Bidart brings abstractions to bear upon the physicality, deviance, and pathos that we associate with confession. Gregory Orr notes that Bidart engages with "an autobiographical mode fraught with personal urgency" ("Post-confessional Poetry" 655). I see the "personal urgency" operating not only within Bidart's dramatic monologues, but also in the poetic construction of experience.

Bidart, upon meeting Lowell at Harvard in 1966, "found that he shared this conscious sense of being engaged in an *argument* with the past" ("An Interview with Mark" 237). Bidart was a student of Lowell's and later became his editor (the ear for his

last four books), and eventually his literary executor. Bidart co-edited *The Collected Poems of Robert Lowell*, and has written critical essays on the poet, as well as naming Lowell and Ginsberg as influences in the notes to *Watching the Spring Festival* (2008). Despite his huge personal and professional interest in Lowell, however, I want to argue that in some ways Bidart shares more in common with Ginsberg than either poet does with Lowell: shared obsessions with desire, sex, sexuality, and the freak. Bidart comments on the intimacy of “Howl”: “Prose strophes aim to show us what ‘poor human prose’ ordinarily cannot, ‘speechless’ yet able (by becoming naked and endless as thought itself) to give soul presence” (“A Cross” 250). The emphasis on prose, thought, and human presence in Ginsberg mirrors Bidart’s own work.

Ginsberg’s “Kaddish” and Bidart’s “Confessional” elegize mothers who battled with mental illness. This chapter will read these two poems closely, and explore what it means for a poet to have a mother who is, in Ginsberg’s words, “freaked in the moon brain” (“Kaddish” *CPAG* 219). Both poets represent themselves as the care-taker and sympathetic ear for mothers, whose battle with mental illness leaves them dependant and alone. From an early age, both learned to care for their mothers, and indeed to appropriate the mother’s role. “Kaddish” emphasizes physical intimacy: as a child Ginsberg skips school to watch over his mother, visits her at the mental hospital, and lies beside her in bed when she returns home. “Confessional” depicts the young Bidart caught up in his mother’s obsessions. He is more concerned with the making of her soul than his own. This project changes shape in the poem, as Bidart yearns for a metaphysical intimacy with his mother than he cannot achieve. In both poems, the child’s investment in the mother (and vice versa) is not depicted as entirely selfless; each poet represents a particular mother and particular self to construct his own identity as well.

Although we think of the mother as playing an intimate role in the child’s life, Adam Phillips argues, “however counterintuitively,” that the mother-infant relationship is a “profoundly impersonal intimacy” (“On a More Impersonal” 104). Phillips notes that the

mother and infant are “more attuned to what each is becoming in the presence of the other” than in each other, and calls this “impersonal narcissistic involvement” (113). According to Phillips, “There is no relation more narcissistic, as Freud himself remarks, than the relation between mothers and their children; and there is, by the same token, no relation more devoted to or more inspired by the virtual, the potential. The first intimacy is an intimacy with a process of becoming, not with a person” (114).³⁷ This concept of “impersonal intimacy” applies to Ginsberg and Bidart, as they balance between intimacy with the mother and self-intimacy, the story of the mother and their own self-fashioning. This chapter draws from Christopher Bollas and D.W. Winnicott who provide useful models of the mother-infant relationship as a site of becoming. Significantly, Ginsberg and Bidart show a keen awareness and investment in the mother’s process of becoming, both in her life and their representation of it in the elegy.

Both poets turn to the potentially reparative and potentially damaging theological frameworks of Jewish and Christian belief to heal their relationship with their mother. As they wrestle with the legacy of the mother’s madness, they make use of religious tradition. Helen Vendler defines “Confessional” as a “modern poem of failed family romance and failed theology” (“Imagination Pressing” 75). While problematizing religious frameworks, both poets nonetheless title their elegies after religious rituals and suggest the historical and cultural role faith plays in their family and literary experience. Ginsberg and Bidart respond not only to damaged and damaging mothers, but to theological ideology, which shapes their portrayal of their formative relationship with their mothers as well as their models of selfhood and ethical dignity.

ii. *On Allen Ginsberg’s “Kaddish”*

³⁷ Phillips refers to Freud’s comment: “When one looks at the attitude of affectionate parents towards their children, one cannot but recognize it as a resurgence and repetition of their own long-abandoned narcissism” (“On the Introduction of Narcissism” 376).

Mark Ford writes that “Ginsberg’s life must be more exhaustively documented than that of any other poet of the twentieth century... There is nothing mysterious or withheld about the Ginsberg poetic persona as it develops in course of the 1,161 pages of his *Collected Poems*” (“The Dreams” 69). Ford’s assessment could refer not only to Ginsberg’s published work but the massive archives at Stanford (sold for \$1 million) and the extensive coverage of his work and life by the media, poets, hero-worshippers, and biographers.³⁸ There have been numerous biographies by Barry Miles (*Ginsberg*), Michael Schumacher (*Dharma Lion*), Graham Caveney (“*Screaming*”), and Bill Morgan (*I Celebrate*). Beyond these, much of the criticism on Ginsberg is inherently biographical. One might ask what sort of story is it? Or who it involves and who is invested in it, from the 4,000 who attended his funeral to the many who have invoked his name (See Morgan 2008: 654). Critics situate his life and work within larger stories about counter-culture, postwar Jewishness, homosexuality, cold war poetics, or censorship.³⁹

It is difficult to talk about Ginsberg’s work because it casts such a wide net, and is caught up in turn in such a huge historical and cultural net. This presents a challenge when I seek to look at an individual poem as poetry rather than as cultural symbol. In discussing “Kaddish,” a poem rich in minutiae, this chapter will grapple in detail with its language while addressing larger concerns about confessional poetry, motherhood, and poetic

³⁸ According to Bill Morgan, Ginsberg’s archive, which included the original draft of *Howl* and “hundreds of boxes” of correspondence, journals, and manuscripts, was “appraised for well over five million dollars” and was sold to Stanford for one million dollars (*I Celebrate* 633). *The New York Times*, *The New Yorker*, *The Nation*, *The San Francisco Chronicle*, *Newsweek*, *Life*, *Time*, *Esquire*, *The Rolling Stone*, and *Playboy* discussed Ginsberg. Jane Kramer’s “Profiles, Paterfamilias” on Ginsberg ran in two parts in *The New Yorker*, in both the Aug. 17th and Aug. 24th 1968 issues; Paul O’Neil’s “The Only Rebellion Around” ran in the Nov. 30th, 1959 issue of *Life*; The April 1969 issue of *Playboy* featured an interview with Ginsberg; *The Rolling Stone* devoted a large section of their May 29, 1997 issue to Allen Ginsberg’s memory; from June 4, 1957 through October 4, 1957, *The San Francisco Chronicle* covered the censorship trial of Ginsberg’s *Howl* and continued to follow Ginsberg’s career.

³⁹ See Matza; Van Elteren and VanWyngarden; and Whitmer for analysis of Ginsberg’s role in the counterculture movement. The following address Ginsberg’s Jewish identity: Maccera Shreiber; Ostriker 1997; Finkelstein 173-182; Herring; and Fredman. For criticism that explores Ginsberg’s sexuality, see Doty; Frontain; and Tayson. For work on Ginsberg’s Cold War poetics, see Axelrod 2007; and Harris. Work that focuses on Ginsberg and censorship includes Morgan and Peters; Rips; and Ehrlich and Ferlinghetti.

identity. Rather than assume that we know too much about Ginsberg, we need to ask questions about the purpose of documentary in “Kaddish,” and inquire what it is Ginsberg wishes to know, remember, or leave out as he writes his mother’s story. This discussion of Ginsberg lays out the critical reception of his work as it relates to confession, drawing parallels between him and Lowell, before moving onto a close reading of “Kaddish.”

In Ford’s account, the most significant Ginsbergian is Ginsberg (69). His work has been described as dense with autobiographical details: Helen Vendler comments on the “avalanche of details” in his work (“Fall of America” 201); George Oppen notes, “Copiousness is an essential part not only of Ginsberg’s gift but of his program” (“Three Poets” 329). Ginsberg’s two major poems, “Howl” (1956) and “Kaddish” (1961), especially exhibit the accumulation of data vertically in long lines and horizontally down many pages. Ginsberg’s open forms and openness about sexuality and physicality contribute to what Oppen calls the “very great mass” and “great power” of his best poems (“Three Poets” 329). In “Howl,” Ginsberg seeks to “recreate the syntax,” and, in so doing, to “stand before you...confessing out the soul/...with the absolute heart of the poem of life” (*CPAG* 138-139). “Kaddish,” an elegy for the poet’s mother, Naomi Ginsberg, is the “release of particulars” (II, *CPAG* 220) about mental illness, divorce, and suffering in the context of his family. “Howl” and “Kaddish” portray deep psychological pain and recount personal experiences with madness or the mad. For some critics, Ginsberg is the first confessional poet. Elizabeth Gregory calls “Howl” “the first directly confessional poem” (“Confessing the Body” 45), pointing to its “celebrations of the male body and of sex” (46), while Anne Hartman argues that Ginsberg “evoked the confessional mode for counter-culture purposes, foregrounding its ability to interpolate an audience” (“Confessional Counterpublics” 42).

Nevertheless, Ginsberg is not usually described as a confessional poet in the same grain as Robert Lowell, John Berryman, or Sylvia Plath. The publication of Ginsberg’s *Howl* (1956) precedes Robert Lowell’s *Life Studies* (1959) by three years, and, as many

critics have stated, makes Lowell look tame.⁴⁰ Although M.L. Rosenthal includes Ginsberg along with Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, and John Berryman, as “Other Confessional Poets,” he distinguishes him from Lowell.⁴¹ He derides him for “an exhibitionistic and self-advertising quality” which “rarely” has an obvious “poetic end” (“Other Confessional” 112). He also boldly asserts Ginsberg’s “need to restudy his art and make the poems of which he is very probably capable” (112). The double adverbs “very probably” reveal his doubt about the poet’s craft. Of his “Kaddish,” Rosenthal maintains that the “humiliating details” are “far more harrowing in every way than Lowell’s accounts” (99). In another piece, Rosenthal and Sally Gall state that Ginsberg “made *Life Studies* appear less shocking in its directness and self-loathing than it would otherwise have done” (“The Confessional” 395). They argue that in comparison with Ginsberg, “Lowell’s “91 Revere Street” section in *Life Studies*...is a model of genteel restraint” (424). *The Times Literary Supplement* acknowledged the similarities between Lowell and Ginsberg, yet placed *Kaddish* well beneath “the nobility and splendor...with which Mr. Robert Lowell treats personal madness and family oddity in *Life Studies* (“American Opposites” 404). If the two poets are so different, we must ask why critics constantly compare them.

Certainly, both poets are linked to major breakthroughs in American poetry, characterized by shifts in subject matter and poetic form. Both poets created portraits, histories, and elegies of family and friends, from Lowell’s “My Last Afternoon with Uncle Deveruex Winslow” (*CPRL* 163-167), “Unwanted,” (*CPRL* 831-834), and “For John Berryman” (*CPRL* 737-738) to Ginsberg’s “To Aunt Rose” (*CPAG* 192-193), “Kaddish”

⁴⁰ It should be noted that Ginsberg dates “Kaddish” “Paris, December 1957- New York, 1959” (*CPAG* 235). The original publication of the poem in the *City Lights* edition simply dates the poem “NY 1959” (*Kaddish* 36), the same publication year of Lowell’s *Life Studies*, although the volume *Kaddish* was published in 1961. Whereas Ginsberg’s “Howl” is seen as preceding *Life Studies*, “Kaddish” could be said to be contemporaneous.

⁴¹ In two instances, Rosenthal writes separate chapters on Robert Lowell’s confessional poetry and that of all others (See Rosenthal 1967 and Rosenthal and Gall). The impression this gives is that Lowell’s confessional poetry is superior to that of his contemporaries and imitators.

(*CPAG* 217-238), and *Elegies for Neal Cassady* (1968). They both included domestic objects in their work, like Robert Lowell Senior's "sacred 'rhino' armchair" ("91 Revere Street" *CPRL* 142) and "the toilet seat" where the young Ginsberg "stood naked" as his aunt applied Calamine to his Poison Ivy ("To Aunt Rose" *CPAG* 192). Steven Gould Axelrod notes that both poets explored "deviant sexual and mental states" ("Between Modernism" 1-2). While Lowell said, "My mind's not right," ("Skunk Hour" *CPRL* 191), Ginsberg famously declared, "I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness" ("Howl" *CPAG* 134). In focusing on what was marginal or even taboo, Lowell and Ginsberg brought new subjects into American poetry.

They both also challenged conventional form as they tried to find the larger structures organic to their subject. Lowell discovered: "I couldn't get my experience into tight metrical forms" and so created a prose autobiography ("91 Revere Street") and looser forms in *Life Studies* ("An Interview with Frederick" 244). Whereas Lowell saw conventional form in terms of rhyme and meter, Ginsberg extended this to line length and stanzas: for him, the "trouble with conventional form (fixed line count and stanza form)" was that it didn't mirror his "own mind" ("When the Mode" 247). He found in the "rhythm of actual speech" and in "direct transcription of visual and other mental data" a way to express his own mind (247). He noted that high-brow literature was devoid of real voices in real conversation: "the things we were telling each other for real were totally different from what we found in literature," and he sought to fill in this gap with an oratorical poetry spoken among friends ("Interview with Thomas" 288). Ginsberg wrote in long lines and verse paragraphs that drew from prose. Some of these links between Ginsberg and Lowell have been downplayed because Ginsberg is seen as more revolutionary.

Ginsberg is more often associated with the Beat Movement of the 1950's, a group of writers in New York City and San Francisco including Jack Kerouac, William S. Burroughs, Neal Cassady, Herbert Huncke, Gregory Corso, John Clellon Holmes, and

Peter Orlovsky, who broke the barriers of traditional literary form and wrote about taboo subjects such as gay sex, peyote, and mescaline. According to Ferlinghetti, “The Beats were advance word slingers prefiguring the counterculture of the 1960’s, forecasting its main obsessions and ecstasies of liberation, essentially a ‘youth revolt’” (“Howl’ at the Frontiers” xii).⁴² Ginsberg defines the term “beat” as “perceptive and receptive to vision” as a result of poverty, exhaustion, or crisis such as “the dark night of the soul” or “the cloud of unknowing” or “beatific, the necessary beatness or darkness that preceded opening up to the light” (“A Definition” 237). The term also applied more loosely to “the beat generation literary movement” (“A Definition” 237) and these writers’ effects on “the youth movement” and “mass and middle class culture of the late ‘50s and ‘60s” (238). After his reading of “Howl” (Part I) at Six Gallery in San Francisco, Ginsberg became arguably one of the most public counterculture figures. Amiri Baraka praises “Howl” for its “defiance”; it gave other revolutionaries “the sense of someone being in the same world” (“Howl” 21). Similarly, Kenneth Rexroth called Ginsberg “a poet of revolt if there ever was one,” fostering a mode of “poetry” that is both an “actual social force” and a “total rejection of the official high-brow culture” (“Disengagement” 40).

When Ferlinghetti published Ginsberg’s *Howl* at *City Lights Books*, he was tried on obscenity charges by the San Francisco Police Department’s Juvenile Bureau. During the trial, witnesses, including poets, English professors, and editors, were asked to explicate lines such as “who let themselves be fucked in the ass by saintly motorcyclists, and screamed with joy,/ who blew and were blown by those human seraphim” (I, *CPAG* 136). Since the words “fucked” and “ass” were censored with six and three asterisks respectively, the prosecutor Ralph McIntosh, knowingly asked several witnesses what they thought the original words were (“Excerpts from the Trial” 139, 146). McIntosh even

⁴² John Clellon Holmes, following a conversation with Jack Kerouac, was the first to use the term “beat” in print: in his article, “This is the Beat Generation,” published in *The New York Times Magazine* on Nov. 16, 1952. Jack Kerouac used the term in a piece entitled “Jazz of the Beat Generation,” taken from a novel-in-progress called *The Beat Generation*, which became *On the Road* (1957).

asked a witness what “blew” meant, suggesting “in reference to oral copulation?” (146-147), and insisting, “Do you find those words are necessary to the context to make it a work of literary value?” (147). On October 3, 1957, Judge Clayton W. Horn ruled in favor of *Howl*, as having “redeeming social importance” (“From the Decision” 197).

Early reviews of *Howl* likewise questioned its literary merit. In *The Partisan Review*, John Hollander derided “the utter lack of decorum of any kind in this dreadful title volume” (“Review” 26). Similarly, James Dickey in *The Sewanee Review* said, “Ginsberg is the perfect inhabitant, if not the very founder of Babel, where conditions do not so much make tongues incomprehensible, but render their utterances, as poetry, meaningless” (“From Babel” 509). Frederick Eckman in *Poetry* called *Howl* “an explosion” (“Neither Tame” 391) and “a very shaggy book, the shaggiest I’ve seen” (393). In *The Nation*, M.L. Rosenthal defined the poem as the “sustained shrieks of frantic defiance” and as “the single-minded frenzy of a madwoman” (“Poet of the New” 162). The review in *The Times Literary Supplement* frowned upon Ginsberg’s use of himself as a poetic subject: “Mr. Ginsberg is committed to nothing except his own experience, body, frustration, and sensuality” (“The American” iii).

Among the few critics to praise “Howl” were W.C. Williams, who wrote the introduction, Kenneth Rexroth, who saw it as representative of “the generation that is going to be running the world” (“San Francisco” 32), and Richard Eberhart, who characterized it as “a howl against everything...which kills the spirit” (“West Coast” 25). *Howl* has since been recognized as a breakthrough poem, even by some critics who initially dismissed it.⁴³ Recently, the documentary, *Howl* (2010), directed by Jeffrey Friedman and Rob Epstein, recreates the obscenity trial and Ginsberg’s never published interview in Rome with *Time* magazine. Yet, Jonah Raskin points out the paradox by

⁴³ Michael Rumaker and John Hollander, when approached for permission to reprint their reviews of *Howl* in a collection of essays, *On Ginsberg* (1984), ed. by Lewis Hyde, wrote a paragraph that contextualizes and even excuses their initial dismissals of the volume (See Rumaker 28 and Hollander 40).

which Ginsberg's celebrity status "ironically...may have caused his exclusion from the elite company of fêted American poets" ("Allen Ginsberg's Genius" xx-xxi). Marjorie Perloff lists the critics who don't address Ginsberg's work: "Frank Kermode, Hugh Kenner, Geoffrey Hartman, not to mention theorists like Adorno or Derrida or Julia Kristeva" ("A Lost Battalion" 31); in another essay, she notes that Charles Altieri and Robert von Hallberg also ignore Ginsberg, "perhaps in reaction to the journalistic overkill devoted to the Beat Generation" ("A Lion" 201). Like Judge Horn, though critics can agree upon Ginsberg's cultural relevance, many question his contribution to American poetry.

Critics continue to worry the boundaries between poetry, confession, and autobiography in both Ginsberg and Lowell. M.L. Rosenthal and Sally Gall refer to aspects of "Kaddish" as "brutally humiliating for Ginsberg himself and members of his family" ("The Confessional Mode" 424), recalling Rosenthal's review of *Life Studies* as "a ghoulis operation" on Lowell's father ("Poetry as Confession" 64). Rosenthal and Gall characterize *Kaddish* as the poet's bodily excretions, from vomit to urine, tears, and diarrhea: as the poet's "lurching," or "flood of notations and outcries," or the "compulsive outpouring of note upon note of event and recollected ambiance" (424). They see the poet's success as only the "triumph of copiousness and overcoming of revulsion," noting a lack of "artistic control": "a loose dynamics...of logorrhea on the analyst's couch" (424). The notion of confessional poetry as verbal diarrhea takes away the poet's agency, and the comparison between poetic and psychoanalytic confession emphasizes catharsis rather than craft. George Oppen's review in *Poetry* similarly critiqued *Kaddish*, arguing that Ginsberg at times "hoped for a poem by riding 'no hands'" ("Three Poets" 330). Yet, Allen Grossman recognized *Kaddish*'s confessional mode as a breakthrough: "*The form of his poetry—that of the enormous unifying syntax of the single sentence—is proposed as a model or archetype of some new language of personal being*" ("The Jew" 156).

“Kaddish” not only relates the life story and death of Ginsberg’s mother, Naomi Levy Ginsberg, but also immerses the reader in a voice-driven poem of many different voices. As “Kaddish” reveals, personal writing derives from a chorus of voices and literary traditions. Further, the poem borrows from various genres of writing, seen in its divisions into the following sections: proem, narrative, unnumbered hymn, lament, litany, and fugue. The title refers to the Jewish prayer, which is said daily in the synagogue service, and also said as a “Mourner’s” or “Orphan’s Kaddish” by the child of the deceased. The Kaddish is a doxology that blesses God’s name; when spoken on behalf of one’s dead parent, the prayer expiates the deceased. The prayer itself does not mention the dead, rather God’s name; however, it is said on behalf of the dead. David De Sola Pool explains the notion of “ancestral merit” which invests the male child with power to represent and redeem the deceased father (102-103). Leon Wieseltier writes about speaking the Kaddish for his father, “When the parent becomes the child and the child becomes the parent... I think that Kaddish is the perfect symbol of such a reversal. Suddenly the train of submission turns around. *He needs me*” (*Kaddish* 174). Ginsberg borrows from the language, tradition, and themes of the prayer, as he engages in his own custom of praising his mother in her paranoia, nakedness, and death. Borrowing words from the Kaddish, he praises his mother as glorious in her suffering, entreating Jehovah to accept her:

“Magnificent, mourned no more, marred of heart, mind behind, / married dreamed, mortal changed—Ass and face done with murder./ In the world, given, flower maddened, made no Utopia, shut under pine,/ almed in Earth, balmed in Lone, Jehovah, accept (I, *CPAG* 220). In fact, the Kaddish was not said at Naomi’s funeral because a minyan, ten Jewish men, was not present; neither was Ginsberg. As a result, Ginsberg wrote his own version: the poem’s double status as a prayer-elegy includes both praise of God and Naomi.

Later in the narrative section of the poem, Ginsberg transliterates a key passage from the prayer Kaddish: “Yisborach, v’yistabach, v’yispoar, v’yisroman, v’yisnaseh, v’yishador, v’yishalleh, v’yisshallol, sh’meh d’kudsho, b’rich hu” (II, *CPAG* 227). In

English, the passage reads “Blessed, praised, glorified, exalted, highly honored, revered, lauded, and extolled is the Name of the Holy One blessed be He” (qtd. by Telsner 142). In the “Hymmn” section, he offers a rough translation, blending two different key sections from the prayer which focus on extolling God’s name (*CPAG* 223). In the transliteration, Ginsberg uses the Eastern European pronunciation, which connects him to his mother’s homeland, Russia, and the speech that would have been used in her community. Ginsberg evokes a larger family and cultural group speaking the Kaddish for her: the minyan absent at her funeral, her mandolin-playing mother, her brother “dead in Riverside or Russia” (III, *CPAG* 233) her children, ex-husband, and more broadly, her homeland. He brings the ghost of the minyan to her, creating a polyvocal voice and audience for his poem and a greater force of voices to redeem her. The most significant difference between the traditional Kaddish and the poem is this question of redemption; while Ginsberg seeks consolation for his mother, he also exalts her in her very weakness and suffering. In the hymn, he proclaims: “Blessed by you Naomi in fears!/. . .Blest be your last years’ loneliness/Blest be your failure” (*CPAG* 223). The poet blends his Jewish background with Beats ideology, by which spiritual or physical poverty can position one for enlightenment and receptivity. Naomi, “like a tree, broken, or a flower. . .leaf stript” (I, *CPAG* 219), and the poet whose “imagination [is] a withered leaf at dawn” (I, *CPAG* 217) appear beaten down, yet beautiful in their nakedness and potential.

“Kaddish” moves far beyond tolerance to an embrace of Naomi. Ginsberg reclaims his mother as his teacher. He locates his poetic origins in his mother’s paranoid mind: “O glorious muse that bore me from the womb, gave suck first mystic life & taught me talk and music, from whose pained head I first took Vision—Tortured and beaten in the skull—What mad hallucinations of the damned that drive me out of my own skull. . .till I find Peace for Thee” (II, *CPAG* 231). On the one hand, Naomi’s mad language drives the poet mad: he must seek “Peace” for her, soothe her with a different tongue. On the other hand, the poet embraces the mother’s visions, sucking on the cadence of trance like breast

milk. She teaches him “music”: he addresses Naomi in a pastoral scene where she lies “on the grass” with “the mandolin on your knees” (II, *CPAG* 231). Naomi uses her mandolin to gain legitimacy; although no one believes her paranoid accusations when she calls her sister Elanor a spy, she protests “I played the mandolin” (II, *CPAG* 229). Her music is a sign of her mental health. When she was in the psychiatric hospital, Ginsberg said he “waited for that day—My mother again to...sing at mandolin...Stenka Razin” (II, *CPAG* 225).⁴⁴ The multilingual mother teaches her poet-son to compose in Russian, Yiddish, Hebrew, and English; Ginsberg locates his “voice in a boundless field” (V, *CPAG* 235), suggestive of their polyvocal collaboration. Ginsberg includes his mother’s voice, as she sings the popular number “Last Night the Nightingale Woke Me” (*CPAG* 229): “Last night the nightingale woke me/ Last night when all was still/ it sang in the golden moonlight/ from on the wintry hill” (II, *CPAG* 222). Ginsberg adds, “She did,” asserting his mother’s song over the nightingale’s and evoking her awakening as a mandolin player and lyricist. It also implicitly addresses what she did for him as a poet, suggesting Ginsberg reabsorbs the lyric from her lyre-like mandolin. Ginsberg invokes Shelley’s famous elegy for Keats, “Adonais,” in the epitaph and Keats more specifically through a reference to “Ode to a Nightingale,” to suggest that his mother is the Keats to his Shelley. Ginsberg devotes much of his imaginative, literary, and epistolary life to his mother: he “dreamed of her soul,” which “was my own love in its form, the Naomi, my mother on earth still—sent her long letter—& wrote hymns to the mad—Work of the merciful Lord of Poetry” (II, *CPAG* 232). He writes to her and becomes obsessed with the mad as his poetic subject. He doesn’t just write about her, but wishes to connect with her through writing, to conjoin her singing with his. When she dies, he says, “I long to hear your voice again, remembering your mother’s music” (II, *CPAG* 231), grounding his voice in hers and a maternal lineage.

⁴⁴ A note to the poem says that Stenka Razin is “a Russian song” about a tortured hero (*CPAG* 774); likewise, Naomi is a tortured hero in the poem.

The inclusion of Naomi's letter and sign-off "love, Naomi (which is your mother)" in the poem evidences their literary exchange. The poem quotes from Naomi's last letter, which was written to her son; though most of Naomi's paranoid shrieks are about spies and doom, in the letter she writes with a new prophetic ecstasy: "The key is in the window, the key is in the sunlight at the window—I have the key" (II, *CPAG* 232). The letter is quoted throughout the poem, representing the ways in which "Kaddish" is in dialogue with Naomi. In the lament, the poet imagines his mother dying in the mental hospital: "her lone in Long Island writing a last letter—and her image in the sunlight at the window/ 'The key is in the sunlight at the window'" (II, *CPAG* 233). Where Naomi sees her own reflection in the window as the sun pours in, Ginsberg presents Naomi as "the key" in the window. The trope of seeing one's reflection in a window has become cliché, yet Ginsberg complicates it by suggesting the "last letter" reflects his mother, and his own poem reflects her self-reflection: "But that the key should be left behind—at the window—the key in the sunlight—to the living—that can take/ that slice of light in hand...and see" (III, *CPAG* 234). As the survivor-elegist and son, Ginsberg becomes Naomi's "Kaddish," a representation and compensation for her. He tries to see her life through her eyes and writing, imaging her moving "Toward the Key in the window—and the great Key lays its head of light on top of Manhattan, and over the floor, and lays down on the sidewalk—in a single vast beam (I, *CPAG* 218). The key here corresponds to Naomi's "head lain on a pillow of the hospital to die" and the transference of "everlasting Light" and "the key in the sunlight" to the "living" poet (III, *CPAG* 234). I agree with Tony Triglio's interpretation of the key as "prophetic language" that is transferred from mother to son (*Strange Prophecies* 126). Ginsberg's ejaculations, "I've seen your grave! O strange Naomi! My own—cracked grave!...I am Svul Avrum" (II, *CPAG* 229) correspond to Naomi's paranoid predictions of death. I take issue with Triglio's emphasis on the "nonsense and doubt" (126) of this prophetic diction, because the poem draws from a

variety of established literary forms such as the Kaddish prayer, Lamentations, hymns, and epistles in addition to prophecy rooted in Biblical history.⁴⁵

On the book jacket of *Kaddish*, Naomi's letter reappears as part of Ginsberg's prosody: "language intuitively chosen as in trance & dream" evoking "the self seeking the Key to life found at last in our self" (*CPAG* 822). This offers an acknowledgment of Naomi's part not only in her elegy but in Ginsberg's poetics. Additionally, the contrast between "the self" and "our self" has ramifications for confessional poetry; private elegy and relational autobiography can evidence larger truths about human experience and it can work the other way around. One can puzzle over the great questions, the literary canon, and philosophy only to discover that selfhood is the "Key to life." Family stories represent a key to self-discovery and poetic self-fashioning, as seen in "Kaddish"; it is not only the content but the communal aspect of the storytelling, the sense of occasion and purpose, and the presence (or notable absence) of the addressee that define confessional discourse.

"Kaddish" constructs a multivocal, multitextual poetics of intimacy which stems from Naomi. The poem represents the mother as various literary figures, including famous Biblical women: Naomi, Ruth, Hannah, and Rebecca. She is the "long-tressed Naomi of Bible" (II, *CPAG* 232), who loses her husband and two sons and asks to be called "Mara," which means bitter rather than "Naomi," which means cheerful (Ruth 1:20 *KJV*). In a similar way, Naomi loses her husband to a divorce and her two sons when she is hospitalized. Ginsberg, though, idealizes her long hair, which symbolizes her earlier beauty: "O...woman on the grass, your long black hair is crowned with flowers" (II, *CPAG* 231). She is also portrayed as Ruth, the Moabite widow, who follows her mother-in-law to her ancestral home in Bethlehem. Ruth is a foreigner in Bethlehem, which is why Ginsberg links her to his immigrant mother as "Ruth who wept in America" (II, *CPAG*

⁴⁵ It is very likely that Ginsberg was also aware of Charles Reznikoff's "Kaddish" published in *Going To and Fro and Walking Up and Down* (1941). Reznikoff's eleven-poem sequence is an elegy for his mother, Sarah Yetta Wolvovsky Reznikoff. The poem conveys the discomfort and impotence an adult son feels watching his mother die: "Day after day you vomit the green sap of your life" (II, *Complete Poems* 54). In a dream, the son imagines comforting her: "Helpless, I looked at her anguish" (VIII, *Complete Poems* 55).

232). The connection to “mad Hannah” (II, *CPAG* 229) is that the biblical Hannah wept and prayed so intensely for a child that she was thought drunk or crazy. She is also associated with “Rebecca,” the mother of Jacob who will later be renamed Israel.⁴⁶ Ginsberg positions himself in terms of this Biblical lineage; he reinvents himself as “Svul Abraham—Israel Abraham—myself—to sing in the wilderness toward God” (*CPAG* 232). As Israel, he is Rebecca’s child. As Abraham, he is Rebecca’s father-in-law, Israel’s grandfather, and an important patriarch who leads the Israelites to the Promised Land, Canaan. Ginsberg frustrates a generational reading of Naomi or “Israel Abraham”; in fact, “Israel Abraham” is a hybrid of the child and parent, reflective of Ginsberg’s role as “the weird nurse-son” (II, *CPAG* 228).

In the most-discussed passage of “Kaddish,” Ginsberg discusses his mother’s physical scars and sexuality:

One time I thought she was trying to make me come lay her—flirting to herself at sink—lay back on huge bed that filled most of the room, dress up round her hips, big slash of hair, scars of operations, pancreas, belly wounds, abortions, appendix, stitching of incisions pulling down in the fat like hideous thick zippers—ragged long lips between her legs—What, even, smell of asshole? I was cold—later revolted a little, not much—seemed perhaps a good idea to try—know the Monster of the Beginning Womb—Perhaps—that way. Would she care? She needs a lover (II, *CPAG* 227).

Critics have emphasized exploitation. Vendler notes “the unbearably graphic, scandalous, farcical, and horrifying narrative of events in Naomi’s life” seen in section II (“Allen Ginsberg” 11). She recalls teaching the poem: “‘How can he write such things about his mother?’ I was asked by one shaken student” (11). Jahan Ramazani claims that Ginsberg “takes revenge on his mother by relentlessly exposing her to public view” (“American Family Elegy I” 254). Although the passage might appear to expose the maternal body in an exploitative way, the tone is complex, allowing for humor as well as tenderness. I also take issue with Ramazani’s claim that Ginsberg and other confessional poets “openly turn

⁴⁶ Rebecca also refers to Ginsberg’s paternal grandmother Rebecca Ginsberg, who is called “Buba” throughout the poem. Ginsberg blends the two, seen as false enemies throughout, as the matriarchy he claims for himself.

on their dead parents” in “astonishing...denunciations of the dead” (“Introduction” 6). Ramazani overlooks the reparative elements of the poem, the complex identity of the mother poet, and the equally candid exploration of the private body and sexuality throughout Ginsberg’s work. Many critics like Ramazani forget the overarching purpose of the poem. As a prayer-elegy, the poem intercedes for Naomi, praising her through “psalm” and seeking her “redemption from Wilderness” (I, *CPAG* 220). Looking more carefully at the poem’s language as well as the poet’s sensibility, we discover Ginsberg’s tender awkwardness. He is the only poet who, in Thom Gunn’s words, “would mistake the start of a mugging for an embrace” and “laugh at himself” (“A Record” 114).⁴⁷

We see the ironic hesitation in the repetition of “perhaps” (“seemed perhaps a good idea to try--know the Monster of the Beginning Womb--Perhaps--that way”). Perhaps, perhaps it's a good idea suggests that it's not. The passage builds humor when Ginsberg adds the ironic qualifier that although he “revolted” it was only “a little, not much,” as if it were possibly to only become slightly repulsed. The qualifier self-consciously refers to the passage itself, as it might repulse the reader, although it is only intended to repulse “a little, not much” with its consideration of incest as the cure for his mother’s sexual needs. I would align my reading to that of Thom Gunn (“A Record”), who has an ear for Ginsberg’s “hilarity” and “awkwardness”:

The long verse reaches a kind of climax of grotesque horror with the mention of the zippers and the lips: she has become a creature from a horror movie. But with “smell of asshole” he, while seeming to add to the repulsiveness, nevertheless recovers his humanity (beautifully) by remembering hers--it makes her a creature like himself again. Which among us has never had a smelly asshole, after all? And the whole passage turns to his puzzled attempt to think of what is right to do, his tone of casual sanity so inadequate to the situation, the hilarity to his clumsy tone of kindness ('seemed perhaps a good idea to try'). It restores the sense of proportion (“A Record” 107).

The notion of the smelly asshole as emblematic of a shared humanity is as hilarious in Gunn’s description as in Ginsberg’s poem; however, when compared to other sites within

⁴⁷ See Ginsberg’s “Mugging” (*CPAG* 633-635).

the wounded maternal body such as “belly wounds, abortions” or “incisions in the fat” (II, *CPAG* 227), the asshole becomes common ground. Similarly, Ginsberg identifies with the emblems of his mother’s sexual maturity. In the lament, he recounts to her the “six dark hairs on the wen of your breast” and “a long black beard around the vagina” (IV, *CPAG* 234). Gunn’s overall sense of Ginsberg is that he is “plainly drawn” to “inherently awkward material” and that this “built-in inelegance” makes his poetry more “authentic” (“A Record” 104). It’s worth noting that although Gunn dislikes the Confessional poets, he aligns himself with Ginsberg: “The closest I come to liking Confessional poetry is liking Ginsberg” (*Thom Gunn in Conversation* 23). Gunn defines Ginsberg here as the only kind of confessional poet he would read, pinpointing his “humanity of spirit and wild humor” (“A Record” 115) as positive aspects of his aesthetic. Later in the final chapter, I will look at Gunn’s relationship to the maternal body, an issue that comes into sharp focus in poems about his mother’s suicide. I would add to Gunn’s comments that Ginsberg creates a deeper inelegance in his rendering of an awkward moment by constantly shifting tones from horror to comedy to affection.

The simple assessment of the mother’s condition—“she needs a lover”—is heartbreaking, considering the mother’s broken relationships and the poet’s identity as her homosexual son. It is also revelatory: the poet interprets the mother’s persistent nudity and seduction attempt in terms of a narrative basic to all his work: the story of unrequited love, the story of the outcast, the freak, and the sex-obsessed. One need only look at his work on Neal Cassady to better understand Ginsberg’s identification with his mother. It is striking that Ginsberg attributes to his mother her own search for a lost love object. The passage presents to us the Oedipal Complex in a new way; in Ginsberg’s rendering it is the mother who needs a lover rather than the child longing for the lost mother or mother-substitute. What Ginsberg brings to the genre Ramizani calls “The American Family Elegy” (“American Family” 216) is the notion of the parent’s loss and the child’s inability to save the parent from death, loneliness, even abandonment.

In his essay on Leonardo da Vinci, Freud argues that homosexuals “remain faithful” (*Leonardo da Vinci* 74) to their mothers. In his account, a gay man “may appear to be running after boys...but he is in fact running away from other women who might cause him to be unfaithful” (74). Leo Bersani discusses the Freudian path of the homosexual: “After a long and intense fixation upon the mother, the budding homosexual does not abandon her” but recognizes himself in the mother (“Sociability and Cruising” 53). Bersani points out the problems with Freud’s theory such as its heteronormative bias and reduction of homosexuality; yet he finds a point worth salvaging: “The Oedipal rivalry...has simply been bypassed by an identification that is neither a loss nor object-love in the usual sense” (54). Ultimately, in Bersani’s reading, “The psychoanalytically defined homosexual” is “a stranger” to the “murderous passions” that plague the family romance, and, as such, can “identify with... [love] objects without introjecting them” (55). As seen in Ginsberg’s description of his mother’s sexuality, he identifies with her as naked, unloved, and mad; further, he exempts himself from the “murderous passions” of the Oedipal model to reveal understanding of his mother as a fellow human being. Additionally, the casual, humorous tone could be said to fly in the face of Cold War containment ideology, post-World War II Jewish-American masculinity, and Freudian psychology. “Kaddish” underscores Bersani’s critique: “Psychoanalysis has conceptualized desire as the mistaken reaction to loss; it has been unable to think desire as the confirmation of a community of being” (“Sociality and Sexuality” 105).

However, I argue that while Bersani’s emphasis on sociality critically re-imagines homosexual desire and the Oedipal complex, psychoanalysts such as D.W. Winnicott and Christopher Bollas have also prioritized identification and relatedness. Winnicott provides a striking anecdote: “I remember a baby of three months who, when feeding at the mother’s breast, would put his hand to her mouth to feed her before he took her breast. He was able to get an idea of what the mother was feeling like” (“Children Learning” 235). Not only does the mother accommodate the child’s needs, but in this instance, the child

actively seeks to identify with the mother's position. This image of a mothering infant is particularly relevant to Ginsberg's "Kaddish," as the son goes to great extents to "get an idea" of Naomi's history, damaged mind, and unmet needs. The prayer-elegy seeks redemption for Naomi, converting a potentially catastrophic mother-child relationship into a regenerative, mothering act.

Christopher Bollas builds from Winnicott's concept of the "good-enough mother" who adapts herself to her infant, creating a "facilitating environment" that allows for the baby's growth and integration ("Children Learning" 234). Bollas refers to the mother as a "transformational object" because of her fundamental role in her baby's development: she is "experientially identified by the infant with processes that alter self experience" (*The Shadow* 14). Thus, in Bollas' account, "the mother is less significant and identifiable as an object than as a process" (14). However, the mother is not endlessly and ruthlessly used as part of the child's growth. In Ginsberg's poem and in Bollas' work, the child develops an understanding of his or her individuality: "the relation to the mother changes from the mother as the other who alters the self to a person who has her own life and needs" (*The Shadow* 28). Bollas explains that this early experience of the mother is not necessarily put aside: "The ego experience of being transformed by the other remains as a memory that may be re-enacted in aesthetic experiences" (28). As we see in "Kaddish," Ginsberg re-activates his and Naomi's symbiotic relating, and creates a model for poetic identity and repair.

Harold Bloom, in particular, has not acknowledged positive aspects of poetic transformation that might involve collaboration with others. He reads "Howl" and "Kaddish" as "failures" ("On Ginsberg's" 214) and "Kaddish" as "largely and increasingly out of control" (214), missing the intimate, literary relationship between Naomi and Ginsberg. Rather than explore the multilingualism of a relationship that doesn't fit into his own masculinist take on Oedipal poetics, Bloom says of the last stanza: "All that is human about these lines is the circumstances of their incoherence" (215). Bloom's

disappointment stems in part from the expectation raised by the poem's epigraph from Shelley's "Adonais," an elegy for Keats: "Ginsberg's epigraph is from *Adonais*, and he arouses in the reader some expectation that all this pathos and sorrow have been evoked toward some imaginative end" (214). Bloom's expectation of rivalry between Ginsberg and his so-called poetic father Shelley blinds him to Ginsberg's use of his mother as a poetic collaborator and strange muse who not only inspires poetry but prophesies and writes letters. Ginsberg defies the expectation that his poetry is exclusively about masculine bonds, bodies, and influence, as he engages with his mother's singing voice and chosen musical instrument. The litany in particular, where we might expect a great, Ginsbergian list, invokes Naomi to collaborate: "O mother/ what have I left out/ O mother/ what have I forgotten" (IV, *CPAG* 234). The lack of question marks indicates the deeper loss, not of details, but of a life and a relationship. The poem as a whole moves from narrative to dirge as it "diminish[es] to shorter and shorter sob" ("How *Kaddish*" 233), embracing a longing for his mother's voice and for deeper knowledge of her. Suggesting not only the poem's status as elegy, but also his incomplete knowledge of her, Ginsberg defines "Kaddish" as "a poem in the dark" (I, *CPAG* 217).

Ginsberg's work has been seen as masculine whereas confessional verse has been associated with femininity. However, his two major works draw immensely from his mother's battle with mental illness; that which "Howl" buries, "Kaddish" celebrates: the poet's relationship to his mad mother. Ginsberg reveals that "Howl," a poem often discussed in terms of male bonds, actually addresses the mother-child relationship: "*Howl* is really about my mother, in her last year at Pilgrim State Hospital—acceptance of her, later inscribed in *Kaddish* detail ("More Explanations" 11). "Howl" (1956) corresponds to Ginsberg's later elegy for his mother, "Kaddish," (dated 1959, published in 1961)—and not as ying-and-yang poems that deal with masculinity and femininity or public and private life, respectively. Instead, "Kaddish" returns to the subject of "Howl," the poet's intimacy with the mad, and fleshes out the earliest and most formative experience: the

story of his paranoid-schizophrenic mother. In “Kaddish,” Ginsberg explores his poetic origins as stemming from a mentally-ill mother, and seeks to embody her prophecies, naked body, and story of difference and rejection.

In “Howl” the mother figure appears at the end of Part I, after a description of the insane asylum. Ginsberg’s annotations to these lines reveal the links between the mad protagonist of “Howl,” Carl Solomon and the poet’s mother; in fact both were hospitalized in Pilgrim State Hospital. Ginsberg says that he drew from memories of his mother at Greystone Hospital when he wrote about the psychiatric ward, but he used the word “Rockland,” referring to New York’s Rockland State Hospital, in Part III for rhythm’s sake (*Howl* 42n 130). In Part I, he refers to all three hospitals, linking them all as the “doom of the wards of the madtowns of the East”: “Pilgrim State’s Rockland’s Greystone’s foetid halls, bickering with the echoes of the soul, rocking and rolling in the midnight solitude-bench dolmen-realms of love, dream of life a nightmare, bodies turned to stone as heavy as the moon” (*CPAG* 138). It is striking to note that Ginsberg drew from his mother’s hospitalization rather than his own experience with Solomon at the Psychiatric Institute in 1949. In the poem, he tells Solomon that his mother is omnipresent in the literature of madness: “I’m with you in Rockland/ where you imitate the shade of my mother” (III, *Howl* 7). In the “Footnote to Howl” (1955), Ginsberg exclaims, “Holy my mother in the insane asylum!” (*CPAG* 142), linking her illness to Solomon’s and his own, and blessing her as his mad mother and as the proverbial mother of mental illness. In February of 1986, he says of “Howl”: “I’d used Mr. Solomon’s return to the asylum as occasion of a masque on my feelings toward my mother, in itself an ambiguous situation since I had signed the papers giving permission for her lobotomy a few years before. Thereby hangs another tale” (“Reintroduction to Carl” 111). It was Ginsberg who decided finally to sign the paperwork authorizing Naomi’s pre-frontal lobotomy in November of 1947 (*Ginsberg* 95). Ginsberg’s entry later that month darkly reports, “Allen, don’t die” (*The Book of Martyrdom* 239). “Kaddish” reveals the ways in which pain unites mother

and son. Ginsberg refers to “Kaddish” as “the hymn completed in tears” and speaks of “the familiar defenseless hurt self” he locates in “my self my own mother...trapped desolate...homeless” (*CPAG* 822). One way Ginsberg compensates for their shared pain is not to compensate for it all, but to extend his praise to his mother’s darkest, most doomed parts.

“Kaddish” conveys the guilt and burden of the poet’s role as caretaker. Ginsberg feels responsible for her bleak quality of life in the asylum: “2 years of solitude—no one” (II, *CPAG* 223). “Kaddish” attempts to enter that solitude, and resist the barriers. The poem compensates for the years of “no one” by bringing together the mother and poet in a literary relationship. Throughout the poem, Naomi is seen as an unlikely literary predecessor. Ginsberg’s precursor texts are her lullabies, popular songs, Communist propaganda, paranoid-schizophrenic shrieks, and her “blackboard full of CAT” from her days of teaching special education (I, *CPAG* 222). Drawing from his mother’s voice is not an empty gesture to avoid exploitation, but perhaps the only way to honor her memory while also affirming his place as her Kaddish, son, biographer, and lyre. The poet questions how to write Naomi’s story, and one response is to compose an elegiac *ars poetica*, by which the impetus to lament, bless, pray for, and remember one’s mother is caught up with questions about why one writes at all. For Ginsberg, who penned what I see as two of the most public private poems of the 20th century, “Howl” and Kaddish,” writing is correspondence, an immersion of the self into others and vice versa. At the heart of his mother-poem, and one of the most well-known mother-poems of the century, is an abiding interest in camaraderie and inclusiveness. The poem’s closing section reaffirms the dual status of the poem as a shared story: Naomi is “my halflife and my own as hers” (V, *CPAG* 235). The poem goes beyond elegiac documentation of his mother to affirm the “Work of the merciful Lord of Poetry” (II, *CPAG* 232), which he inherits from her and acknowledges as her legacy.

iii. *On Bidart's "Confessional"*

Only Bidart would title a poem "Phenomenology of the Prick" (*Star Dust* 28-29). His work refuses to be read as either wholly about the other or the self, biography or autobiography, the intellect or the body (but *The Book of the Body*), phenomenology or the prick. Bidart thus complicates Lowell's distinctions between "raw" and "cooked" poetry ("National Book"), giving a very cooked title to a seemingly raw narrative. Nevertheless, the poem raises larger questions about desire, will, and punishment. Words such as "forbidden," "satisfied," "possess," "world," and "fixed" straddle the world of "phenomenology" and that of the "prick." Bidart is clearly a more difficult poet than Ginsberg, but also a student of the prick: "what war I enter and for what a prize! the dead prick of commonplace obsession" (*CPAG* 48). Although Ginsberg would use the prick as part of the same physiological lexicon as "masturbation," "shit," "ass," "cunt," "hard-on," and "cock," he also conceptualized the body in ways that reflect current societal, literary, and political questions. Bidart draws the title of his Collected Poems *In the Western Night* from Ginsberg's "Howl": "I'm with you in Rockland/ in my dreams you walk dripping from a sea-journey on the highway across America in tears to the door of my cottage in the Western night" (*CPAG* 141). The title touches on the poet's collage of sources, including Western Philosophy, Ellen West, the American West, the poet's cowboy father, and "Howl." The cover illustration is of Giovanni Volpato's etching of Raphael's "The School of Athens," a reflection of the philosophical themes Bidart draws on as well as his use of found material.

Bidart deliberately blends various genres and sources such as letters, case studies, diaries, and his own autobiography. He modernizes Saint Augustine ("Confessional" *IWN* 53-74), Catullus ("After Catullus" *IWN* 169; "Catullus: Odi et amo" *IWN* 52; "Catullus: Excrucior" *Desire* 8; "Catullus: Id Faciam" *Watching the Spring* 19), Plato and Aristotle

(“The First Hour of the Night” *IWN* 183-219), the fifteenth-century Scots poet William Dunbar (“Lament for the Makers” *Star Dust* 22), Shakespeare (“Little O” *Watching the Spring* 42-23), Ovid (“The Second Hour of the Night” *Desire* 27-59), and others, while also characteristically creating links with performers from opera singers to actors to writers. Performers include Marilyn Monroe (“Marilyn Monroe” *Watching the Spring* 3), the Russian ballerina Galina Ulanova (“Ulanova at Forty-Six at Last Dances Before a Camera Giselle” *Watching the Spring* 26-35), the film director and lead role in *Hamlet* (1948), Lawrence Olivier (“Borges & I” *Desire* 9-11), the opera singer Maria Callas (“Ellen West” *IWN* 109-121), and many others. In a poem about his inability to forgive his mother, Bidart humorously says, “Augustine too/ had trouble with his mother” (“Confessional” *IWN* 58), suggesting that even saints have mother trouble. Rather than devote his poem to the type of intimate narrative details found in a Ginsberg poem, Bidart constructs the inner workings of the minds and souls of larger-than-life figures. In “Confessional,” a seemingly confessional poem about his mother’s death and childhood trauma, focuses more on Saint Augustine’s shared vision with his mother at Ostia than it does on his own mother.

Bidart’s work appears to abandon the autobiographical, yet achieves something closer to it through the psychic distancing of the case study, the psychoanalytic dialogue, and critical reading. To Dan Chiasson’s notion of “the parable of selfhood” (“Presence” 63) in Bidart’s oeuvre, I would like to add the “autobiographical ballet” he speaks of in “The War of Vaslav Nijinsky”: “Once again, I nearly/ abandoned my autobiographical ballet” (*IWN* 29). Bidart often combines two different aspects of confession, the notion of a creed or anti-creed, and the story of crisis. In his work, the suffering protagonist is less a victim than a writer and reader, highly self-conscious of philosophy’s great questions. Out of his own mental life and his protagonists’ “endless, fascinating researches” (*IWN* 29) and “nights” spent “reading and improving Nietzsche” (*IWN* 29), Bidart dances between

abstract, discursive attempts at manifesto and emotive, cinematic attempts at monologue. “It was my own life put into a choreographic poem” (*IWN* 28), Bidart ventriloquizes through Nijinsky. Bidart, like Nijinsky, dances and performs his life-story by “analyzing and then abandoning/ my life, working on the *Great Questions/* like WAR and GUILT and GOD/ and MADNESS” (“The War of Vaslav Nijinsky” *IWN* 29). In a ballet with texts, Bidart unsettles what we might think of as pure confession, suggesting that analysts and biographers also confess through their subjects, as his use of approximate quotations or “words like these but not/ exactly these” (“Confessional” *IWN* 72). In such moments, Bidart draws attention to his editorial craft, and the way in which his words approximate the other as much as they approximate the self.

If Bidart and Ginsberg are both poets of the body, Bidart’s interest lies in the tension between the body and mind. Both men are poets of accumulation and addition, tenderness and adhesiveness. Although both have an outsider ethos, Ginsberg is more obviously inclusive whereas Bidart moves towards emptiness, negation, and deconstruction. Although he is a kind of archivist, reader, and collector, like Ginsberg, Bidart is more restless, earnest, and investigative. Bidart’s “Confessional” is an existential, even absurdist search for forgiveness and resolution, given the fact that neither exist. Unlike Ginsberg, who finds redemptive elements in Judaism despite major differences between the traditional Kaddish and the poem, Bidart dissects and then dismisses Christianity and any metaphysics. He creates the rhetorical situation of a confessant, who tells the story of his difficult relationship with his mother, and a confessor, who listens, asks questions, and suggests the absence of any redemptive ideology. The rhetorical situation is one of crisis. The confessant has lost his mother, and recounts her insanity, his traumatic childhood, and his feelings of guilt and anger. The confessant introduces the counter narrative of Saint Augustine’s relationship to his domineering mother Monica, and their shared mystical vision. While there is tangible envy in the telling of this story, there is equally tangible skepticism about Monica’s fierce control over her son’s conversion,

and her inability to create a soul separate from him. The long poem is in two parts and represents the dialogue through typography: the roman-type letters on the page are spoken by the confessant, and the italic letters are spoken by the confessor. Throughout, the language draws from both confessional poetry and Augustinian confession: words like “catharsis” (*IWN* 63), “ME” (*IWN* 65), “crises” (*IWN* 63), “THE PAST” (*IWN* 67), “*issues in her life*” (*IWN* 63), “CRAZINESS” (*IWN* 63), with their psychological underpinnings, counter the religious diction of “WISDOM” (*IWN* 69), “forgive” (*IWN* 53), “CREATED BEINGS” (*IWN* 53), “absolution” (*IWN* 58), “convert” and “blasphemies” (*IWN* 67).

“Confessional” explores the metaphysical intimacy of Augustine and Monica as the reflex of all that Bidart can’t create with his mother: the philosopher-saint and his mother are able to “FORGET THE PAST/ AND LOOK FORWARD/ TO WHAT LIES BEFOR THEM” (*IWN* 67). Through their shared Christianity, they move beyond their past angers and contemplate eternity: “they stand here sweetly talking together/ and ask/ *“what the eternal life of the saints could be”* (*IWN* 66). The two reach an intellectual, spiritual high, as they meditate on “what the saints’ possession of God is like,” recall “each level of created things,” consider “the sweetness of the saints’ LIGHT and LIFE,” and “SCALE THE STARS” (*IWN* 66). They transcend everyday life by talking about “their own Souls.../and past them, to that region of richness/ unending, where God feeds ISRAEL forever/ with the food of Truth” (*IWN* 66-67). The language of religious mania and mysticism becomes almost unbearable in its sentimentality and enviable ecstasy as saint and mother begin “panting for this WISDOM, with all the effort/ of their heart, for one heartbeat” (*IWN* 69). The word “forever” creates doubt about whether one would want to eat the same food everyday, spiritual food or otherwise. The notion of a shared vision is difficult enough for modern readers; the joint heart adds sentimental cliché; the joint heartbeat pushes further into melodrama. There is playfulness here: Bidart attempts writing a line so bad it’s actually good, and does so successfully.

There is usually a rift between the way one speaks to one's parents and to one's partners in Christ, fellow poets, or colleagues. Such rifts are critical to Bidart's representation of the alienated writer. In the long poem "Golden State," addressed to his father, he comments on his education as a kind of Scarlet Letter:

you were proud
of me, the first Bidart
who ever got a B.A.; Harvard, despite
your distrust, was the crown;—but the way
you eyed me:
 the *bewilderment*, unease:
the somehow always
tentative, suspended judgment...
—however *much* you tried (and, clearly,
you *did* try)
 you could not remake your
taste, and like me" (*IWN* 156-157)

In the letter from Bidart's father, Shank Bidart, printed in the poem, the post-script begs, "Excuse this writing as its about 30 years since I wrote a letter" (*IWN* 155). The P.S. functions as Bidart's appeal to his father to excuse his identity as a writer, to not hold it against him: "Excuse this writing" (excuse who it has made me; excuse what I have made of myself). The poet is unable to resolve his poetic identity in relation to his father:

And yet your voice, raw,
demanding, dissatisfied,
saying over the telephone:
 "How are all those bastards at Harvard?"
remains challenging: beyond all the
patterns and paradigms
 I use to silence and stop it ("Golden State" *IWN* 152).

There is some pleasure in being one of those bastards at Harvard, some admitted masochism in being unable to silence the name-calling. The divide between the poet and both of his parents is not only loss, but what enables Bidart to write poems and create a different family tree through the world of poetry. As in "Golden State," there is unresolved anger throughout "Confessional" about the poet and parent's separate universes: "THERE WAS NO PLACE IN NATURE WE COULD MEET" (*IWN* 63). Yet, the mother is

omnipresent in the poet's psyche and he finds he must "KILL HER INSIDE ME" (64) to find a place in nature and beyond it where he can exist outside of this struggle, as a separate being. In "Lament for the Makers," which comments on his parents' struggles as creators, the poet states, "Only one must seek/ within itself what to make" (*Star Dust* 22). As he laments the practice of other makers, Bidart highlights the word "one" as the artist who is both alienated and privileged in the project of soul making. He alludes to "masters" who will "teach" him, yet indicates how singular the making of a soul is (22).

That Augustine and his mother made their souls together through Christianity is fascinating to the poet, in part because it is an unlikely enterprise. Yet, that is why it is so desirable. In the first instance, "Confessional" bleakly negates religion or any worldview as the site of soul-making for individuals, institutions, or human kind: "*Man needs a metaphysics;/ he cannot have one*" (*IWN* 74). Any intimacy based on a shared religion is deeply unsettled by the poem's counter-statement or anti-creed. In the second, Bidart has tried and has failed with his own mother: his experience speaks against spiritual intimacy. During his childhood, he and his mother "seemed to be engaged in an enterprise/ together,—/ the enterprise of 'figuring out the world,'/ figuring out her life, my life." His early attempts at "THE MAKING OF HER SOUL" and "the making of my soul" (*IWN* 63) were foiled and brought about "a kind of CRAZINESS" (*IWN* 63). In fact, the mother's religious "making" led to violent acts of unmaking, not unlike those of rapists and murderers in Bidart's personae poems. She "converted to Christ" when the poet was eleven, and told him they must "struggle/ 'to divest ourselves/ of the love of CREATED BEINGS'" (*IWN* 53):

and to help me to do that,
 one day
 she hanged my cat.
 I came home from school, and in the doorway
 of my room,

my cat was hanging strangled.

She was in the bathroom; I could hear

speaks through masks in so many of his most famous, signature poems, here he allows Hare to speak through him, to inhabit his textual body. Hare's experience seems to take over Bidart's poem and body, in that the most memorable, dramatic event of "Confessional" is the murder of the cat. In Hare's memoir, we learn that his aunt hangs his beloved cat Selma (*Peculiar People* 38) out of a religious mania, similar to that of Bidart's mother's. Hare's adoptive mother does nothing to intervene in the situation, and, in fact rationalizes the act. His aunt, noticing his affection for the cat, "insisted that the cat must be given up to her" while his adoptive mother, perhaps equally insanely, "was relentless in saying that I must be taught to give up my own way and pleasure to others; and would be forced to give it up if I would not do so willingly" (38-39). At first, the aunt hides the cat at the Rectory, and Hare gets to see Selma. "But soon there came a day when Selma was missing: Aunt Esther had ordered her to be ...hung!" (39).

This moment in Hare's tormented childhood becomes emblematic for Bidart's. "Confessional" dramatizes the hanging, imagining the mother's hands strangling the cat, and later aligns the mother's strangling hold on the poet with this initial fatal choke. The anecdote represents a kind of displaced or introjected trauma within its context of a confessional dialogue. Whereas other writers and sources usually become mediums for Bidart to explore the self, in this instance, Hare unsettles Bidart's confessional story with something even more shocking than we might expect in a confession of a traumatic childhood. As in "The Second Hour of the Night," in which Bidart entreats a dead lover to "borrow, inhabit my body," to "enter it/ like a shudder as if eager again to know/ what it is to move within arms and legs" (*Desire* 58), Bidart invites dead writers to inhabit his text. Whereas he more clearly enters Augustine's text, here he allows Hare access to "move within" his textual body.⁴⁸

⁴⁸ Chiasson comments on this moment in "The Second Hour of the Night": "The strange beauty...arises partly from the wish, a new one in Bidart, to see someone else—an *other*—play him. This is a fascinating way, in a career of playing others, for Frank Bidart to end a poem about the difficult necessity of playing himself" ("Presence" 67). I would agree with Chiasson but simply add that this same logic is reflected earlier in "Confessional."

With this complex biographical intertextuality in mind, I wish to respond briefly to Louis Glück's argument about victimhood and the conception of confessional poetry as the child-victim's voice. Glück argues that the confessant is

the child, the done-unto, the passive watcher, the victim: he is haunted by his mother's act because it represents his own culpability; he participates with his mother in its creation. The space in which the speaker lives with his mother is a sealed space, characterized by exclusion, intimacy, that quality of deadlock which exactly renders the condition of victimization, its conviction of its own agency, its will toward responsibility ("The Forbidden" 61-62).

Glück misreads the scene in several ways. First the cat-hanging is more symbolic of psychic damage than literal violence to the child. In some ways, it mocks the confessional outcry of trauma by melodrama (a technique common in Bidart's work). Secondly, Bidart points to larger failures than his mother's as a parent and maker. In a poem that explores the poet's own guilt, there is emphasis on her wrongs as well as his. Beyond this, part of Bidart's aesthetic is to complicate and empathize with crime and cruelty more generally. He gets into the minds of murderers, and in his generosity and curiosity, he transforms their acts into misguided attempts to make meaning. Within the poem itself, the last lines of each section point to the failure of ideologies rather than Mom and Dad who have forever ruined us (the way in which forgiveness and larger structures evade us). The mother-son scenes in the poem are ambivalent about agency. On the one hand, the confessant wants to be the focus of his mother's life, and, on the other hand, he wants separation and independence. Jessica Benjamin's intersubjective theory, discussed in Chapter 1, sheds light on the speaker's tension between "interdependence and autonomy" (*Like Subjects* 22), between "connection and separation" (*Like Subjects* 35). Benjamin explains that "domination and submission result from a breakdown of the necessary tension between self-assertion and mutual recognition that allows self and other to meet as sovereign equals" (*Bonds* 12). In "Confessional," the mother and son do not always recognize the other's separate identity. For example, the speaker hates his mother for

controlling his life and for needing him too much, yet prides himself in being able to fulfill her needs. The degree to which mother and son depend on each other makes it difficult to judge issues of responsibility, agency, and culpability. In fact, selfhood is radically called into question in Bidart's conception of it as dependent upon recognition: we see the devastating and constructive ways in which the child and the mother seek affirmation and recognition. The individual only "fully experience[s] his or her subjectivity in the other's presence," to borrow from Benjamin's language (*Like Subjects* 30), yet seeks a separate identity.

Like confessional poets, Bidart draws on Freudian ideologies, but, contrary to Glück's critique, he emphasizes the child's corruption, as a way of reclaiming agency, thought patterns, and motive. Ellen Pifer defines Freudian constructions of the child: the "heir of libidinal impulses carrying the germs, or seeds, of corruption" (*Demon or Doll* 22-23) in contrast to Romantic constructions of the child as pure. Pifer argues that in Western culture and literature, for every representation of the child as "an image of human creativity and potential" there are just as many "terrifying...darker versions of the child's mysterious nature and dangers" (*Demon or Doll* 16), and this is certainly the case within "Confessional." Bidart's selection of Augustine as a kind of co-star or alter ego speaks to his ambivalence about his own identity as a son, his mother's child, as well as his ambivalence about human nature more generally: the wayward son who famously prayed "Grant me chastity and continence, but not yet" (VIII vii *Confessions* 145), and later became a bishop, theologian, and saint. Augustine views the child as inherently sinful from infancy; he questions whether it was "wrong that I greedily opened my mouth wide to suck the breasts" and cites the universal baby's "jealousy and bitterness" towards "his brother sharing his mother's milk" (I, vii *Confessions* 9). Famously, Augustine analyzes his adolescent theft of pears in terms of depravity: "I loved my fall, not the object for which I had fallen but the fall itself" (II, iv *Confessions* 29). Bidart's version of the child is somehow part-Freudian, part-Augustinian, but without the totalizing determinism of

either. Whereas Augustine is troubled by his depravity, Bidart highlights his corrupt wishes as proof of his individuality and agency in his family. He re-envisioned his childhood self as envious and predatory, certainly culpable and guilty, but also a victim of his mother's insanity and religious mania, his father's absence, and his step-father's weakness.

Within the poem, Bidart describes his faults as a child, owning them as somehow more endearing than others' shortcomings:

As a child I was (now, I
clearly can see it)

PREDATORY,—

pleased to have supplanted my father
in my mother's affections,
and then pleased to have supplanted my stepfather. . .

—I assure you, though I was a "*little boy*,"
I could be far more charming, sympathetic,
full of sensibility, "*various*," far more
an understanding and feeling
ear for my mother's emotions, needs, SOUL

than any man, any man she met,—

I know I *wanted* to be: WANTED
to be the center, the focus of her life. . .

I was her ally against my father;
and then, after the first two or three

years, her ally against my stepfather. . . (*JWN* 59-60).

As his mother's "ally" and the "center...of her life," the poet highlights his agency in choosing these roles. "Wanted" is repeated in the same line, once in italics, once capitalized. Even if the child's predatory and insular relationship with the mother are conditions that might create an Us-against-the-World mentality, the poem emphasizes the child's potential and creativity. He becomes all the more "various" as he makes his soul in contradistinction to the men in his mother's life.

Bidart explores the possibilities of the child as a maker and poet who might be able to avoid or somehow counter the tragic lives of his parents. Bidart is a poet whose work has focused on the need to escape the mindset of one's parents to carve out a different space: his parents' failures at making are eerily linked to the failures of serial killers, rapists, and murderers to create.⁴⁹ In "Confessional," Bidart reflects on his mother's creative failures:

She had had no profession,—
 she had painted a few paintings, and
 written a handful of poems, but without the illusion
 either were any good, or STOOD FOR HER. . .
 She had MADE nothing.
 I was what she had made (*IWN* 73).

The final claim in the passive tense "*I was what she had made*" paradoxically represents the mother as creator and creative failure, but also underscores the idea of the son as a work of art, or substitute for one. Because the words "nothing" and "*I*" correspond, suggesting that the poet is nothing, the mother didn't make her son's soul or didn't shape him in fundamental ways. As we will see in the coda, this issue comes up in Thom Gunn's elegy as he asserts that the mother has not composed his identity and story entirely. In "Confessional," though this self-authorship seems to contradict the charge against the mother for damaging him, she is not held responsible. Despite her religious mania, she is not given the privilege of making or misshaping the poet's soul. This frees the poet to engage in his own enterprise of soul-making through poetry and his expansive autobiography.

⁴⁹ Garth Greenwell points out the "'Ellen West,' 'The Arc,' and 'Herbert White'... are meditations on the failure to make, and on the ease with which what is a moral ambition, the desire to mean, can frustrated lead to suffering and horror" and later includes "Confessional" as "haunted by the idea of this failure ("Frank Bidart" 208)

Bidart raises questions about whether it is even desirable to resolve his conflict with his mother. Although the counter-narrative of Augustine and Monica's intimacy offers a kind of closure, Bidart distrusts it. That a great thinker is sharing his deepest intellectual orgasm with his mother is actually quite funny and uncanny. Bidart problematizes their love story, this oddly successful Oedipal tale by which mother, God the Father, and son can all share spiritual communion. He raises doubt by the flowery language which seems to evade earthy, raw experience and remain coded in a sentimental theology removed from the human realities of pain and conflict. Bidart disrupts the shared vision of Augustine and Monica by pointing out that they had to "FORGET THE PAST" and "They had much to forget" (*IWN* 67). To forget the past, Bidart implies, in his interpersonal and familial relationships, is death. The problem of forgiving his mother is that a seemingly renewed relationship would represent a false closure, since forgiveness erases the past and one's anger, thus erasing the integrity of the relationship:

*. . . and I willed NOT to forgive her,
for "forgiveness" seems to say:—*

*Everything is forgotten, obliterated,—
the past
is as nothing, erased. . .*

Her plea, her need for forgiveness
seemed the attempt to obliterate

the ACTIONS, ANGERS, DECISIONS

that *made me* what I am. . .

To obliterate the CRISES, FURIES, REFUSALS
that are how I
came to UNDERSTAND her—; me—;
my life. . .

Truly to feel "forgiveness,"
to forgive her IN MY HEART,
meant erasing ME . . . (*IWN* 65).

To preserve the free will and integrity of "ME," Bidart renames the wrongs done to him as not sins to be forgiven but, rather, stages in his poetic growth. He transforms all the

moments where his mother wrongs him, perceiving his mother's acts of insanity and cruelty as "ACTIONS, ANGERS, DECISIONS...CRISES, FURIES, REFUSALS" which "*made me* what I am" and were "how I/ came to UNDERSTAND her...me/ my life" (*IWN* 65). The words "actions," "crises," and "decisions" are all neutral words. The words "furies" and "refusals" are negative, but also evoke the voice of a larger-than-life opera singer or tragic character. The language is dramatic, suggestive of a breakthrough, leading to the development of the poet-confessant. Like Ginsberg, Bidart converts his mother's madness into a map of poetic identity. In "Confessional," this act is particularly reparative for the poet's selfhood.

Bidart has spoken elsewhere about Oedipus who accepts his fate, but still chooses to blind himself as an act of free will:

Oedipus is not wrong to blind himself: he's saying in effect, "Okay, I didn't know I was sleeping with my mother, I didn't know the person I was killing was my father. Nevertheless, it's a terrible wrong to sleep with one's mother and to kill one's father—not because the gods say so, but because it is. And I must *in my body* bear the mark that I not only know it's wrong, but have chosen to be marked by that." And that, in a way, is an act of freedom. I don't want to idealize his act. But it is an act that represents choice in relation to a universe where all his earlier choices were illusory choices, had been (in fact) predicted ("An Interview with Frank" 77).

Bidart distinguishes between the illusory choices that were fated and the choice to bear that fate, which is a limited freedom, but freedom nonetheless. In a similar way, disrespecting the logic of Christian confession, the poet-confessant owns the past, his mother's wrongs, and his wrongs, by denying the power of forgiveness to erase those acts.

The poet maintains that he would rather hold onto his anger, and thus his selfhood, than forgive and forget as Augustine appears to. In the poem, Augustine's story darkens when Monica is no longer afraid to die, now that her son is a Christian. Her life appears to have no meaning outside of her role as evangelist mother. Augustine's life is reframed as a conversion story, and her life is absorbed within that story, like smaller and smaller Russian dolls inside each other. The poet's concerns about being erased are relevant here,

as we think about the erasure of Augustine's past (particularly his abandonment of his mistress of fifteen years, and their child Adeodatus) as well as Monica's past. The mother's existential comment, "What am I still doing here?" (*IWN* 72) immediately after Augustine's conversion as well as her own death "nine days later" (*IWN* 73) suggest her lack of selfhood. In the *Confessions*, Monica says: "The one reason why I wanted to stay longer in this life was my desire to see you a Catholic Christian before I die. My God has granted this in a way more than I had hoped. For I see you despising the world's success to become his servant. What have I to do here?" (IX, x *Confessions* 141). Bidart injects "What am I?" within "What am I still doing here?" to suggest the lack of selfhood implied and the echoing of a doubled rhetorical question. To Monica, the individual is meaningless, since Christ is more than the self; this world is meaningless compared to the joys of heaven. On the other hand, it is a comment about the significance of a certain individual: the writer. This was no ordinary mother-son relationship. Augustine would become hugely influential on literature, Christian theology, Western thought, and the literature of confession, and in many accounts, Monica would receive credit.

First, she dominates his autobiography, and hence, subsequent biography. Peter Brown writes, "What Augustine remembered in the *Confessions* was his inner life; and this inner life is dominated by one figure—his mother, Monica" (*Augustine of Hippo* 29). For this reason, Brown titles an entire chapter of the biography, "Monica" and presents the scene "Vision at Ostia" (Book IX) as the climax of their story. Henry Chadwick comments on that scene, beginning with a mystic vision and ending with Monica's death, is "the turning point" in which autobiography ends and theology begins: "With Book X, Augustine is no longer speaking about the past but explicitly about his state of mind in the present as a bishop ministering the word...to his people" ("Introduction" xxv). I would argue that this scene is the culmination of Monica and Augustine's life as a shared entity, soul even. Augustine, after Monica's death at the young age of 56, writes, "Now that I had lost the immense support she gave, my soul was wounded...since my life and hers had

become a single thing” (IX *xii Confessions* 175). Second, it is thought that Monica’s prayers, devotion, and incessant weeping brought about her son’s conversion. When Monica approached a bishop to intercede for her and speak to her son, he became annoyed and said, “Go thy way, and God bless thee, for it is not possible that the son of these tears should perish” (Book III, *xii The Confessions* 41).

Bidart claims their love “seems designed to make non-believers/ sick with envy” (*IWN* 59), yet he raises a number of questions about a love that is founded on such a shaky metaphysics. It becomes evident that Bidart doesn’t believe that Augustine and Monica’s intimacy is the whole story; after all, Monica refused to acknowledge her son while he was living in sin:

Monica’s ferocity
is frightening:—

before Augustine became a Christian,
she saw him as dead—;

she refused to live with him or even
eat at the same table in his house,
shunning and detesting his blasphemies,--

until she had a dream in which she
learned that he would finally convert to Christ (*IWN* 67).

When Monica is satisfied that he will convert, and he tries to escape Africa and her grip, she pursues him, “clinging to him...with *“dreadful grief,”* all the way to Italy (*IWN* 67). Only by succumbing to Monica, who “ceaselessly” wept and mourned and prayed, are they spiritually unified (*IWN* 67). The poem’s emphasis on the words “finally” and “of course” in the statement, “Finally, of course, he became a Christian” (*IWN* 67), suggests Monica’s “ferocity” and her son’s reluctance to change his fate: the given of a crazed, persistent mother. The story raises questions about what compelled Augustine: the theology or the theologian? If Monica wanted him to convert to Islam, would it have made a difference? If any relationship can be soothed by a shared theology, then do the individuals in the relationship, their behaviors and identities matter, and does the religion

itself matter? Perhaps all that repels Bidart and his mother is the structure of the universe described in “Confessional,” by which “*forgiveness doesn’t exist*” (IWN 57) and “a metaphysics” is an unmet need (IWN 74).

The last words of the poem “*Man needs a metaphysics; he cannot have one*” (IWN 74) appear to be spoken in the absolute language of a metaphysics. Yet, the anti-climactic anti-creed suggests the failure of the confessional dialogue to offer answers or an answer. The statement implies that there are different types and goals of confessional speech. In religious confession, the penitent knows what the sin is, and knows what the conversation will be about, the confession of that particular sin or sins. The priest has the role of giving absolution, so the conversation is brief and scripted. Freud famously writes, “In Confession the sinner tells what he knows; in analysis the neurotic has to tell more” (“The Question” 8). In psychoanalysis, the analysand does not initially know what troubles him or her, and as Peter Brooks points out, his or her “‘confessions’ must always be regarded with suspicion, as serving some other motive—guilt, revenge, self-justification, self-abasement” (“The Culture” 117). Brooks asserts, in keeping with Freud’s theories, “the real truth of the psychoanalytic situation is marked by resistances, by the analysand’s reluctance to articulate it, to come face to face with it” (117). Further, the analyst doesn’t predict the flow of the conversation nor have the authority of a priest to offer absolution. According to Adam Phillips, “The analyst will tell the patient something and seek to discover why he believes it, why he needs to believe it” (“On Getting Out”). This technique emphasizes how desire informs knowledge or is itself a kind of knowing. The analyst doesn’t believe in answers, but in questions: as Adam Phillips says, “Answers are not a cure for questions” (*Terrors and Experts* 3). Ideally, the analysand “goes to therapy to get out of therapy,” in the words of Phillips (“On Getting Out”), whereas the penitent is a confessant for life, because he or she will always be aware of sins committed. If therapy is successful, the patient will no longer require authoritative answers, but will discover what Phillips calls “the answering voices in himself” (*Terrors and Experts* 2).

In many respects, “Confessional” reveals the poet’s distrust of religious confession and contrasting interest in psychoanalysis as secular confession. The main reason for this revolves around the confessant’s need to be listened to and refusal of rest, absolution, closure, or forgiveness. He acknowledges that the confessor can’t grant him absolution, yet he still wants to be heard, as if to discover or recover something in the process. The confessant says, “. . . LISTEN./ Confessor/ incapable of granting “rest” or “absolution,”—/ LISTEN . . .” (*IWN* 58). The word “rest” directly refers to one of the most famous quotations from *The Confessions*: “Thou has formed us for Thyself, and our hearts are restless till they find rest in Thee” (Book I, i *The Confessions* 3). Bidart privileges process over stasis, an interlocutor over a haven, restlessness and a spirit of inquiry over answers. Bidart repeats the word “LISTEN” in all capitals to convey the need for an interlocutor as well as self-awareness and self-knowledge. The poem’s strategy of repetition reinforces this listening: “I’m capable of an “empathy,”// that I denied her, living. . ./ I DENIED HER, LIVING” (*IWN* 64). There is a sense of the soul listening to its guilty conscience, and in a larger sense, arguing with and engaging with the past, rather than repressing it. Elsewhere the confessant says, “—You are listening to a soul/ that has *always* been/ SICK WITH ENVY. . . “ (*IWN* 59). This is less a description than a demand, an accusation even. It oddly implicates the reader, requires the attention that the poet confesses to have always desperately needed. The reader and confessor become complicit in the poet’s ravenous desire to be watched, listened to.

The confessant’s questions can be seen in the light of both religious and secular confession. The questions range from the brash, dramatic, contextually essential, first line about the poet’s mother, “*Is she dead?*” (*IWN* 53) to the more exploratory “*What did you have to forgive?*” (*IWN* 53) and “*How do you explain it?*” (*IWN* 59) to the irritating insistence on the surface-level problem, “*Did you forgive her?*” (*IWN* 53-57), which is repeated five times. The abrupt close of the first section, and seeming “session,” is the insulting question, “*Don’t you understand even now?*” and oddly satisfying answer,

"Forgiveness doesn't exist" (IWN 57). This strange answer doesn't stem from the world of Augustine or Christianity, but instead, reflects the kind of language the Phillipsian analyst might use to suggest alternative narrations of guilt and desire. In this context, the poem resists the Christian notions of sin, forgiveness, and redemption, because they do not account for the way holding onto one's anger is like holding onto one's identity (the right to hold onto the past and reshape it). The premise that forgiveness is illusory is not a statement but a way of testing what it might accomplish, what it can't, where the need comes from, and what other resolutions are possible.

The poem employs a similar strategy in the second section, in repeating questions and challenging creeds. The confessor solicits conversation in different ways: Are you able to explain X? If you are, then how might you explain X? Finally, to what end would you explain X? What does it accomplish? The confessor asks: *"Can you explain them?"* (IWN 58), then *"How do you explain it?"*, repeated four times (IWN 59, 62, 69); and with some dark humor, asks the existential question, *"Do you know why you are saying all this?"* (IWN 68). Implied in the question is the sense that the confessant has no idea why he avoids talking about his mother's death and related issues to talk about Augustine and his envy of this dead writer's intellectual partnership with his mother and their dead theology. Bidart here self-consciously reflects on the nature of his post-confessional poem titled "Confessional" and its departures (are they departures?) from the internal drama of his guilt, traumatic childhood, and mad mother, associated with confessional poetry as well as its relationship to the family narrative of a theologian-confessant Saint Augustine. In doing so, he moves from the language of creed to the questioning voice of the analyst to interior dialogue. The dominant question in the second section, repeated five times, is also the final one: *"Why are you angry?"* (IWN 62-64, 66, 73). This reiterates the central question in the first section, *"Did you forgive her?"* (IWN 53). If *"Forgiveness doesn't exist"* (IWN 57), then do guilt, anger, and the need for it just vanish? If as the confessant claims, a metaphysics exists, but not for us (IWN 74), then how does one think about the

larger issues? They don't simply go away. Bidart comments elsewhere on the way in which guilt is not just manufactured by Christianity nor can it be contained by it:

I would be lying if I said, 'After Christianity, guilt doesn't really have any meaning.' It's not true, in my life! I'm not a Christian any longer, and I still feel guilt. When I began the book [*The Sacrifice*], the rational humanist liberal academic position seemed to be that, because guilt is the result of outmoded injunctions in which we no longer believe—the result of the Church telling children that they shouldn't masturbate...—once the beliefs are given up, guilt disappears. It's not true. The fact is, people feel... They make promises to one another, then they feel imperatives to remember them. And if one cannot fulfill those promises—promises that matter, whose abrogation causes pain—one feels guilt. You feel guilt *even when you think you are doing or did the right thing* ("An Interview with Frank" 77)

"Confessional" exhausts the theme of guilt in ways that transcend rather than merely deconstruct Western or Christian traditions, and expands the very idea of "confession" to "confessionality" or faith. You can, after all, confess faith as well as sins.

The poem collapses the roles of confessor and confessant not only in terms of religion, but in interpersonal relationships. Within the larger discourse of the poet-confessant, there are several confessional relationships: that between the poet and his mother and between the poet and Augustine. At times, the poem focuses on the mother as the confessor-absolver: "*What did she have to forgive?*" (IWN 56) and "*Did she forgive you?*" (IWN 53, 57), repeated twice. Elsewhere, the mother is the analysand in need of the poet-analyst: "The emotions, the *"issues"* in her life/ didn't come out somewhere, reached no culmination,/ climax, catharsis" (IWN 63). There are imaginary confessions to the mother-confessor in which the poet tells her: "*I didn't forgive you!! I didn't forgive you!*" (IWN 56). There are false confessions: "I pretended/ that I had forgiven her—;/ and she pretended to believe it,—/ she needed desperately to believe it" (IWN 56). Finally, there are unspoken confessions: "SHE KNEW I COULD BARELY STAND TO BE AROUND HER" (IWN 56).

Equally important to the poem's drama is the dialogue between the post-confessional poet and the "pre-existing forms" found in Augustinian confession ("Borges

and I" *Desire* 9). In an essay on Lowell's confessional poetry, Bidart rejects the negative connotations of the term: "It implies helpless outpourings, secrets whispered with an artlessness that is their badge of authenticity, the uncontrolled admission of guilt that attempts to wash away guilt. Or worse: confession of *others'* guilt; litanies of victimization" ("Afterword" 997). Yet, Bidart still uses the term, rescuing it by way of Augustine: "There is an honorific meaning to the word *confession*, at least as old as Augustine's *Confessions*: the most earnest, serious recital of the events of one's life crucial in the making of the soul" ("Afterword" 997). Despite Bidart's criticism of Monica's "ferocity" in the process of soul-making, the poet engages with Augustine as a collaborator and co-writer. As Bidart recaptures aspects of Augustine's autobiographical and theological *Confessions*, he recasts the saint's words to highlight their relationship within an ancient confessional tradition. Many of the references to the text and its author are in parenthesis, as if to sublimate the act of reading and transform it into a conversation: "(in Book nine of the *Confessions*)" (*IWN* 66); "(which time, Augustine says, GOD knew...)" (*IWN* 66); "as they [Augustine and his mother Monica] stand here sweetly talking" (*IWN* 66); "(Augustine tells us)" (*IWN* 68); "And so, Augustine tells us" (*IWN* 68); and "Augustine says" (*IWN* 69). Towards the end of the Augustine section in the poem, the two writers merge together as makers who approximate experience. As stated earlier, Bidart writes, "In words like these, but not/ Exactly these, (Augustine then says,...)" (*IWN* 72). It is not clear from this if Augustine is the one saying his own words do not exactly match what happened, or if Bidart is referring to differences between his own version and Augustine's. It becomes obvious a few lines down when Bidart says, "(just as the words I have given you are/ not, of course, exactly Augustine's)" (*IWN* 72), that Augustine and Bidart both qualify their words. Neither claims complete ownership of their own experience. Augustine says, "I said something like this, even if not in just this way and with exactly these words" (*IX, x Confessions* 172), just before describing his mother's last words and death. In other words, here Bidart changes Augustine's exact

wording about exact wording. He shortens Augustine's qualifier about how his memory of what happened might be different from what actually happened, in very small, insignificant ways. Then, after recasting Augustine's qualifier, Bidart writes his own comparable qualifier. He says that his words about Augustine's story are not exactly Augustine's words. In doing so, he draws attention to the way in which the writing self, his and Augustine's, "seeks embodiment through making things" ("Borges and I" *Desire* 9) and offers an inexact, imperfect reflection of the past: a "dirty and cracked...mirror" ("Borges and I" *Desire* 10). It may be that Bidart was reflecting on "Confessional" when he wrote in "Borges and I": "Frank...had written poems about his mother and father until the poems saw as much as he saw and saw more and he only saw what he saw in the act of making them" (*Desire* 10). In "Confessional" or what we might now consider as "Saint Augustine and I," Bidart pursues the logic that we are hedged in by language, unable to see "more" than what the creative act allows. The truth of the made poem displaces that of the life recorded.

Despite the vast differences between Augustine and Bidart's relationships to their mothers and their overall work, there is an overlap in their conception of autobiography. Peter Brown argues, "The *Confessions*...is not a book of reminiscences. They are an anxious turning to the past" (*Augustine of Hippo* 164). Brown views this "strictly intellectual autobiography" as deeply personal and even cathartic, which anticipates some of the descriptions of post-confessional poetry: "Augustine communicates such a sense of intense personal involvement in the ideas he is handling, that we are made to forget it is an exceptionally difficult book. Augustine paid his audience...the great (perhaps unmerited) compliment of talking to them as if they were as steeped in Neo-Platonic philosophy as himself" (*Augustine of Hippo* 167). To give some examples, although Books I-IX are autobiographical, the remaining books take on such ambitious titles as "Memory" (X), "Time and Eternity (XI), and "Platonic Christian Creation" (XII). Modern readers who come to the text, expecting to read about the saint's theft of pears, romance with a

mistress, bastard son, or even the erotic spiritual language, are surprised to encounter the philosophical terminology that predominates the second half of the volume. Bidart's portrayal of Augustine touches on his ideas about "MEMORY" (*IWN* 66), "WISDOM" (*IWN* 69), "*the Will*" (*IWN* 70), "time" (*IWN* 66), the "LAW" (*IWN* 71), "the Resurrection of the Dead" (*IWN* 72), and "*the eternal life of the saints*" (*IWN* 66). Bidart paraphrases some of Augustine's awkward ecstasy while still maintaining some of earnestness. For example, Augustine writes (in the translation)

And while we talked and panted after it [wisdom], we touched it in some small degree by a moment of total concentration of the heart. And we sighed and left behind us "the first-fruits of the Spirit"...bound to that higher world, as we returned to the noise of our human speech where a sentence has both a beginning and an end" (IX, x *Confessions* 140-141).

In his poem, Bidart speeds up the pace, emphasizing the end result: dependence on the imperfect medium of language:

While they were thus talking of, straining to comprehend,
panting for WISDOM, with all the effort

of their heart, for one heartbeat,

they together attained to *touch* it—;

... then, sighing and leaving the first-fruits
of their Spirit bound there,

they returned to the sound of their own voice,—
to WORDS,

which have a beginning and an end... (*IWN* 69).

Despite the "straining," "panting," and "effort" to transcend the world of flesh for the spirit world, the saint and his mother remain "bound" to "WORDS" even as the "Spirit" is "bound" to the spiritual realm. Bidart and Augustine as writers are limited to the same medium—"the sound of their own voice" and "WORDS, which have a beginning and an end" (*IWN* 69). The most interesting changes are in the words "heartbeat" and "WORDS,"

both of which animate the human presence of the writer as someone whose medium is not only language, but feeling.

Bidart emphasizes the act of making, particularly the making of the soul, and shows how it is both a human condition and a literary project. On the one hand, everyone has a desire to make. The poet is no different from any other human being trying to create meaning; Bidart explores this as a leveling device in another poem, "Advice for the Players": "My parents never made something commensurate to their will to make, which I take to be, in varying degrees, the general human condition—as it is my own" (*Star Dust* 12). Yet, Bidart alludes to another poet, W.B. Yeats, who has presumably made his soul through poetry and trauma. In "The Tower" (1928), Yeats writes:

Now shall I make my soul,
Compelling it to study
In a learned school
Till the wreck of the body,
Slow decay of blood,
Testy delirium
Or dull decrepitude,
Or what worse evil come—
The death of friends, or death
Of every brilliant eye
That made a catch in the breath—
Seem but the clouds of the sky
When the horizon fades,
Or a bird's sleepy cry
Among the deepening shades (III, *The Tower* 15).

Yeats situates the making of one's soul within the context of death and decay, suggesting that the perfected soul or the artistic soul can transform physical suffering, deaths of friends, evil, and aging, so that pain can seem like "the clouds of the sky" or "a bird's sleepy cry," a momentary sight, sound, or passing experience, rather than a lifelong burden. Although Bidart suggests Yeats' powerful argument that the soul can lighten the effect of suffering on the "wreck of the body," he also acknowledges the awful reality of his mother's mental illness and failed marriage, as well as her need to involve her son in the making of her soul. While Bidart sees himself as dragged into his mother's project, he also sees the inevitability of the dual efforts to make one's soul. Bidart's emphasis is more

on the act of making one's soul rather than on the projected effects of the enterprise. He writes about the making of one's soul in the context of his relationship with his dependent, obsessive mother. When he was young, his mother and he were involved in the task of making her soul, "which somehow, in our 'enterprise'/ together, was the making of my soul,—" (*IWN* 63). Although the portrait of the mother as crazy, controlling, lost, and infantile is not endearing, the notion of the mother and son working together to make their souls is full of pathos. The mother's hunger to figure out the world and to understand herself is like the child-poet's hunger, artistic in the emphasis on curiosity and imagination. The positive aspect of Bidart's identification with the mother is conveyed in the enterprise of the long poem, which is also a figuring out and remaking of both of their souls.

On the other hand, the rage the poet feels for playing doctor to her sickness is evident as well. Bidart says that the same power that gives him life also kills him, and rages against his mother, hoping to kill her inside him. He says that when he was

about twenty, he of course wanted his "*freedom*,"—

and then he found

that what had made his life
possible, what he found so deeply INSIDE HIM,

had its hand around his neck,
strangling him,—

and that therefore, if he were
to survive,

he must in turn strangle, murder,
kill it inside him. . .

TO SURVIVE, I HAD TO KILL HER INSIDE ME (*IWN* 64).

Survival depends on killing the internal mother; self-erasure is part of the poetic process. The benefit of unmaking is the ability to begin afresh, which is connected to childhood with its potential for development and creativity. Bidart, in a paradoxically intimate

moment of unmaking, self-effacement, and self-parody, shifts from the first person to the third person. He refers to himself, as nowhere else in the poem, in the third person, to emphasize the desire to be separate and autonomous. Although the speaker might appear to separate from his mother to achieve independence, he also shows remorse for this desire, seen in the way he shifts to the third person to avoid agency. The speaker describes himself as a young man desiring his independence and raging against his mother, while she is described in vague, impersonal terms, as a large, all-encompassing thing-like essence, under the umbrella of "What had made his life possible," perhaps a very literal definition of a mother who carries a baby to term and endures birthing him or him. The mother is then described as the impersonal, inanimate, objectified, dead "It," which has a macabre texture given the elegiac impulse of the poem, and then as the universal, feminine capitalized "HER." Throughout the poem, Bidart switches voices and, as mentioned earlier, tones, but primarily writes in the first person in the two voices of the confessant and confessor. The confessor initiates, guides, and sustains the confession, which is significantly both a dialogue and a split-personality dramatic monologue. The questions posed by the confessor are, for the most part, repetitive and very basic, rather than convoluted and emotionally loaded or metaphysical. The most repeated questions have to do with whether or not the speaker forgives his mother and why he is angry. However, Bidart breaks this pattern, speaking outside the dialogue of questions in italics and answers in Roman type. In this fast-paced passage, he dramatically moves from first person to third and back again to first, or put differently, from the internal dialogue to the narration back to the internal dialogue. The shifts are from "I've never let anyone else/ *in* so deeply" to ". . . he of course wanted his *freedom,*" to "TO SURVIVE, I HAD TO KILL HER INSIDE ME," to dialogue "*Why are you angry?* (IWN 64). In the third person, Bidart speaks from the outside and writes about himself as if far removed from his psyche. He interrupts the dialogue and speaks in a more journalistic, detached voice in the third person. More crucially, Bidart writes about his mother without referring to her as such. His mother

becomes the “she” in the poem transformed into an “it,” at which point the speaker breaks back into the first person, as if brought back to life or one’s senses.

In “Professions for Women” (1942), Woolf writes about the female writer’s need to kill the “Angel in the House,” a maternal figure who soothes, cooks, and cleans but has no real profession: “She never had a mind or a wish of her own” (“Professions” 237). She is characterized by qualities such as “purity,” “sacrifice,” domesticity, empathy, charm, and unselfishness (“Professions” 237). Woolf views the terms profession and occupation in ways similar to Bidart’s concept of a maker; Woolf’s need to forge a professional identity as a maker and artist corresponds to Bidart’s self-perception as a maker and his larger “Lament for the Makers” (*Star Dust* 22), his parents who made only a child but nothing else. This domestic making does not count, in Woolf or Bidart’s view, as art. Woolf strangles the “Angel in the House,” who is strangling her: “I turned upon her and caught her by the throat. I did my best to kill her. My excuse, if I were to be had up in a court of law, would be that I acted in self-defence. Had I not killed her she would have killed me. She would have plucked the heart out of my writing” (“Professions” 237-238). In “Confessional” the dead, strangled cat embodies the domestic and psychic battleground in which survival depends on self-strangulation and murder. These violent acts oddly draw mother and son into an eerie intimacy, as the intense anger, the refusals, and inability to forgive the other, also demonstrate their mutual psychological investment. It is like the intimacy between strangers who are brought into a relationship by violence, such as serial killers and their victims; the important differences here are that both parties are implicated as part of the same family. Their sameness is what separates them. In an elegy for his mother, Bidart quotes her words addressed to him: “I had to *push* you away—/ we were always/ more like each other than anyone else” (“Elegy” *IWN* 97-98).

In many ways, this chapter reflects on what comes before and after confession. In Bidart, we see the influence of Augustine's *Confessions*, the Catholic rite of confession, the framework through which confessions and creeds emerge, and the impersonal intimacy of the confessional act, as it takes place between parents, priests and believers, analysts and patients, poets or even poet-Freak Acts and their audiences, all of which address confession. One of the main implications of Bidart's *Confessional* is that there is a vast history of autobiographical writing and incantation before Lowell. For example, Augustus Hare, the source of the cat anecdote, receives a similar critical reception as the confessional poets for the violence he subjects his dead relatives to in his autobiography. One of Hare's reviewers complains about the "vicious and venomous personal onslaught"; another defines the memoir as "the continuous wail of a very garrulous person" (*Peculiar People* 294). This commentary anticipates the literary, societal, and political threats to confessional poetry, such as M.L. Rosenthal's criticism of Lowell's *Life Studies* as a "ghoulish operation on his father" ("Poetry as Confession" 64) and the censorship trial on Ginsberg's *Howl*. In Ginsberg, we see the groundwork laid for other confessional poets: the use of colloquial language and narrative details as well as the influence of other genres such as prose, autobiography, family history, theology, and case studies. Both poets discover the failures of mothers to create meaning and intimacy, and seek to navigate their own identities as makers.

Bidart and Ginsberg see their mothers' stories as their own stories of selfhood, but in different ways. Ginsberg's mother is a mandolin player, an aspiring artist, and an unrecognized prophet, connected to literary texts such as the Jewish prayer Kaddish, communist pamphlets, and the epistolary tradition. Likewise, Bidart's mother is depicted as someone who paints, writes a few poems, yet doesn't create anything that represents her. However, her religious mania links her to mothers of literary figures in the poem, Saint Augustine and Augustus Hare. Bidart positions himself as the child-poet who must

counter his mother's aesthetic vision and decreation. Whereas Ginsberg praises his mother as his muse and predecessor, Bidart rages against his mother as the antithesis of poetry. Ginsberg celebrates his mother's Paranoid-Schizophrenic mind, calling her a prophet. Her language of dread is often indistinguishable from Ginsberg's own apocalyptic, elegiac tone of voice. "Kaddish" conceives of Naomi as the poet who died and wasn't able to fulfill her promise; the epigraph, taken from Shelley's *Adonais*, reinforces the ways in which Naomi is a Keatsian figure. "Kaddish" juxtaposes the visionary sublime lyric mode of Romanticism with the urban, conversational mode of the Beats and confessionals to suggest a new poetry of feeling.

In contrast to the colloquy between Ginsberg and Naomi, Bidart emphasizes differentiation. "Confessional" equates two events: the poet's independence from his mother when he was twenty and his development of a writing voice. He affirms the need to kill his internal mother if he wants to become a writer; to do this, he acknowledges the ways in which his mother's soul and his were intertwined in a failed search for meaning and self-authorship. This lament pushes Bidart further into the undone project of making the writing self and the poem, while he continues to cast doubt on institutions and rituals of soul-making and soul-searching. The poem confesses to profound uncertainty over the role of Catholicism, the literary canon, psychoanalysis, and confessional writing in the process of self-fashioning. Ginsberg, by contrast, also incorporates his mother's failures and tragedies, into his poetics, to bless, touch, and sanctify them. Both poets turn to different religious traditions as part of their creative process; the Catholic rite of confession and the Jewish prayer of mourning are overarching structures, seen in the very titles of the poems, which shed light on the spiritual and cultural dimensions of self-telling.

For Ginsberg and for Bidart, however, despite the differences, poetic identity is forged in the mother-son relationship where traumatic circumstances facilitate the need for a language to counter the mother's mad language. Poetry offers the countering language

that transforms, translates, and cures the maddening language of the mentally-ill mother. The sense that the mother-tongue is mad and potentially dangerous creates exigence for the poet to transform his mother-tongue. In writing about crazy mothers, both Bidart and Ginsberg convey the implications of mental illness on the mother-son relationship; their poems embody the brokenness of their broken mother-tongue.

CHAPTER 3

**“THAT WAS WHAT I CRAVED, TO *TELL* ON HER”: MOTHER-SON
RELATIONSHIPS IN THE POST-CONFESSIONAL LYRIC**

i. *Introduction*

Robert Hass suggests the post-confessional mode in a poem title, “Picking Blackberries with a Friend who Has Been Reading Jaques Lacan” (*Praise* 36), referring to both Plath’s “Blackberrying” and psychoanalysis, and in so doing, conveying a humorous, self-reflexive, and cerebral tone. Hass and C.K. Williams, the two post-confessional poets this chapter will discuss, approach psychological themes and family stories from a distance, creating an essayistic line and exuding a self-conscious knowingness about confession. Robert Pinsky coins the term “discursive” to talk about “the radical sense of motion over terrain” in poetry that “goes through or over one’s subject...digressively or directly” (“The Discursive Aspect” 134). He applies the term to Lowell’s sonnets and Berryman’s *Dream Songs* as well as Bidart’s post-confessional *Golden State*, arguing that such poetry reveals the “mind in the most precise and animated way” (136). Pinsky links the discursive nature of poetry with confession, arguing that revealing one’s mind is a “formal statement of a creed” and “personal declaration” (139). Pinsky’s notion of discursive poetics differs from self-revelation, because it focuses on the thought process itself rather than subjective experience. In many post-confession poems, the subject is less an individual mind than the very process of thinking which connects experience explicitly to the outside world.

This chapter reads Williams’ poems, “The Cup” and “My Mother’s Lips,” and Robert Hass’ long poem, “My Mother’s Nipples.” Both poets evoke many of the motifs of confessional poetry as they focus on the mother-child relationship and the emotional pain that occurs within it. They engage with the confessional trope of early childhood wounds. Nevertheless, they are suspicious of the idea that these emotional scars from childhood dictate the rest of one’s emotional life and refuse to utter their confessions in the voice of a child without agency. Williams, although he first emphasizes his mother’s seeming omniscience, later exalts in being able to speak alone, without his mother as master. Hass uses role-reversals to put limits around his portrayal of his mother as an alcoholic who

causes him pain. He draws from the strange religious imagery of Christ's wounds as a breast that the Virgin Mary suckles, appropriating this Christian reversal of the roles of mother and son to suggest the child's ingenuity and survival. Rather than miss out on integral care from his mother, Hass compensates by projecting the maternal onto God and creating his own song out of suffering. In these poems by Hass and Williams, the question of what is a traumatic childhood arises. Williams draws attention to the way in which the adolescent dramatizes the trivial, and projects internal angst onto the mother's body, seeing in her everyday actions, a reason for emotional breakdown. Hass draws on potentially traumatic material in depicting his mother's alcoholism, yet subdues the high cry of pain by deflecting it, turning instead to literary tradition, landscapes, and the intellect.

Each poem circles around the maternal body and confesses to self-consciousness about writing on such loaded topics as the mother's breasts, lips, and mouth. Hass begins his poem on his mother's nipples quite shyly; he first quotes the songs that philosophers, utopians, and others compose on this subject (*SUW* 12-14). He also quickly asserts that someone gave him the poem idea as a writing assignment (*SUW* 12). This psychic distancing is also seen in Williams' two poems, both of which feature the poet's rage towards and fascination with his mother's lips and their relation to his poetic tongue. Williams writes about the mother's mouth with such anxiety that one wonders if he is not engaging with the idea of a woman's two mouths, vocal and genital. Anne Carson argues that for centuries women have been taught to keep their two mouths shut, mouths that have signified "monstrosity, disorder and death" ("Gender of Sound" 121). She writes about the way the ancients understood the female genital and vocal mouths as similar: "The orifice through which vocal activity takes place and the orifice through which sexual activity takes place are both denoted by the word *stoma* in Greek (*os* in Latin) with the addition of adverbs *ano* or *kato* to differentiate upper mouth from lower mouth" (131). Like the patriarchal society Carson describes, Williams at times engages with the notion of

the female mouth as the site of anxiety and confusion, which he seeks to manipulate. Williams seeks to console his mother when he confronts her, complicating Carson's depiction of patriarchal culture. Williams also writes about his mother's mouth as an emblem of matriarchal omniscience. "My Mother's Lips" and "The Cup" reveal the changes in the speaker's perception of the mother: from a child's idealization to an adolescent's demonization to an adult's identification with her.

However, the teen angst and accusations are at the heart of these two poems, suggesting his ongoing scrutiny and interest in the mother's body. Adrienne Rich illuminates why this adolescent insecurity and rage towards the mother might still resonate with the grown son's concerns and fears. Rich expresses the connection between the maternal body and mortality. She highlights the son's vulnerability in the presence of his mother's physical body: "Is it simply that in looking at his mother (or any mature woman) he is reminded, somewhere beyond repression, of his existence as a mere speck, a weak, blind, clot of flesh growing inside her body? Remembering a time when he was nothing, is he forced to acknowledge a time when he will no longer exist?" (*Of Woman Born* 185-186). In quite existential terms, Rich points out the way in which mothers remind men of their vulnerability, an issue that Chapter 1 explores in connection to Lowell's pre-history.

Elisabeth Bronfen provides a psychoanalytic interpretation of the maternal body as a trope for death. She downplays the father's signification as the law and the child's fear of castration, and instead, focuses on the loss of the mother in death. She writes: "The maternal body serves as a figure doubly inscribed by the death drive—as trope for the unity lost with the beginning of life and also as trope for loss and division always already written into life, pleasure and imaging" (35). As seen in Freud's use of the Fort Da game in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, which I discussed in the Introduction, the child renounces the forbidden mother and seeks to represent his loss through language and play. Elisabeth Bronfen rereads Freud's Fort Da episode to say that the game isn't merely "a revenge for and triumph over the mother's absence...but a game that simultaneously

confirms and denies the child's own mortality in response to the vulnerability exposed by the mother's wounding absence" (*Over Her* 25). Bronfen points out the second game the child plays in the mirror where he stages his own disappearance and return, thus linking the mother's absence with his, her disappearance with his mortality (*Over Her* 27). The poets in this chapter portray the "wounding absence" of mother as, on the one hand, insignificant, narrating the momentary troubles of adolescence, and, on the other hand, totalizing, mapping a larger story about mortality. Bronfen's emphasis is particularly appropriate to this chapter, because Hass and Williams represent the mother's physical body as evidence of a broken continuity. Through poetry, the son suggests a song that transcends death and separation.

Melanie Klein, whom Bronfen draws upon, theorizes the mother's body as a site of anxiety. She explains that the child projects his or her fear of death onto the mother's breasts, deflecting his or her longing to devour the breasts onto the mother and internalizing the devouring breast. The child internalizes the good breast as well, which is associated with the "life instinct," seen as "indispensable for the preservation of life" ("On the Theory of Anxiety" 31). Klein says that "the fear of being annihilated includes the anxiety lest the internal good breast be destroyed" ("On the Theory of Anxiety" 31). Williams and Hass evoke anxiety not only over their mother's damaged voice and song, but over the possibility that they would be without a poetic voice. These poets suggest an abiding concern over creating and finding a poetic self and story. There is anxiety also about co-authoring a song with the mother.

Each poet explores what kind of loss or scar poetry can provide compensation for, and who it is that needs to be compensated. These poems are concerned with compensating their mothers for their losses and their unhappiness. Hass creates the expectation that a song for his mother will in some way explain her suffering. Williams creates a separate identity for his mother, not simply so he can speak without her

interrupting him, but so that she can speak as herself without imitating, predicting, or formulating his identity.

ii. *On C.K. Williams' "My Mother's Lips" and "The Cup"*

C.K. Williams responds to the confessional poetry of Lowell and Berryman by exploring his need to speak, especially about the ugliness of the past.⁵⁰ In an interview, Williams says that his poem "The Gas Station" speaks to confessional poetry, "about which I have mixed feelings" (163).⁵¹ In the poem "The Gas Station," originally published in *Tar* (1983), Williams tells the story of a pimp who approaches him and his friends in Times Square in New York City, and offers his "whore or mother" (*CPCCK* 196) to give them each a blow job for two dollars. The woman, "like a machine," gets them off, except for one friend, who later drives to the Gas Station to masturbate in the men's room. Williams makes the odd comparison between the woman's blow job and his poem about it, saying that they are both operating like machines. The woman is dehumanized, turned into a head, "that dark curly head, working, a machine, up and down;" she is an objectified woman who "take[s] care of us" (*CPCCK* 196). The poet sees himself as a machine, because he dehumanizes himself in the poem; the poem doesn't reflect his particular inner self or the soul of the poet, but like a machine, elides a thinking self. The poem opens with the poet confessing his lack of an intellectual, developed self: "I don't think there were three words in my head yet" (*CPCCK* 195). He confesses that he hasn't yet read Nietzsche,

⁵⁰ Several critics have linked C.K. Williams to confessional poets. For example, Ian Gregson says "Williams does adopt a version of confessionalism though his focus is never as thoroughly on himself as it is in the confessional poems of Lowell and Berryman" ("Creeps and Bastards" 185).

⁵¹ Like Berryman and Lowell, and many others before him, Williams expresses his distaste for the label: "I was never a great fan of the confessional stance as such" ("An Interview" 163). Lynn Keller points out how the speaker in Williams' "The Gas Station" "asks some difficult questions about the confessional mode" and compares the confessional speaker to "a machine" (163). Williams notes that he was a friend of Anne Sexton, who helped him publish his first book, but has "mixed feelings" about confessional poetry (163).

Kant, Kierkegaard, Whitman, Yeats, Augustine, Chomsky, Rimbaud, or Blake (*CPCCK* 195-196).

Stepping outside of the historical moment of the poem, Williams appeals to Freud, among other authorities, to explain his behavior, to define himself: “Freud, Marx, Fathers, tell me, what am I, doing this, telling this, on her, on myself/ hammering it down, cementing it, sealing it in, but a machine, too? *Why am I doing this?*” (*CPCCK* 196). The questions as well as the overarching invocation to Freud and Marx disrupt the machine-like reportage, and turn on the writing self and act. Williams explores a question central to confessional poetry: Is it enough to simply say what happened? Is the sheer density of details sufficient in a confessional poem, or, in any poem, for that matter? Lowell asks the question himself in “Epilogue,” in *Day by Day*, “Yet why not say what happened?” (*CPRL* 838). In an essay, Williams quotes from William Pritchard’s never-sent letter to Lowell, which laments the “‘it’s enough if I say it’ air” of Lowell’s confessional poetry (“Listening to Lowell” 14). Williams interrogates not only Lowell but himself about the significance and urgency of confession.

The drama in “The Gas Station” appears to titillate readers with the figure of the woman performing oral sex and the ambiguity he has about her, that she is either a “whore” or “mother.” Williams alludes to Freud’s juxtaposition between the “affectionate” and the “sensual” currents (“Contributions to the Psychology” 403), and between “beloved objects” (405) and “debased, despised objects” (406). Freud contrasts the male desire for a mother figure, someone who “has the responsibility of caring” for him (403) and the sensual desire for a “debased sexual object” (408). He writes, “In almost every case the man feels restricted in his sexual activity by respect for the woman, and only develops his full potency if he has a debased sexual object before him” (408). Essentially, Freud says that men have conflicting desires for whores on the one hand, and virgin or mother figures on the other hand. Williams presents the prostitute as fulfilling both roles by taking care of the young men. Her offer of oral sex mirrors the young poet’s offer of a nearly empty

brain, with less than “three words” in it (*CPCCK* 195), to the world of poetry. Williams has yet to be aroused by the great philosophers and thinkers; the irony in this overtly confessional, sexual poem stems from the poet’s depiction of critical reading as the ultimate coming-of-age story and his poetic selfhood as the real awakening.

In “The Gas Station” Williams describes the poet’s task as “telling,” suggesting that poetry is spoken to an interlocutor, implicitly drawing on the trope of the confessant-confessor relationship. Significantly, Williams portrays the poet as someone who tells, who confesses, without knowing why he is doing this or what he is doing to himself, possibly incriminating himself, possibly turning himself into a voyeur or a victim. The poet is highly knowing in other ways, aware that he is caught up in self-scrutiny, self-confrontation, and voyeurism. Williams’ oeuvre focuses on the poet’s urge to tell: to tell himself he is telling, to tell on himself, to tell on his mother, to tell the reader he is telling, to tell the reader something, to tell himself something, to ask himself why he can’t tell something, and to ask why he is telling a story. These existential questions arise in the context of poems with very straight-forward, uneventful narratives. Williams implies that the act of telling is the “buried subject” of the confessional poem while autobiography is the “announced subject,” to borrow Stanley Plumly’s terms (“Personal Interview”).

For Williams, telling involves gazing. His entire body of work marvels at his own need to gaze, to hold his gaze, and to confess he is gazing. For example, in “The Dog,” the speaker can’t look away from a mutt painfully defecating. He blames the owner for letting the dog suffer, and describes the dog’s struggle “to eject the feeble, mucus-coated, blood-flecked chains that finally sputtered from him” (*CPCCK* 162). The most important stare in the poem belongs to the dog, who looks up at his owner: “Every other moment he’d turn his head, as though he wanted her, to no avail, to look at him,/ then his eyes would dim and he’d drive his wounded anus in the dirt/ lurching forward in a hideous electric dance as though someone were at him with a club” (*CPCCK* 163). Throughout his oeuvre, Williams finds exigence in his own feelings of discomfort about looking, about having to look, at

what is unpleasant. It is not only the discomfort of looking, but the burden of telling that troubles the poet yet drives his work. Ian Gregson describes William's gaze as a kind of "protest" against "the human habit of looking *away*, arguing that "what will come to define Williams' sense of himself as a poet is his insistence on looking at what others routinely turn away from" ("Creeps and Bastards" 182). In Williams' work, there is an anxiety about why some gesture or event holds the poet's gaze and calls forth such emotion. In the handful of poems he has written about his mother, he pays obsessive attention to his harsh feelings towards his mother when he was an adolescent.

In "My Mother's Lips" from *Tar* (1983) and "The Cup" from *Repair* (1999), Williams curses his mother only to comfort her. *Tar* was followed by his longest collection, *Flesh and Blood* (1987), which includes a series of poems under the general title "Good Mother." The poems are written in the third person and feature a mother and three-year old son, who figure throughout the series. The final poem, "Good Mother: Home" conveys the way the son suffers at his mother's hand. His mother's tone irritates the child more than a spanking would: "It was worse than being struck, that tone, that intensity, that abnegating fervor and furor./ It seemed to open on a kind of limitless irrationality, uncontrollability, chaos, an abyss..." (*CPCK* 283). It is not the content of the mother's words; rather, it is the way the mother emphasizes them, the ferocious sound of her voice. Parents often tell their disrespectful teenage children "I don't like your tone" or "Change your tone"; yet in this poem, the son notes the mother's disproportionate rage. In the closing lines, the son is desperate to make his mother stop using that anxious tone with him, but acknowledges that this tension defines their relationship as much as peace would: "He wanted to submit, capitulate, atone, if only she would *stop*, but he could never say, 'Please stop,' / because somehow he knew that their connection was as firm in this— firmer than in their affection" (*CPCK* 283). While in the "Good Mother" poems, the son cannot disrupt the mother's perceived identity as "good" nor shatter his own self-image as good, in "The Cup" and in "My Mother's Lips," the adolescent son rages against his

mother. In telling these stories in poems, Williams both reclaims the rage of his past and distances himself from it by distinguishing between then and now. He not only confesses his mother's wrongs, but the angst within him that turned mild irritations into severe offenses.

Paul Breslin writes about this alternate understanding of confession, in which "openly revealing what others will condemn becomes a way of asserting one's independence" ("Confessional Poetics" 47). Williams presents a kind of case against himself in making the case against his mother; yet he does not hold back. He freely expresses his irritation as facilitating his eventual separation from her. Breslin argues that "confession does not always entail an admission of guilt," but can mean "to make oneself known, disclose one's identity" (*OED*); these forms [of confession] are self-assertive, or even defiant—one is unafraid to make one's beliefs known or to reveal one's true identity, regardless of other people's response to the disclosure" ("Confessional Poetics" 47). In his mother-poems, Williams certainly seeks to make himself known as a poet, but his audience is either non-existent or imaginary. In "The Cup," the poet laments that the one person he cannot "tell on" is his mother. He wonders who will hear the story of her offenses. In "My Mother's Lips," the poet finds in the creative act a kind of confessor; as he incants poems to the night air, the air hits his cheek like a kiss, as if to answer, receive, and validate him.

In "The Cup," Williams recounts how his mother's ritual of drinking coffee made him wild with rage. He begins the poem by pointing to his perception that made the scene more awful than it was. He asks himself why it made him crazy to watch his mother drink her cup of coffee: "What was going through me at that time of childhood/ when my mother drinking her morning coffee would drive me wild with loathing and despair?" (*CPCCK* 516). However, he quickly departs from this line of self-questioning as if to avoid the guilt associated with confession. Instead, he owns his bitterness, and retrospectively scrutinizes every detail in his mother's loathsome ritual. Later in the poem, he returns to

the issue of why it mattered to him so much, and decides it was in part because he could not confess it to someone else at the time. As a child, he could not tell his mother about his irritation with her. He recreates the childhood scene:

Every day, her body hunched with indignation at having had to leave its sleep,
her face without its rouge an almost mortal pale,
she'd stand before the stove and wait until the little turret on the coffee pot
subsidied,
then she'd fill her cup and navigate her way across the kitchen.

At the table, she'd set the cup down in its saucer, pour in milk, sit,
let out a breath charged with some onerous responsibility I never understood,
and lift the cup again.

There'd be a tiny pause as though she had consciously to synchronize her mouth
and hand,
then her lips would lengthen and reach out, prehensile as a primate's tail,
and seem to *grasp* the liquid with the sputtering suctioning of gravity imperfectly
annulled.

Then, grimacing as though it were a molten metal she was bringing into herself—
always grimacing, I'd think: did she never know what temperature the stuff would
be?—

she'd hold about a spoonful just behind her teeth before she'd slide it thickly down

Thickly, much too thickly:" (CPCCK 516).

The poet takes explicit pleasure in re-entering the moment, celebrating his disgust as well as his identity as a bitter child.

The use of adverbs, so notable at the beginning of the poem, points to the poet's ownership of his despair. We have nine adverbs in fourteen lines: "almost" in "an almost mortal pale," "some" in "some onerous responsibility," "never" in "never understood," "consciously" in "consciously to synchronize," "imperfectly" in "imperfectly annulled," "always" in "always grimacing," "never" in "never know," and "thickly" in "slide it thickly," followed by "much too" in "much too thickly" (CPCCK 516). In addition to these adverbs, Williams uses adverbial clauses such as "prehensile as a primate's tail" to describe the way in which his mother's lips "lengthen and reach out" and "as though it were a molten metal" to describe the way in which his mother grimaced while drinking her coffee (CPCCK 516). The prepositional phrase "with indignation" describes the way in which his mother hunched over, indignantly (CPCCK 516). This use of adverbs is

characteristic of Williams; however, in “The Cup,” the adverbs mark the degree to which Williams doesn’t understand his mother, even as he tries to nail down her morning ritual. The poem itself suggests the kind of writing exercise in which a young novelist imagines the contents in a potential character’s purse or glove compartment as a way to develop characterization. Similarly, describing a character’s mundane chores or little gestures might also fill out his or her idiosyncratic personality and inner world. Yet, what’s ironic in Williams’ poem is that scrutinizing the mother’s coffee ritual does little to captivate who she is; instead, it points to the speaker’s own neuroses and adolescent angst. The poet says he “never understood” his mother’s deep sighing before her cup of coffee (*CPCCK* 516).

The adverbs, to adopt the poet’s phrase, lay it on thickly, “much too thickly,” as if to intensify the mother’s offenses. Nevertheless, the adverbs convey pleasure in poetic language itself, in the treatment of unpleasant subject matter. The mother’s offenses become less important than the poetic thinking. Williams claims “The language of poetry is narcissism itself. It calls attention to itself at every possible opportunity. It is as vain and self-conscious and as tensioned and competitive as an adolescent. . . .The subject is utterly incidental to it (“Contexts” 99). In “The Cup,” which covers the period from childhood to adolescence, we see the youthful assertiveness in the poetic form. “Tensioned and competitive,” the poem is like a letter in which every space is filled and the lines fill the page from margin to margin. We see the narcissistic adolescent who wants to adopt a defiant stance, even if the parent’s “wrongs” don’t merit such confrontation. In this way, the poetic form, the adolescent’s outpouring, is the content. The adverbs lengthen the line; one might even say the adverbs create the long line.

Since the publication of *With Ignorance* (1977), long lines are characteristic of Williams. He discovered compression in the lyric to be a disadvantage, because it forces the poet to omit or condense material: “A poem might be able to sacrifice a possibly crippling terseness without having to lose any of the nondecorative tensions and intensities

that are primarily definitions of the lyric" ("Beginnings" 86). Williams felt that the long line could incorporate everyday speech and meditative thought: "It was a line, though, that while asserting itself as a generative verse element, seemed to be able to handle more comprehensively the sort of subjects I was interested in getting into the poems" ("Beginnings" 86). We see in "The Cup," Williams' commitment to what Linda Gregerson has termed "flagrant disclosure." Gregerson writes of the "long commodious, flexible lines that have come to be his trademark...some prodigal, loquacious overspill that is a kind of second wind" (76), an overspilling that for many readers may be excessive and confrontational. The long, dense lines allow for more emotional content, more nuance, more disclosure, more confession, both of others' flaws and his own. Gregerson touches on Williams' confessional impulse and its ethical implications: "One of the ethical tests to which Williams submits himself and his readers with some regularity is the test of flagrant disclosure. He will not turn his eyes away (or not soon enough) from the beautiful woman's artificial hand, from the young boy's deformed legs...He will make us flinch and make us behold our own flinching (76). In "The Cup," we flinch at the poet's scrutiny of the mother and self. He is not even sure if the irritation has a source. This makes us flinch more, because the rage cannot be located, and points to the human condition of bitterness.

Williams oddly makes us flinch at the most common of morning rituals, drinking coffee. The drama is an interior one, since in the poem, there is nothing shocking about the scene. Nothing happens. The mother drinks and slurps her coffee. When the mother stops drinking, when she puts her coffee cup down, and has "finally come to rest" (*CPCK* 517), we would think the drama, if one could call it a drama, is over, but it is not. Unlike the mother and her cup, which are at rest, the speaker is displaced, restless, and wild with loathing. Perhaps in his mind he frets that she will start drinking more coffee, or that she will continue doing the same thing in the same way forever. Like the confessional poets

who abandon social and poetic decorum, the speaker wishes to upset his mother's ritual and satisfy his urge to confess. Williams writes,

. . .As *I* never came to rest, as I had to watch, I knew the interval by heart,
 her hand came down to it again, her head lower to it again,
 that excruciating suction sound again, her gaze loosening again.
 I'd be desperate, wild, my heart would pound.
 There was an expression then, "to tell on someone": that was what I craved, to *tell*
 on her,
 to have someone bear witness with me to her awful wrong.
 What was I doing to myself? Or she to me?
Oh, surely she to me! (CPCCK 517)

Williams emphasizes the act of telling, of speaking, of confessing. The expression "to tell on someone" is a colloquialism from childhood: children often tell their mother how one of their playmates has hit them or taken their toy, and the mother usually functions as the mediator. The child-accuser is usually not entirely innocent, and the mother often accuses the child of being a tattle-tale, and instructs the child to worry about himself and not others. Williams pursues the notion of the tattle-tale by deconstructing self-examination as shame-producing. There is no shame in Williams' bewilderment, only awe. When Williams says, "What was I doing to myself?" (CPCCK 517), he implies that he makes himself flinch, not only his readers. Williams wonders at his masochism, thrilled by his ability to create self-hatred out of a non-issue, a non-event, nothing: the cup. That this object calls forth such despair both repulses and fascinates him.

The questions in the last stanza recall those in "The Gas Station." Williams tells on "the whore or mother" from "The Gas Station"; he craves to "tell on *her*," his mother, in "My Mother's Lips." In both poems he asks what he is doing in telling on these women, and what he is saying about himself. What's implied is that Williams can't tell on these women without implicating himself. After all, in "The Gas Station," isn't he the one paying the whore to blow him, isn't he the one making her a whore? In "My Mother's Lips," it's clear that Williams' mother isn't doing anything wrong. The last line, "*Oh surely she to me!*" (CPCCK 517), by protesting too much, admits that the mother has done nothing wrong. The line performs the child or adolescent's self-righteous feeling of being

victimized. In the first stanza of “My Mother’s Lips,” we must wait until the end of the third long line to learn what the mother’s offense is:

Until I asked her to please stop doing it and was astonished to find that she not
 only could
 but from the moment I asked her in fact would stop doing it, my mother, all
 through my childhood,
 when I was saying something to her, something important, would move her lips as
 I was speaking
 so that she seemed to be saying under her breath the very words I was saying as I
 was saying them (*CPCCK* 160).

The sentence is four lines long, an entire stanza, and renders absurd the idea that anyone, even a mother, could anticipate the next word in this complicated sentence. The two important clauses within the long sentence are when the speaker asks the mother to stop and when she moves her lips when the speaker says something, as if knowing what he will say. In the first line, the reader only knows that the speaker asks the mother to stop, and doesn’t, until the last two lines, know what the mother is doing that is so irritating. In the first line, we don’t even have the mother; we only have a “she,” only the antecedent, and don’t know to whom it refers. In the second line, we get the referent, “my mother,” but there are three interruptive phrases that separate the subject (the mother) from the verb of “would move.” “All through my childhood,” “when I was saying something to her,” and “something important” are all interjections that delay the syntax. It’s not until the last line that we understand why it matters that the mother is moving her lips: she seems to be saying her son’s words at the exact time he is saying them. The unique syntax asserts the poet’s independence from a mother who usually predicts her child’s words.

Williams describes his shift from childhood to adolescence as a shift from being irked to being troubled by his mother. He accuses her of trying to take away his independence, his ability to fashion his identity through language. His mother would say his words with him, or, worse, she would seem to make him say what he says. Williams writes:

Or, even more disconcertingly—wildly so now that my puberty had erupted—

before I said them.

When I was smaller, I must just have assumed that she was omniscient. Why not? She knew everything else—when I was tired, or lying; she'd know I was ill before I did.

I may even have thought—how could it not have come into my mind?—that she *caused* what I said (*CPCCK* 160).

When he was a child, he would have already thought his mother a god, so if she could predict his words, it would have come as no surprise. Yet as he erupts into adolescence, his mother is a barrier. He directs his angst at his mother's lips.

Williams shifts next from adolescence to adulthood, narrating his changing relationship to his mother. Strangely, Williams now identifies with his mother's anxiety to finish his sentences:

All she was really doing of course was mouthing my words a split second after I said them myself,
but it wasn't until my own children were learning to talk that I really understood how,
and understood, too, the edge of anxiety in it, the wanting to bring you along out of silence,
the compulsion to lift you again from those black caverns of namelessness we encase (*CPCCK* 160).

The "you" in the "the wanting to bring you along out of silence" (*CPCCK* 160) is ambiguous. Functioning not as direct address, but as a generalized third person, "you" refers to the child the mother wants to pull out of silence. It also refers to the poet's children learning to talk. Further, it could refer to the poet pulling himself out of silence by writing a poem. In other words, it could articulate the anxiety to speak alone. The "you" could signify the mother, who is nameless in the poem, and yet, is still a figure in the poem. The mother's lips are forever altered when they become the title of a poem, representing the poet's unsettling relationship to language. The poet reinforces the sense of namelessness by using the "you" to identify himself as a child, his own children, himself as a poet, and his mother. When Williams says that "we encase" the "black caverns of namelessness" (*CPCCK* 160), he includes his mother and himself as a parent in the same category as children, identifying the same experience of being at a loss for words. The

same caverns that a child dwells in, the parent dwells in, which explains the parents' anxiety.

Williams complicates the idea that the parent gives the child language. Earlier in the poem, he portrays the mother as a kind of copy-cat who mimics the child's language. Rather than the child mimicking the mother's words, we see the mother imitating the child. It would seem that the child is schooling the mother. Later in the poem, however, Williams makes clear that there is no single introduction to language, and the process of "learning to talk" (*CPCCK* 160) involves an infinite amount of time. This process is dynamic, as the child is lifted out of silence "again" (*CPCCK* 160). Williams implies that we are continually giving and receiving language afresh, because we all dwell in caverns of darkness. The parent rescues the child from the darkness of "namelessness" (*CPCCK* 160) only to introduce him to the darkness of language. Even the parent's desire to give the child language is tainted by the parent's conflicting desires to act as a mimic, stealing the child's best lines, or to act as a ventriloquist, controlling the child's speech. The process of "learning to talk" unfurls as a multi-layered process involving another generation of children and parents. Williams, anxious to save his children from debilitating silence, mimics his mother.

In the last two stanzas, poetry separates mother and son. The speaker leaves his mother, his home, and stands before a window in a "grim hotel" where he utters poetry to the night air. He doesn't remember the poetry he spoke; in fact, he doesn't even now consider it to be poetry, perhaps only the germ of a poem. His poetic self-fashioning is marked by both separation from and identification with the mother, because Williams sees the need to understand his mother, not just define himself apart from her. As a parent, he now understands his mother's habits that once peeved him. Towards the end of the poem, Williams rewrites the memory now as if it is "endearing to watch us again" (*CPCCK* 161). The poet can afford to see what might be endearing in the past only because he breaks away, and seeks solitude and poetry. He writes of the past, when his mother would irritate

him: "I've just grown to her height, or just past it: there are our lips moving together, / now the unison suddenly breaks, I have to go on by myself, no maestro, no score to follow" (*CPCCK* 161). Although Williams says "I have to go on," he wants to have to go on by himself. Throughout "My Mother's Lips," he has been lamenting and limiting her speech, clearing a space for his own. When Williams creates a space for his work, he finds himself chanting to himself at two in the morning. He is alone, and instead of his mother's lips to follow or his mother's kiss to reassure him, he mutters to the night and feels the air kiss him.⁵² He describes this moment where he seems to be experimenting with poetry, alone in the city:

the impenetrable maze of an endless city, when, really alone for the first
time in my life,
I found myself leaning from the window, incanting in a tearing whisper
what I thought were poems.

I'd love to know what I raved that night to the night, what those innocent
dithyrambs were,
or to feel what so ecstatically drew me out of myself and beyond . . .
Nothing is there, though,
only the solemn piazza beneath me, the riot of dim, tiled roofs and
impassable alleys,
my desolate bed behind me, and my voice, hoarse, and the sweet, alien
air against me like a kiss (*CPCCK* 161).

Juxtaposed to loneliness is the kiss of the air. The words "leaning," "love," "night," "ecstatically," "beneath me," "bed," "kiss," "against me," and "raved" suggest eroticism and sensuality. The word "rave" means "to enjoy oneself freely or with abandon," as well as "to speak with great admiration," and "to declaim wildly" (*OED*). The poet replaces the mother with other love objects, even imagined raving beauties. Juxtaposed to the mother's lips, which don't touch the poet's lips in a kiss, but frustrate his speech, is the kiss of the air. The air leans against the poet in a kind of erotic act, and the poet births poems.

Williams replaces his mother's lips with the lips of the "alien air" (*CPCCK* 161), the

⁵² Williams writes about the experience behind "My Mother's Lips," describing his awakening to poetry when he was in Florence: "I found myself improvising, declaiming, orating, in a kind of ecstasy 'what I thought were poems'" ("C.K. Williams on the 'Eighth' 243).

familiar with the unfamiliar. In this way, he transforms the alienation of his childhood via poetry.

There are two different end points in “My Mother’s Lips.” The first is the most historically recent: becoming a father and understanding his mother’s anxiety firsthand. The second end point occurs in the final stanzas when the speaker begins to compose poetry out loud and enters into adulthood. The end points represent the balance between independence and solidarity. Before he can see identify with his mother, the poet must birth himself as an independent voice. He must speak his soliloquy to the night air; he must confront his loneliness and free himself from a need for a “maestro” to write his “score,” that is dictate his life through words. He finds himself in another country outside the confines of the familiar, the domestic, and the archetypal. Hearing his own speech in a foreign city, in the dark of night, in the room with the “desolate bed” (*CPCK* 161), he validates himself as a unique voice, not one that another has scripted or will echo after him. Later, the poet becomes like his mother through parenting and identifies with her anxiety. Interestingly, Williams puts the later moment first in the poem, and ends with his ecstatic moment in young adulthood where he finds his voice. He implies that only through writing, through “incanting in a tearing whisper what I thought were poems” (*CPCK* 161) does he discover a shared anxiety, however transformed into ecstasy, to free himself from “the black caverns of namelessness we encase” (*CPCK* 160). The words on their lips seemed to highlight their tension-fraught relationship, and yet, their lips are engaged in the same impossible task of eradicating silence or “namelessness” (*CPCK* 160).

In both “My Mother’s Lips” and “The Cup” Williams focuses on the site of his mother’s mouth, and how he responds to her with his mouth; the poems create a kind of kiss. In “My Mother’s Lips,” Williams imagines the air ‘like a kiss’ (*CPCK* 161); mother and son’s lips synchronize as if in a kiss, the mother “mouthing my words” (*CPCK* 160). Williams writes about his mouth and teeth, not only his mother’s lips, as his “teeth went

on edge" (*CPCCK* 160) or as he declaimed poems, "raving...to the night" (*CPCCK* 161). He writes about teaching his own children how to talk, how to use their mouths. In "The Cup," the scrutiny of the mother's lips is so intense that readers confuse the two poems, assuming that this poem should be titled "My Mother's Lips." The mother's lips extend, "prehensile as a primate's tail" to drink (*CPCCK* 516), seeming to expect a kiss instead. In all this, we might recall W.H. Auden's definition of poetry as "a way of happening, a mouth" ("In Memory of W.B. Yeats," *Collected Poems* 248).

iii. *On Robert Hass' "My Mother's Nipples"*

Robert Hass in "My Mother's Nipples" and throughout *Sun Under Wood* (1996) engages with what we have come to think of as a confessional story, involving the archetypal family, childhood wounds, and psychological drama. What distinguishes Hass from the first-generation confessional poets is the self-consciousness with which he approaches the motif of childhood wounds. He doesn't create a power-struggle between parents and children that is meant to symbolize a larger cultural struggle as in Middlebrook's account of confessional poets' symbolization of their parents' "unassailable authority" ("What Was" 647). As this chapter will explore, Hass assumes more responsibility and agency in writing about his childhood suffering and the possibilities of emotional escape. Don Bogen notes that Hass begins to explore autobiography in his fourth book of poetry, *Sun Under Wood*, in a way that raises questions about "confession." Bogen says that Hass "makes Robert Lowell's childhood look tame" (176), because as we see in *Sun Under Wood*, his mother is an alcoholic and brother a crack addict. Bogen is very quick to distance Hass from the confessional poetry that doesn't transcend the poet's "status as victim" and becomes nothing but "wallowing" (176). Bogen implements confession in a kind of straw-man argument to point out that Hass is far too "rigorous a poet to fall into the traps of

confession,” seeing confession as the antithesis of rigor and precision (176). Bogen’s rhetoric brings to mind the voices of Rosenthal, Bloom, and Phillips who, earlier, made similar critiques of confession as lacking poetic craft.

Despite Bogen’s reductive characterization of confessional poetry as having more “traps” than any other kind, he does draw attention to the way Hass plays with confession and works against it. Bogen points out that Hass contextualizes the motifs of confession within “his more fundamental concerns with art, nature, and human relations” (176). Again, Bogen assumes that the self and the family, such obviously confessional subjects, are not “fundamental,” but that “human relations” somehow are more so. However, Bogen’s point still stands that Hass brings in other subject matter, such as the imagery of the Squaw Valley Meadows in “My Mother’s Nipples,” to bear on autobiographical material. His discursive, meditative tone allows more material into a poem than one would expect in a confessional poem, particularly from the natural world. Like Lowell, Hass brings in religious themes, and explores another kind of confession, but in a more indirect manner. Several critics have noted the way in which Hass tends to both avoid his subject and extend his meditation on it pursuing tangential subjects. For example, Tony Hoagland writes, “Hass may be the contemporary master of the synthetic collage” (39) because “in a Hass poem, the speaker is always skirting the stage—rarely standing in its center” (40). Hass’ evasiveness is one feature of his voice that critics pin down as “anti-confessional” because Hass is not dramatizing, locating, or insisting on his childhood wounds. However, as we have seen in Lowell and Berryman, evasiveness is very much at issue in self-disclosure, and in this respect, Hass continues working with the very indirectness and resistance to confession that we have seen in the first-generation confessional poets. Yet, what distinguishes Hass’ post-confessional poetry is the deliberate way in which the poet seeks distraction and disturbance: his children’s voices, the noise outside his window, or the faint memory of a poem he read years ago all function as welcomed interruptions.

Additionally, Hass' poems feel different from confessional poems because he is so knowing and self-conscious about the themes of language, loss, and the mother. Hass' "My Mother's Nipples" treats the subject that is, according to Bogen, the "most psychologically loaded of subjects" (176). Freud's notion of the mother's breast as the first love object is evoked in "My Mother's Nipples," as is the issue of displacement. Freud writes about the "maternal model of the object-choice" that shapes the way men perceive possible lovers: "The libido has lingered so long with the mother, even after the onset of puberty, that the love objects chosen subsequently possess the imprint of maternal characteristics, and all become easily recognizable maternal surrogates" ("Contributions to the Psychology" 244). Freud even goes so far as to find a physical manifestation of the maternal mark on the infant: "after a protracted birth the child's skull must represent the cast of the maternal pelvic canal" (244-245). Hass engages with the trope of the mother as an archetype of love, writing about his mother's breasts as well as his first erotic experience as a young man seeing a woman's breasts. We have seen in Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* how the child learns to represent the mother through symbolization and language, and works through his grief over the mother's occasional absence. Lacan develops and modifies Freudian ideas about the mother and language, and adds an emphasis on alienation in his concept of the "Mirror Stage," which Hass evokes in his mediation on displacement.

In "Dragonflies Mating," the poem preceding "My Mother's Nipples" in *Sun Under Wood*, Hass explains how humans differ from dragonflies in their sexual lives, because humans are doomed to replace the first lost love object of the mother. Hass writes of the dragonflies as distinct from insatiable humankind: "They don't carry all this half-mated longing up out of childhood/ and then go looking for it everywhere./ ...They don't go through life dizzy and groggy with their hunger,/ kill with it, smear it on everything" (*SUW* 11). "My Mother's Nipples," appearing on the next page of the volume, responds to this theme of early childhood loss. "My Mother's Nipples" examines the mother's nipples

as part of the mother's body first and foremost and then as part of the child's symbolization, and, by extension, as a psychoanalytic and literary symbol, one that comes to rise in confessional poetry in particular. Hass comments on the literary-historical moment where "personal and psychological experience" emerged as poetic material in the late 1950's, and suggests that he can't not respond to this in his poetry: "How can you do anything new with this material, but how can you not write about it?" ("An Informal Occasion" 144). Aware of the legacy of confessional poetry, Hass seeks to create a space where he can do something new with autobiographical, psychological material. In some ways, the poem can be read as an attempt to rescue the cliché of displacement, the overdone idea of the poetry of loss, which explores how language stems from the initial loss of the mother's breast. In "Meditation at Lagunitas," Hass expresses this very idea as cliché: "All the new thinking is about loss./ In this way it resembles all the old thinking" (*Praise* 4). The repetition of the inclusive "all" enacts the way in which loss has become the poet's default subject in every poem. Hass acknowledges the cliché notion of language as elegiac, yet seeks to rescue the cliché, even by drawing attention to the mother's nipples rather than breasts.

Hass puts pressure on the notion of language as compensation for the loss of the mother's breast by wondering who it is that needs this compensation, who it is that needs language, that needs a song. He refuses to accept the role of the victimized child, suffering from a lack of maternal nurture, suffering from the absence of the mother's breast. Instead, he takes a more sympathetic, adult position of wondering what his mother would have sung about, had she not suffered from alcoholism and guilt over her addiction. He wonders what his mother would have loved, found beautiful on the earth. The poem ends with the poet's puzzling over what, if anything, his mother would have found pleasure in, as if to compensate for her difficult life as a woman rushed into marriage and motherhood: "I tried to think of some place on earth she loved.// I remember she only ever spoke happily/ of high school" (*SUW* 22). Throughout the long poem, Hass keeps coming back to a very

specific kind of language, song, and wonders how his mother fits into this kind of compensation. He is concerned not with his own brokenness, but with his mother's.

In "My Mother's Nipples" and throughout the volume, Hass is self-conscious that the subject of his alcoholic mother might suggest to readers that he is a child-victim. While acknowledging the pain in his broken home, the poet refuses to play the role of the wounded, troubled child. Hass revises the figure of the mother and even the word "mother" in poetry. In "Dragonflies Mating" Hass establishes a recurring scene, in which he used to play basketball at school and fear that his mother would enter the gymnasium "well into one of those weeks of drinking she disappeared into" (*SUW* 8) and humiliate him. He then offers this meta-commentary:

When we say "mother" in poems,
we usually mean some woman in her late twenties
or early thirties trying to raise a child.

We use this particular noun
to secure the pathos of the child's point of view
and to hold her responsible (*SUW* 9).

Hass attempts to empathize with his mother by re-defining a mother as someone young "trying to" rear a child. The "we" here presumably refers to Hass and other poets of his generation responding to the legacy of confessional poetry. He is self-conscious about using the mother figure to "secure" the child's role as victim, a role particularly relevant in his own case since his mother was an alcoholic in and out of institutions. Hass implies that this doesn't have to be the default "point of view." He says that when we write about mothers, we "usually" speak as the child, and goes on to explore what happens when one identifies with the parent instead.

"My Mother's Nipples" treats the theme of displacement by enacting it through metaphors, imagery, and tangential material that replace, yet illuminate the subject of the mother. The central idea is stated at the outset. The title, "My Mother's Nipples," and the first line, "They're where all displacement begins" (*SUW* 12), declare that the mother's

breasts initiate the speaker into displacement. However, the first line begins with a pronoun, and we only find the antecedent in the title, which has the unsettling effect itself of performing the displacement. Reading the first line, we may not be sure what “they” refers to, so that we commence the poem with the sense that we have lost our bearings, too, the anchoring of the antecedent. This feeling is compounded when we find that the same pronoun “They” in the next line refers not to the mother’s nipples but to the construction workers who destroy the meadow (*SUW* 12). The poem intentionally unsettles us, so we are without not only one antecedent, but two. The title and first two lines raise issues having to do with the loss of the mother-infant dyad in exchange for the symbolic system of language. The opening of the poem intentionally confuses us, sending us looking for antecedents, as if looking for the archetypal objects represented linguistically by signifiers. This strategy dramatizes Hass’ stress on alienation and Lacanian model of language.

Lacan’s concept of the “Mirror Stage” is relevant in thinking about language, mothers, and alienation. The French analyst posits that infants, sometime between six and eighteen months, discover their reflection either in a mirror or in the reflective gaze of the mother. While still dependent on the mother and lacking fine motor skills, the infant sees him or herself reflected in a mirror or the mother’s face and learns to manipulate his own image. The image or reflection, which can be controlled to a degree, is divorced from the reality of the infant’s dependence on others. The infant experiences a sense of his bodily unity, although he has not yet mastered the functions of his body. This experience is exhilarating for the child, as a foreshadowing of eventual bodily mastery, yet it is also alienating, since the mirror image is illusory and mediated by another, in most cases, the mother. Lacan elaborates on the infant’s fantasies: the retroactive fantasy of the body as fragmented and the fantasy of the body as unified, which facilitate the development of the ego. The infant moves from various fantasies to “the assumption of the armour of an alienating identity, which will mark with its rigid structure the subject’s entire mental

development” (*Ecrits* 4). The identity is alienating, because of the disparity between the self and the image of the self in the mirror or another’s face. According to Charles Altieri, “Lacan stresses the mirroring function of the mother, which gives the child a sense of an inner life tragically dependent on its outer reflections” (“Contemporary Poetry” 221), and this Lacanian emphasis pervades Hass’ work. He explicitly refers to Lacan in a poem title (*Praise* 9), offering a different narrative of development and dependency than that of Jessica Benjamin, discussed in earlier chapters.

For Lacan, language has to do with dependency. Where the infant perceived no distinction between the self and the mother, now the child relies on the mother to mirror his specular image back to him. The notion of the specular image is connected to the symbolic order of language, which is also a kind of alienating or false mastery. The formation of the ego takes place in the dissolution of the preoedipal and the replacement of the oedipal, symbolic, and linguistic. Jane Gallop writes about a kind of linguistic “castration” by which “we are inevitably bereft of any masterful understanding of language, and can only signify ourselves in a symbolic system that we do not command, that, rather, commands us” (20). These issues of alienation and language are helpful in thinking about what Hass is doing in “My Mother’s Nipples.” Hass explores his process and entryway into poetic language, grounding his poem in multiple examples of displacement and loss: the loss of the mother’s breasts, the loss of a meadow, the loss of antecedents to which his pronouns refer, the loss of the signified objects that words point to, and the plurality of losses implicit in the lack of a song to compensate for his mother and his pain.

“My Mother’s Lips” keeps circling back to the idea of what the speaker has had and lost as well as what he and his mother never had: “What we’ve lost is a story/ and what we’ve never had/ a song” (*SUW* 19). He later contradicts himself: “What we’ve never had is a song/ and what we’ve really had is a song” (*SUW* 21). He resolves this issue by conflating loss and happiness with “emptiness” and “fullness,” both of which are

translated into song at times. Song offers compensation for loss, but also celebration of happiness: “There are all kinds of emptiness and fullness/ that sing and do not sing” (*SUW* 21). Hass makes us reflect on whether the confessional poem is a story or a song. James Longenbach sees song and story as creating friction in poetry, as the “sonic and semantic aspects” warring against each other (“Song and Story” 40). For Longenbach, the song refers to “the tactile pleasures of language” whereas the story refers to “the *what* and *why*” of a poem (39). Story is critical to confessional poetry, which focuses on narratives about childhood and emotional pain. After confession, the story of a troubled childhood is so overplayed that Hass wonders if his story loses exigence. Hass can’t decide whether “My Mother’s Nipples” is a song or a story. Hass uses prose in the poem as well as songs (the utopian’s song, for example), and song-like rhymes. The poem includes a folk story about the boy named “Loves His Mother’s Tits” (*SUW* 14) as well as the three sections written in prose poetry: “Two memories” (*SUW* 15-17, an account of his father’s death and the marriage license (*SUW* 19-20), and the section about his mother passing out at the park (*SUW* 21-22). This is a long poem founded on an amalgamation of story and song, prose and poetry. Within the additive, accumulative, inclusive texture of the poem is an internal tension about what the poem wants to be, a story or a song, and what it wants to convey, the subject of loss or happiness. It begins with ambiguity about the implications of the subject matter. Writing about himself in the third person, the poet says that someone suggested he write this poem: “He wanted to get out of his head,” she said, ‘so I told him to write about his mother’s nipples’” (*SUW* 12). This situates him in a desperate position, wanting to escape autobiography in his poetry, and yet, told to write about his mother’s nipples. The poet wants to enter the confessional dialogue but to escape the personal at the same time.

There’s a sense that what the poet really wants to do is look out his window, literally and metaphorically, to distract himself from too much self-consciousness, too much navel-gazing. Out of his window is a construction site. The first stanza introduces

the meadow as a landscape that exemplifies displacement and alienation. The “upper meadow” (*SUW* 12) is destroyed and then replaced with roads and concrete. Although the meadow is “bulldozed” (*SUW* 12), the construction site signifies the present absence of the meadow. This is announced by a sign naming the meadows in the plural, “Squaw Valley Meadows” even though the “upper meadow” is gone (*SUW* 12). The sign represents the way in which language is estranging. In the place of nature is a kind of de-creation or destructive constructiveness; the scene is bustling with people, “framers,” “electricians,” “plumbers,” “the general contractor,” and the “someone” who puts the sign up (*SUW* 12). We see the work of human hands: “road,” “concrete,” “nails,” and the sign itself (*SUW* 12). It evokes the ghost of a meadow turned into a housing complex named “Squaw Valley Meadows.” Hass names the previous inhabitants of the meadow: “horses...two chestnut, one white,” an owl, wood rats, and even specific grasses and earth that are dug up and carted off (*SUW* 12). These inhabitants presumably include Native Americans, given the name. “Squaw Valley” might also refer to a valley of women and mothers; we imagine the valley as a depression and think of the mother’s womb and genitals as hollow. The poem suggests this reading, as it thematizes the mother’s body as a site of loss.

This opening scene in the poem establishes the motif of displacement, insisting that words memorialize that which they seek to describe, embody, or point to. In “Meditation at Lagunitas,” Hass expresses this idea that words represent the death of the objects they represent: “a word is elegy to what it signifies” (*Praise* 4). In the same poem, he notes how when choosing a specific word to describe an experience, one loses the weight of the more universal, general idea behind it: “Each particular erases/ the luminous clarity of a general idea” (*Praise* 4). Hass explores this same idea of the particular in “My Mother’s Nipples” when he describes the very specific terminology the electricians and plumbers use, an insider’s language, a code of specifics: they “came around to talk specs/ with the general contractor” (*SUW* 12). The specific words have to do with tearing up the meadow grasslands—digging a foundation, mixing concrete, pouring it—in a very physical way

convey how language is essentially funereal, elegiac. In a sense, the “specs” facilitate the destruction of the upper meadow and its transformation into a building development. In this way, language is not simply an unsatisfying replacement for the meadow: a painted sign with the word “meadows” rather than an actual meadow. Language itself brings about the loss of the “upper meadow.”

The poem is suspicious of its medium of words, but is also curious about its complicity in exploiting a subject by speaking about it. The meadow returns later in the poem in conjunction with writing. Hass depicts his wife Brenda “working,” which we infer means writing, as in an earlier poem, “Happiness,” where she goes into “the gazebo with her black pen and yellow pad/ to coax an inquisitive soul” (*SUW* 3).⁵³ In “My Mother’s Nipples,” we can assume that Brenda and the poet share this same kind of work. As Brenda is working, there is loud noise from outside: “Rumble of heavy equipment in the meadow” (*SUW* 17). The word “equipment” is similar to the word “instrument” and we associate the writing instruments, paper and pen, with the equipment outside, possibly the dump trucks, drills, chain saws, and other tools. In the next line he writes about the mating calls of birds: “bird squall, Steller’s jay, and then the piercing three-note whistle of a robin” (*SUW* 17). He says they are “mating” (*SUW* 17). The writing voice seems to hover between the artificial “rumble” of machinery and the song of ecstatic birds. It’s as if Hass isn’t sure where to position his voice and his work, as if questioning whether his poetry exploits or expresses the meadow. A related question is whether writing about his mother’s alcoholism and his suffering is a song or cacophony, a mating call or the rumbling machinery, a sonnet or elegy, Eros or Thanatos.

In another place in the poem, Hass discloses how he, too, uses the meadow, in his poetic process, to make something larger than a meadow, something that is at once ontological, metaphorical, and personal:

Yesterday I ran along the edge of the meadow in the heat

⁵³ Hass’ wife is the poet Brenda Hillman, whose most recent book of poems is *Practical Water* (2010).

of late afternoon. So many wildflowers
 tangled in the grass. So many grasses—
 reedgrass, the bentgrass and timothy, little quaking grass,
 dogtail, rip-gut brome—the seeds flaring from the stalks
 in tight chevrons of green and purple-green
 but loosening.

I said to myself:
 Some things do not blossom in this life (*SUW* 18-19)

Hass is conscious here of using the meadow as a metaphor. He wishes to have it both ways, to describe and celebrate the meadow as a meadow, while also using the meadow to say something about himself. He uses the idea of blossoming to denote richness, fullness, and ecstasy, which he can't find in his mother's life. He decides that his mother didn't have any such blossoming: "an early romantic or ecstatic time" in her life, "a blossoming" (*SUW* 21). He relates this idea of a blossoming back to the meadow: "Sweet smell of timothy in the meadow/...there are places on this earth clear all the way up/ and all the way down/ and in between a various blossoming" (*SUW* 21). The meadow represents fecundity, with its mating birds, owls, horses, grasses, and wildflowers, which Hass connects with his search for his mother's fecundity. As a mother, she represents a literal fecundity, having given birth to children. Yet, Hass intimates that her life never came to fruition. In thinking about his mother's blossoming or lack of blossoming, he begins with his mother's nipples. We see in his approach to confession the way Hass wants to have his cake and eat it too. In his reflexivity and in his extreme self-consciousness about confession, poetry, language, and loss, he expresses anxiety about responding to confession. He wants to write a confessional poem, but he also wants to make sure we know that he knows that we know that he knows he is confessing.

At times, this caginess works, especially when accompanied by humor. For example, Hass writes about the way in which we don't even know what we've lost, because as infants, we weren't conscious of losing the mother's breast, which we thought was part of our own body. He also qualifies his whole poem about the mother's breasts by

saying he wasn't breast-fed, implying jokingly that he never experienced the presence or absence of the first love object. He writes, "Mothers in the nineteen forties didn't nurse./ I never saw her naked. Oh! yes, I did,/ once, but I can't remember. I remember/ not wanting to" (*SUW* 15). There is humor in the way the speaker's repression doesn't work, how he brings up the mother's naked body by not bringing it up. Indirection is the strategy, not only in the non-image of the nursing mother, but also in the repressed memory of the naked mother.

Hass distances himself from the image of his mother's breasts by insisting that he was not breast-fed, and again by repressing the memory of her exposed body. He seems to be saying that to see his mother, to gaze at her body, might have been like owning or objectifying her. Juxtaposed to the poet's resistance to her physicality is his invention of her nipples based on photographs:

Pink, of course, soft; a girl's—
 She wore white muslin tennis outfits
 in the style Helen Wills made fashionable.
 Trim athletic swimsuits.
 A small person, a compact body. In the photographs
 she's on the beach, standing straight,
 hands on hips, grinning,
 eyes desperate even then (*SUW* 15).

Here Hass plays the role of the voyeur. He evokes the notion of the mother's breast as the first love object, with a few qualifiers. He writes about his mother when she was a young woman, describing her nipples as those of a girl, presumably not a mother's. He distances her from the maternal body, especially from the pregnant body, by describing her as "small" and girlish, "fashionable," "grinning" as if a young, giggly girl, hardly a woman. By saying that her eyes were "desperate even then," he suggests that it is shocking to the poet that his mother was troubled even when she was young. As the poem tells us, the mother married young and went on to struggle with alcoholism and lead a life devoid of much happiness. We learn her courtship with her husband was not romantic but doomed, headed towards a gun-shot wedding. Hass writes of his discovery that his parents eloped

and hid their anniversary because it was only two months prior to their first child's birth: "It finished off my dim wish that here had been an early romantic or ecstatic time in their lives, a blossoming, brief as a northern summer maybe, but a blossoming" (*SUW* 21). Hass comes to grips with his mother's bleak current life, yet he holds onto the notion of his mother's earlier happiness and potential for happiness. He wishes to interpret his mother as having had promise, in the way that we see children as having promise. The poem struggles against seeing his mother as doomed, yet cannot rewrite her life. Hass wonders about whether his mother was happy before she had him, before she was his mother, before she began drinking. The poem ends with the proclamation that his mother "spoke happily" about her high school years, which is different from saying that she was happy then. This speech resembles nostalgia that is not the same as happiness, and is similar to the poet's "dim wish" for his mother's happiness, even if it exists in a past he never knew. However, when Hass looks at the photographs of his mother as a young girl, "even then" he sees her desperate eyes, reading into these photographs of his mother's girlhood the kind of desperation he comes to know as her child. Hass is self-conscious of the point-of-view, of the way in which he is projecting what he knows now into the past, and of the way in which he views his mother with the bias of being her child wounded by her alcoholism.

Throughout the poem, Hass puzzles over whether he can sing about his mother, whether he and his mother have a song, and where his mother would be in a song. Sprinkled throughout it are lines that revolve around his relationship to his mother and singing. The third stanza in the poem opens a long section of songs different types of people make about their mother's nipples. The types include the cosmopolitan, romantic, utopian, philosopher, capitalist, saint, misanthrope, melancholic, indigenist, melancholic, and regionalist (*SUW* 12-14). The phrase my mother's nipples is distorted ironically by a mix of French and English: "les nipples de ma mère" (*SUW* 13-14), and repeated in several songs. Oddly, Hass uses French for all the words but nipples, which would be

“mamelons” in French. The other French words for “my mother,” “ma mere” are somewhat funny because the word for “my,” “ma” is also a word for mom, as in “Ma and Pa.” The French word for “mother,” “mère” sounds like our word, “mare,” for a female horse, evoking the song, “The Old Gray Mare.” It’s apparent that “nipples” is not a French word, which makes it stand out as awkward, making the larger point about the uncomfortable subject matter. Hass later acknowledges this: “What is one to say of the nipples of old women/ who would, after all, find the subject/ unseemly” (*SUW* 18). In the section of songs, Hass uses several distancing techniques, such as a foreign language, the voices of personae, irony, and humor. For example, the capitalist’s song for his mother’s nipples is “Fifty cents a share” (*SUW* 13). Notably, the poet himself doesn’t have a song about his mother’s nipples, situating himself somewhere between the songs of the melancholic and the misanthrope. The melancholic’s song is “They were never there,/ les nipples de mère./ They are not anywhere”; the misanthrope’s is “I can scarcely bear” (*SUW* 14). Hass departs from this voice that combines a light, humorous touch with a dark, melancholic texture, drawing attention to his act of making a song, whether creating a song with his mother’s voice, hearing his mother’s song, or writing a poem that in some way releases his mother’s song.

Throughout the poem, Hass follows a particular thread beginning with the personae’s songs about mothers, then with birds mating and singing mother songs, and then with an inner monologue about the relationship between his voice, his mother’s, and song. Hass links mothering with mating and singing, essentially with an ecstatic voice or expression: “Whistle of robin./ They’re mating now. Otherwise they’re mute./ Mother-ing. Or Mother-song./ Mother-song-song-song” (*SUW* 17). He begins addressing himself and trying to make definite statements about the relationship between himself, his mother, and song, although he keeps adjusting these seemingly definitive statements. It’s unclear whether the song refers to ecstatic happiness or to lyric poetry, such as “My Mother’s Nipples” and other songs and poems about mothers. Hass says that the song would have

been inclusive, something shared between mother and son, when he writes “what we’ve never had/ a song” (*SUW* 19), and repeats with some formal and syntactical variation: “What we’ve never had is a song” (*SUW* 21). He first aligns himself to his mother’s singing voice or song: “I said: you are her singing” (*SUW* 21). Then he corrects himself: “You are not her singing” (*SUW* 22).

Hass’s changing ideas about his mother’s relationship to song are paradoxical. First there is no song about the mother and the poet, then there is one. First the poet is the mother singing, then he is not. Though he continually adjusts his perspective, Hass finally settles on the idea that his mother is progressively fading from the song. From this point on, Hass abandons the self-doubt, arguing, and paradoxes. There is a definite shift from the contradictions that seem to erase what’s come before to the accumulations that seem to build on what’s come before. He says his mother is “what’s/ broken in a song” (*SUW* 22), with the line break between “what’s” and “broken,” creating a visual pun between line breaks and brokenness. She goes from being the piece that is broken in a song to the “silences” in a song (*SUW* 22) to the possibility of silences. Perhaps Hass wants to give his mother a rest, while relieving himself from the pressure to impose a song on experience.

Since Hass ends on the possibility that his mother is the “silences” in the song (*SUW* 22), we imagine that the mother paradoxically makes singing possible, in the way that silence foregrounds music. The mother as a human being and as a subject for poetry presents Hass with the difficulty of transforming their shared painful experiences into song. Perhaps the pain they experienced makes a kind of music, yet is not the sort of compensation for suffering one might find in a song. Another poem in the collection, “Faint Music,” puzzles over the connection between pain and singing: “I had the idea that the world’s so full of pain/ it must sometimes make a kind of singing./ And that sequence helps, as much as order helps—/ First an ego, and then pain, and then the singing” (*SUW* 43). Perhaps the expectation of order is what helps in “My Mother’s Nipples,” since Hass portrays himself as expecting a song, expecting singing. The book ends with the desire to

end singing. In the last lines of the last poem, “Interrupted Meditation,” Hass writes: “I’m a little ashamed that I want to end this poem/ singing, but I want to end this poem singing—the woolly/ closed-down buds of the sunflower to which, in English,/ someone gave the name, sometime, of pearly everlasting” (*SUW* 76). Hass doesn’t end “My Mother’s Nipples” singing, but he does ironically end with his mother’s happy voice, as she “spoke/happily” about her high school years, which alienates the poet since he only sees her lack of happiness.

When Hass writes about his mother’s alcoholism, he intentionally uses a poetic form that does not look like song. The sections of the poem that confront painful childhood memories are written in prose whereas the songs, the descriptions of the meadow, and the other parts of the long poem are written in verse lines. The prose poetry seems to convey Hass’ struggle to make a kind of resistant music out of his childhood wounds and out of his mother’s suffering. In the first prose section, Hass writes about his mother’s voice as the antithesis of song and in a poetic form that is more like prose than music. The mother screams at the doctors who appear at the home to take her to the mental hospital. The voice is an echoing resistance. The doctors chase the mother down the steps and outside: “The back stairs led into a sort of well between the houses, and when I went into the kitchen I could hear her screaming, ‘No! no!’” the sound echoing and re-echoing among the houses” (*SUW* 16). The poem attempts to again re-echo the sound of the mother’s voice, multiplying the screams. The poet doesn’t consider his mother’s voice anything like singing; in a poem concerned with the “Mother-song-song-song” (*SUW* 17), that is, with finding or making a song out of the mother’s voice, the echoing scream “No!” becomes an anti-song, the opposite of the song. Hass’ portrayal of his mother shrieking “No!” invokes Ginsberg’s “Kaddish,” as we saw in Chapter Two, where Naomi prophesies out of her paranoia. Naomi, like Hass’ mother, is taken against her will to a mental hospital. Unlike Hass’ mother, Naomi certainly has a story, one that calls out to be written down: at the opening of “Kaddish,” the poet says, “[I] still haven’t written your

history" (II, *CPAG* 220). Ginsberg transforms her cries into prophetic speech. She "scream[ed] bugs of Mussolini—Death!" and created "Terror, that woke the neighbors" (II, *CPAG* 223). At the poem's end, Ginsberg joins Naomi's voice with the cawing of crows, creating a "strange cry" (V, *CPAG* 235). Like Ginsberg, Hass echoes his mother's cries, "No! no!" (*SUW* 16), and transforms them into a song that is beautiful in its brokenness. Ginsberg, like Hass, questions whether he can sing: "I'm hymnless" (I, *CPAG* 220), yet writes the song-like lament. Both poets write about mothers who struggled with mental illness or addiction, and find it difficult to reconcile their roles as lyric poets with their experiences as "hymnless" sons, who come from homes in need of song and story.

The terminology for his mother's situation, which Hass learns as a child, is equally antithetical to song. In the second prose section, Hass recalls a childhood visit to his mother in the mental hospital. He describes learning a new vocabulary to discuss his mother's mental health:

I had asked my grandmother why, if my mother had a drinking problem, that's the phrase I had been taught to use, why she was locked up with crazy people. It was a question I could have asked my father, but I understood that his answer would not be dependable. My grandmother said, with force, she had small red curls on her forehead, dressed with great style, you had better ask your father that. Then she thought better of it, and said, They have a treatment program, dear, maybe it will help. I tried out that phrase, treatment program (*SUW* 16).

The terms "drinking problem" and "treatment program" are euphemisms for alcoholism and rehabilitation or rehab. Hass avoids the clinical terms "addiction" or "alcoholic," having been taught the term "drinking problem." In an earlier poem, "Our Lady of the Snows," Hass plays with this kind of language, describing his mother as "in a hospital drying out" (*SUW* 5). The concept of sobering up or drying out is not at all like staying sober, yet the phrase is meant to euphemistically muddle the two. Behind the euphemism is the child's will to understand, perceive, and process what is happening around him. As Hass expresses it in "Our Lady of the Snows," he wished his sorrow as a child would be in manageable bits: "And the days churned by,/ navigable sorrow" (*SUW* 5). As the poem

navigates the difficult subject matter of an alcoholic mother by avoiding the voice of victim-child, so does the child within the poem exercise control over how he perceives his sorrow, whether he sees it as “navigable” or not. In the poem, the child escapes his pain through prayer and another kind of meditation more like blanking out or staring. He would “light an aromatic candle,/ and bargain for us both./ Or else I’d stare into the day-moon of that face/ and, if I concentrated, fly” (*SUW* 5). The face refers to the “unpainted statue of the young girl” (*SUW* 5) placed at the altar, which represents the Virgin Mary. The child, lacking maternal nurture at home, turns to Catholicism, where he can project onto the “unpainted statue” a maternal image. Rather than depict his childhood in terms of victimhood, Hass draws attention to language as navigation, as agency, and within that frame, the language of prayer as seen in “Our Lady of the Snows.”

In “My Mother’s Nipples,” the child navigates not only his pain but the language used to describe pain. The child is seen sifting through the terms that describe the mentally ill, and choosing who to approach for information. He doesn’t ask his father to explain his mother’s illness, because he knows “his answer would not be dependable” (16). Hass is interested in how language shapes one’s experience, how as a child he “tried out” a “phrase.” Perhaps the phrase “treatment program” represents an attempt to understand the medical dimension of his mother’s experience. Ultimately, the poem itself tries on different phrases, songs, and literary forms in an attempt to find his mother’s song. Despite the poem’s sophistication, it retains a child-like curiosity to try different registers of language. Juxtaposed to this earnestness is a deliberate attempt to evade the subject matter, the mother’s sexuality and alcoholism.

Hass evades the mother’s breasts by writing about other breasts, which is an indirect way of returning to the mother as the Freudian love object. He writes about his adolescent experience of being overwhelmed with desire at the sight of a young woman’s breasts:

The first girl’s breasts I saw

were the Chevy dealer's daughter Linda Wren's.
 Pale in the moonlight. Little nubbins, pink-nosed.
 I can still hear the slow sound of the surf
 of my breath drawing in. I think I almost fainted (*SUW* 18).

Although we might connect this passage to the earlier description of his mother's breasts when she was a young woman, we see a disparity between the ecstasy over "Linda Wren's" breasts and the lack of ecstasy, blossoming, or song in the mother's life (*SUW* 18). Hass problematizes the notion of the maternal surrogate by introducing other breasts into the poem from very different contexts. He describes a female patient at the mental hospital who is sitting on the bench beside him, his mother, and his brother, and who is "talking to herself in a foreign language" (*SUW* 16). As a child, he studies her as if to avoid studying his mother: "She was so careless of herself that I could see her breast, the brown nipple, when she leaned forward. I didn't want to look, looked, and looked away" (*SUW* 17). The woman's breast is the antithesis of the erotic, because of the context of a mental hospital. The woman is like the poet's mother in the sense that she, too, has been hospitalized, although for different reasons. The woman is unlike the poet's mother because she speaks a different language, speaks to herself, and neglects her personal appearance. The poet's mother is seen imitating a celebrity, wearing a beret. The poet looks and doesn't want to look at the woman in the same way that he remembers and doesn't want to remember his mother's naked body. However, this woman is de-eroticized by the poet's pity, which is evident in the description of her as deliberate in all the wrong ways. She is too deliberate in her speech, gesturing and glancing as she speaks to herself, and not deliberate enough in her self-presentation, revealing her breast accidentally. Hass possibly projects his pity for his mother onto this woman, whose condition is pitiable in a safer way, in a way that allows for psychic distance.

The most unusual breast to appear in the poem comes from a strange displacement of the mother's breast onto Christ's body. Hass acknowledges the oddity of this metaphor

by saying that he could be misremembering. He first introduces the religious imagery of the Virgin Mary's breasts and then the imagery of Christ's wounds as breasts:

Twin founts of mercy, they used to say of the Virgin's breasts
in the old liturgy the Irish priests
could never quite handle, it being a form of bodily reference,
springs of grace, freshets
of lovingkindness. If I remember correctly,
there are baroque poems in this spirit
in which each of Christ's wounds is a nipple.
Drink and live: this is the son's blood (*SUW* 18).

Hass illuminates how clergy have elided the terms breasts and nipples in thinking about the Virgin Mary. The phrase "never quite handle" could refer to the Blessed Mother's breasts as well as to the "old liturgy," which describes them as "twin founts." Hass uses the clergy's awkwardness to reflect his own discomfort in addressing the topic of his mother's nipples. Hass refers to baroque poems that imagine Christ's wounded side as a breast and the stream of blood as breast-milk. Of course, the spiritual poems do not use the word nipples, which is what makes Hass' qualifier, "...If I remember correctly" ironic. Hass alludes to an entire literary tradition of eroticizing the spiritual, something we see in John Donne's "Holy Sonnets," in George Herbert, and in Julian Norwich.

The baroque poet Richard Crashaw writes about Christ's breasts by way of the Virgin Mary, using the words "Paps" and "Teats." In "Luke 11," Crashaw addresses Christ, about his mother, the Virgin Mary, then appears to address the reader about his or her own "teats," and then views Christ as the succoring mother and Mary as the suckling son:

Blessed be the Paps which thou has sucked

Suppose he had been Tabled at thy Teats,
Thy Hunger feels not what he Eats;
He'l have his Teat e're long (a bloody one)
The Mother then must suck the Son (*Steps to the Temple* 17)

That Christ is imagined nourishing his mother is a paradox, since it cannot be understood in a physical way. The blending of the physical with the spiritual, the feminine with the

masculine, and even the roles of mother and infant are paradoxical.⁵⁴ The metaphor of wounds as breasts is especially so, since we wouldn't expect nourishment to flow out of a wound. However, Caroline Walker Bynum points out that in "medieval medical theory breast milk is processed blood"; thus, "the loving mother...feeds her child with her own blood" (132). In the baroque poem, the breast milk and Christ's blood come together to represent the relationship between suffering and blessing. In Catholicism, Christians receive communion, drinking wine they believe to be the blood of Christ, and receiving forgiveness for their sins. Mothers, in a similar way, are seen as martyr figures who sacrifice all for their children; certainly, Hass' poem complicates this stereotype by conveying his mother's inability to even nurture herself, let alone her children. The role of a maternal Christ, though, represents wounds that issue forth blessing.

The trope of healing wounds becomes important to the poem's resolution of family conflict. Hass suggests that post-confessional poetry is not first and foremost concerned with one's own pain. The poem seeks to find a song to compensate for the mother's wounds. Through Crashaw, Hass links Christ's wounds to breasts, domesticating God into a nurturer. Both Crashaw and Hass' poems contain instructions for the mother to receive nourishment from the son. Crashaw writes: "The Mother then must suck the Son" (*Steps to the Temple* 17) whereas Hass states, "Drink and live: this is the son's blood" (*SUW* 18). Hass implies that poetry, rather than compensating for the child, seeks to give the mother life. The metaphor of wounds adds to the discussion of poetry as life-giving. In this conceit, the mother depends upon the son's soothing balm of poetry, whereas the son depends upon the mother's troubled life in order to heal her. Poet and mother thus co-author their song and story.

iv. *Conclusion*

⁵⁴ Caroline Walker Bynum argues that the "sexual inverted images" of a maternal Christ convey "a growing sense of God as loving and accessible" (129).

Williams and Hass in different ways appropriate confessional material. They deal with various emotional wounds, ranging from the traumatic to the trivial, from a mother's alcoholism to a mother's irritating, but innocuous, habits. These poems like many confessional texts take place in homes, and focus on everything from the idiosyncratic speech of mothers to the accidental viewing of her naked body. Both poets, wary for different reasons of the legacy of confessional poetry, seek to balance the personal material in their work with a thinking voice and imagery in the natural world. The still center in each poem is the figure of the mother, and it is her story and her wounds that warrant attention not dramatization. Ultimately, it is the mother's physical body that we see emerge in these poems: her breasts, lips, mouth, voice, song, and even her deep sighs.

CHAPTER 4

**“I AM MADE BY HER, AND UNDONE”: THOM GUNN AND THE
TRANSATLANTIC RESPONSE TO CONFESSIONAL POETRY**

i. *Introduction*

In an interview with Stefania Michelucci, Gunn says, “I like it when someone calls me an Anglo-American poet; that’s what I am, an *Anglo-American poet*. I’m not English, I’m not really an English poet any longer, and I’m not an American poet either. I am somebody between the two” (“Cole Street” 167). Gunn lived in both suburban and rural England before moving to San Francisco in 1954 where he would live until his death in 2004; all three places figure in his work and identity.⁵⁵ The poet, born in Gravesend, Kent, England in 1929, moved to Hampstead with his family in 1938, where he lived until his mother’s suicide when he was fifteen. He then stayed with family friends in Hampstead during the week and spent his weekends and vacations on a farm in Kent with his two maternal, unmarried aunts.⁵⁶ Of Snodland Farm in Kent, Clive Wilmer suggests, “It might have opened a youthful imagination to the timeless and unexpected, to the perennial patterns of human experience and its intermittent chaos” (“Gunn, Shakespeare” 46). Wilmer renames the place “Elizabethan Kent,” not to suggest the “archaic” but the resonance of the Elizabethan architecture, landscape, and literary tradition (46). To give one such example of the presence of the past, Wilmer writes, “Gunn was living in Snodland when David Lean’s film of *Great Expectations* was shot on nearby Romney Marsh. When the crew departed, a gibbet got left on the skyline, an image that haunted him long afterward and fed his imagination. That gibbet need not have been Victorian; it could have belonged to any time but the present” (46). This anecdote speaks to Gunn’s sense of continuity between places and eras; for example, in *The Man with Night Sweats* (1992), the epigram “Barren Leaves” recasts Wordsworth’s oft-quoted definition of poetry within the

⁵⁵ Gunn’s essay “My Suburban Muse” (*Occasions* 153-156) discusses his time in the country and Hampstead Heath. Gunn defines his “literary beginnings” in connection to pastoral poetry as well Keats (*Occasions* 155).

⁵⁶ See Clive Wilmer’s entry in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* for the basic outline of Gunn’s life (“Gunn, Thomson”) and Gunn’s autobiographical essay “My Life Up To Now” (*Occasions* 169-188).

adolescent fantasy of masturbating in the library, towards a Ginsbergian effect:

“Spontaneous overflows of powerful feeling:/ Wet dreams, wet dreams, in libraries congealing” (CPTG 449). The poem suggests Ginsberg’s auditory vision of Blake while he was masturbating, and conveys a sense of the two worlds “congealing” into a new, homogenous mixture. Wet dreams are not typically thought of in connection to mating—hence the title, “Barren Leaves”—but in terms of self-pleasure or the onset of puberty. The poem inverts the notion of wet dreams as wasted seed, and instead celebrates the superfluous. The redundant plurality of “overflows,” the repetition of “wet dreams,” and the multiplicity of “libraries” together mock ideas about literary influence as the dissemination of personality, as essentially a linear chain of command. Rather, the poet offers a model of erotic, ongoing imaginative play that balances masturbatory originality with collaboration.

After reading English at Trinity College, Cambridge, Gunn crossed the Atlantic with his partner Mike Kitay. The poet studied with Yvor Winters at Stanford for a fellowship, spent a year teaching in Texas, then returned to Stanford for two years of graduate work, opting not to pursue a PhD.⁵⁷ Gunn taught at Berkeley on and off for forty-one years, from 1958 to 1999. He returned to England for a year in 1964, which led to a collaborative work with his photographer-brother Ander (*Positives*, 1966) and a long poem on the fear of nuclear war (*Misanthropos*, 1965). The act of returning perhaps laid the groundwork for later reflections of home, seen in “Hampstead: The Horse Chestnut Trees,” “Breaking Ground” (*Jack Straw’s Castle*, 1976), “Talbot Road” (*The Passages of Joy*, 1982), and the poems on his mother’s suicide and character, “The Gas-poker” and “My Mother’s Pride” (*Boss Cupid*, 2000). “Talbot Road” in particular explores the duality of the poet’s adolescent and adult selves, suggestive of his hybrid identity hovering over multiple addresses: a destroyed childhood home near Hampstead Heath and residences on

⁵⁷ See Gunn’s memoir, “On a Drying Hill: Yvor Winters,” for an account of his time at Stanford and of Winters’ personality and aesthetics (*Occasions* 197-217).

Talbot Road and Cole Street in Haight-Ashbury: “A London returned to after twelve years/ On a long passage between two streets/ I met my past self lingering there” (*CPTG* 382). The past, marked by “the prickly heat of adolescent emotion,/ premature staleness and self-contempt,” is something to be forgiven: “I forgave myself for having had a youth” (383). Yet, the pardoning act itself conveys self-blame rather than acquittal. The poet, despite an opportunity of “reconciliation/ to whatever it was I had come from,” (382-383), opts for movement, transience, and instability, rather than a fixed identity: “The mind/ is an impermanent place, isn’t it,/ but it looks to permanence” (384).

The mind also fears permanence, particularly the finality of death and the metaphor of a burial site as one’s final resting place. Gunn himself considered the implications of dying in England rather than America, as if the old self might not simply linger, but actually triumph in that last attempt at self-definition. In an essay on Christopher Isherwood, Gunn reveals his anxiety about place:

He, like I, was an Englishman who lived in California, in love with his new home, and in a state of ambivalence toward his old. I had an irrational terror that on some visit back to England I might fall fatally ill, get *stuck* there, and die without being able to return to America first. It was absurdly romantic, since my health was sturdy—yet it was a real fear, nevertheless, as though I would by dying there get wedged forever inside a purgatory of dissatisfied adolescence. I asked Isherwood once if he ever felt a similar fear. “Oh yes,” he said, “then my mother would have won!” (“Christopher Isherwood” 175-176).

The inclusion of Isherwood’s comment on his mother is important here, as Gunn connects England with his parents, America with various adventures and opportunities to escape their hold: “If England is my parent and San Francisco is my lover, then New York is my own dear old whore, all flash and vitality and history” (“My Life” 178). Certainly, for Gunn, the past was also associated with a series of separations: time away at a boarding school during the Blitz, his parents’ divorce, his mother’s death, and the consequent separation from his brother and father, and his time divided between aunts and friends. One could argue that the loss of his friends during the AIDS crisis in California, documented in *The Man with Night Sweats* (1992), is more palpable in his work than any

trauma, yet I would point out that thematically loss transcends place, setting, and time. After all, in *The Man with Night Sweats*, “Death’s Door” explicitly links his mother’s ghost with that of AIDS victims (CPTG 485-486). Additionally, in *Boss Cupid*, which elegizes Gunn’s mother, the poet Robert Duncan, and a close friend, Charlie, the dead merge in “Postscript: The Panel” to haunt the speaker:

The dead have no sense of tact, no manners, they enter doors without knocking, but I continue to deal with them, as proved by my writing the poem. They pack their bodies into my dreams, they eat my feelings, and shit in my mind. They are not good to me, of no value to me, but I cannot shake them and do not want to. Their story, being part of mine, refuses to reach an end. They present me with new problems, surprise me, contradict me, my dear, my everpresent dead (BC 16-17).

The dead span different countries, cities, and points in the poet’s development. Working with or against this emphasis on connectivity is the anti-social stance of the modern, American tough. *The Sense of Movement* (1957), Gunn’s volume most associated with the American outsider—Hell’s Angels (“On the Move”), the werewolf (“The Allegory of the Wolf Boy”), or the white rock and roll artist who co-opted African-American blues, Elvis Presley (“Elvis Presley”)—marks his entry into American poetry as an outsider, even within the American tropes of anti-heroes, teen angst, difference, and social deviance. Hardly a simple story of Americanization. Yet, *The Sense of Movement* was for Gunn “still a very European book in its subject-matter” (“My Life” 177). He writes, “I was much taken by the American myth of the motorcyclist, then in its infancy, of the wild man part free spirit and part hoodlum, but even that I started to anglicize: when I thought of doing a series of motorcyclist poems I had Marvell’s mower poems in my mind as a model” (“My Life” 177). In the Notes to his *Collected Poems*, he says of “On the Move” (*The Sense of Movement*): “most English people nowadays give ‘toward’ two syllables, whereas Americans, like the Elizabethans, treat it as one. In my early books I was still an English poet, not yet Anglo-American” (CPTG 489). Interesting that Gunn identifies a seemingly American poem as English in its treatment of both subject and meter; the line he refers to, “One moves as well, always toward, toward” (CPTG 40) is

iambic pentameter to an English audience whereas to American ears, due to syllable count and accent, the final foot would shift to spondaic, to a haunting, echoing emphasis. Gunn's comment on the way in which the American pronunciation mirrors the Elizabethan one, in contrast to contemporary English speech, underscores the complexity of imitation and invention as a two-way street. The Notes in a collected volume imply the poet's self-conscious re-reading of his poems with different audiences in mind, and a sense of his own lack of placement within either canon.⁵⁸ Broadly speaking, if *The Sense of Movement* (1957) approached American myth through an English sensibility, then it was the following volume, *My Sad Captains* (1961) that adopted a more Anglo-American perception through the deployment of accentual syllabics. His later volume *Touch* (1967) further developed an Anglo-American prosody through open forms. Regardless, it was the rebel figure in *A Sense of Movement* that inspired one critic, Nicholas de Jongh, writing in *The Guardian*, to call Gunn the "Brando Bard" ("The Changing Face" 9).⁵⁹ Emphasizing the recklessness and sexiness of the English dimension rather than the American, August Kleinzahler refers to the poet as "an Elizabethan in modern dress" ("Introduction" ix).

Most memorably, Glyn Maxwell, himself an English poet living abroad in New York City, claims that Gunn is no longer an English poet in voluntary exile. He characterizes Gunn as "a man of decorous, skillful, metrical verse who had for his own reasons become absorbed into an alien culture that gave him alien subjects (like sex), alien backdrops (like sunshine), and most vexing of all, made his strict forms melt on the page" ("How Late" 10). Maxwell analyzes further, "No longer could he be Our Man Out There like say, Auden in New York or James Fenton in the Far East, because he seemed to have

⁵⁸ Paul Giles argues that Gunn has not been fully integrated into either the American or English literary canon ("Crossing the Water" 209). I would like to add that recently Gunn was excluded from the 2008 *Norton Anthology of American Literature*, edited by Nina Baym.

⁵⁹ In Gunn's *Collected Poems*, "On the Move" no longer retains its epigraph, a reference to the film, *The Wild One* (1953), directed by Laslo Benedek and starring Marlon Brando. In the original volume, *The Sense of Movement* (1957), the epitaph for "On the Move" reads, "Man, you gotta Go" (11). I would speculate that in the collected volume, Gunn widens the scope of the poem; clearly, the poem transcends its epitaph, cultural context, and moment in time, and can be linked to other poems about toughness, existentialism, and defiance.

been Their Man Out There” (“How Late” 10). Although Maxwell’s comment is accurate in general terms, I want to steer clear of the simplistic view that drugs and free verse are as American as impersonality and iambic pentameter are English.⁶⁰ Surely, the time Gunn spent reading American poets for *The Yale Review* (1958-1964), writing critical essays, learning from the poetry of W.C. Williams, Allen Ginsberg, and Marianne Moore, or studying with Yvor Winters is part of the story.

I would agree with Robert Pinsky who explores the complex dualities of the Anglo-American poet, carefully arguing that Gunn’s *Moly* (1971) is not just about the druggy American consciousness trapped in English rhyme and meter: “It has often been noted that *Moly* is a learned book in rhyme and meter about the experiences of LSD, but the dualities go far deeper than that. Oedipal father and son, man and beast, transformed and the same—in a Gunn poem, with each situation, each character, the sympathy or oneness prevails over polarities of judgment or detachment” (“Coda” 287). Indeed, it might be useful to think about Gunn’s inclusiveness; a look at “Terminal,” (*The Man with Night Sweats*, 1992), for example, reveals the inventiveness of breathing life into a form. Six heroic couplets develop and extend just one sentence. The line integrity and teasing syntax create a feeling of continuity in the poem, as a younger man supports his older, sick friend; this collaboration sheds light on the boy of American modernism shouldering the terminally-ill form of heroic couplets “down the long stairs” (*CPTG* 469), creating vertical movement on the page through the complex sentence. Bearing upon Ezra Pound’s *Pisan Cantos* (1948) and its explicit aim to disrupt iambic pentameter—“To break the pentameter/ that was the first heave” (LXXI, *Cantos* 538)—is Gunn’s distinct but related argument for ongoing exchange between old and new. In an oft-quoted interview, Gunn deepened his sense of himself as an Anglo-American poet: “My life consists on continuities—between America and England, between free verse and metre” (“My Life”

⁶⁰ Gunn qualifies the critical assumption that English and American poetics are defined merely by poetic form (“An Anglo-American” 218).

183), acknowledging the freedom and possibilities of living between the two worlds of verse rather than the explicit paradox.⁶¹

As cited earlier, Gunn states, “A few years ago I came across a reference to myself as an Anglo-American poet and I thought: ‘Yes, that’s what I am. I’m an Anglo-American poet’” (“An Anglo-American” 218). It is likely that the reference is to Dan Jacobson’s September 18, 1980 article in the *London Review of Books*, which briefly names Gunn as a participant in the Lawrence Festival, cataloguing him as “the Anglo-American poet” (“Lawrence Festival” 21).⁶² The term was in circulation earlier; for example, the 1974 Norton *Anthology of English Literature* labels Gunn “a mid-Atlantic or Anglo-American poet” (“Thom Gunn” 2429).⁶³ Gunn’s arrival at this identity is less an arrival than a constant flux between two traditions, from larger questions about identity and transatlantic crossings to aesthetic questions about form, poetics, and subject matter, to the smaller issues of spelling, place-names, the occasions of poems, and the poetic source of childhood memory and belonging. Gunn is not unique in this; many poets struggle towards and against their dual identities—for some, in light of bilingualism, sexuality, immigration, diaspora, or post-colonialism. For example, the Irish poet writing in English, Seamus Heaney has struggled to remind audiences of his Irish history, subject matter, and identity. His pamphlet *An Open Letter* (1983) addresses his inclusion in *The Penguin Book of Contemporary British Poetry* (1982), to remind audiences “My passport’s green” (*Open Letter* 9), reflecting on post-colonialism, Irish literature, and national identity. When

⁶¹ In a more humorous example, Gunn’s contributor note for *The Three Penny Review* in the Spring 1999 issue reads: “Thom Gunn, who claims to be a lipstick lesbian, is actually an Anglo-American poet who has lived in San Francisco since the late 1950s” (2). The acknowledged stereotype of the butch lesbian or dyke becomes more glamorous in Gunn’s version; similarly, the multi-faceted nature of the poet’s identity, in terms of his sexuality, national origin, and transatlantic passage, suggests role-playing, shape-changing, and transformation.

⁶² In the interview, when Gunn says that he “came across a reference” to himself, it becomes obvious that he was not the main subject of the article, but rather a name that popped up. Additionally, Gunn mentions Lawrence in the same speech segment of the interview, suggesting a link between himself and another innovative English poet responding to American modernism (“An Anglo-American” 218).

⁶³ Other critics have invoked the term “Anglo-American poetics” in the late 1960s. For example, Laurence Lieberman identifies Gunn as “the only recent English poet besides Charles Tomlinson who has struggled with the problem of evolving an Anglo-American poetics” (“New Books” 139).

compared with Heaney, even superficially, Gunn adopting the identity of an Anglo-American is seen as a choice, a particular response to the givens of his existence. Gunn's interest in posture and pose, which will be discussed in the chapter, certainly applies to his self-fashioning as an Anglo-American poet, which suggests risk and movement.

Significantly, Joshua Weiner conceives of Gunn as living not between worlds, but at the barriers between them: the poet's "imperative" is "to stay *at* them [the barriers], where they are set up, so as to leap past them to another place" ("Introduction" 2). Weiner, in a discussion of Gunn's "At the Barriers," illuminates how the police-enforced barrier around the gay fair at Dore Alley, "an open place once you have found the way" (*CPTG* 400), is paradoxically inviting to heterosexuals and homosexuals alike. Weiner suggests that this "carnival inversion" of social order ("Introduction" 1) speaks to the multitudinous binaries in the poet's oeuvre and the crossing of barriers between "open and closed form; inclusiveness of imagination and exclusiveness of discerning judgment; the life of instinct and the life of intellect; attraction to embodiments of physical power and the duplicity of meaningful play within expressions of power; originality developing from derivation" ("Introduction" 2). I would like to extend this conversation about "carnival inversion" and "meaningful play" in the context of Gunn's response to American confessional poetry. Critics are quick to cite Gunn's critical prose and its frequent dismissals of confessional poets, concluding that Gunn is more Elizabethan than American. Even in a short biographical entry on Gunn, Clive Wilmer asserts, "He detested the confessional mode, preferring an almost anonymous tone like that of the Elizabethans he loved" ("Gunn, Thomson"). The exaggeration in Wilmer's entry insists on binaries that do justice to neither camp; it wildly ignores the intimacy in Gunn's approach to his material as well as the human or universal facets of autobiographical writing.

In the most extensive study of Gunn's relationship to confessional poetry, David Fulton portrays Gunn as a kind of reticent Englishman in contrast to the existentialist, edgy American poets confessing private experiences. Fulton's argument is based in part on

stereotypes about American and English culture as well as poetry; he writes, “American culture exhibits a greater hospitality to the exaggerated, the extreme, the super- or sub-rational” (“Too Much Birthday” 41). He completely ignores Gunn’s noted interest in existentialism, in a shaky argument juxtaposing American celebration and English rejection of Camus and Sartre (41-42).⁶⁴ Part of Fulton’s argument depends on generalizations about place; he finds that America’s diverse landscapes and people have encouraged American poets to write slapdash, wide-ranging poems, “a ragbag in which everything that interests the poet can be stuffed” (43). In contrast, Fulton interprets the English poet as coming from “a small, dingy, overcrowded island of cool, damp seasons and finite horizons” which “gives little encouragement to emotional expansiveness” (43). Even if these generalizations were true, Fulton doesn’t even consider that Gunn spent most of his poetic career in the expansive, more intimate America. To confront Fulton’s generalizations of stoic English verse, climate, and voice, one need only think of Wordsworth and Romanticism overall; there are many similarities between English Romanticism and American confessional poetry when one considers the construction of the lyric self, focus on childhood, and moments of “emotional expansiveness.” Fulton goes on to limit confessional verse to exhibitionism, easily evidencing why Gunn would prefer the poetry of impersonality and restraint (43-44). What Fulton leaves out is the association between confessional verse and sexuality: Gunn’s interest in Ginsberg as a confessional poet, the fact that it was easier to come out in America than in England, and his exchange with aspects of confessional poetry such as openness about sex and sexuality. For instance, one might consider Gunn’s “The Miracle” about a hand-job in a McDonald’s restroom, and the “snail-track” of semen on “the toe of my boot” (*CPTG* 357). Keith Tuma points out: “One surely *does*...hear the influence of some of his American contemporaries in a more conversational and relaxed idiom. There is, for example, the use of the word ‘cock,’

⁶⁴ Gunn famously connects his theory of “pose” with the work of Sartre (“Cambridge in the Fifties” 162). For illuminating work on existentialism in Gunn’s poetry, see John Miller (“The Stipulative Imagination”) and Alfred Corn (“Existentialism and Homosexuality”).

which would be unimaginable without the example of poets such as Allen Ginsberg and Robert Duncan” (“Thom Gunn” 100). Although not the focus of this dissertation, a study on the relationship between sexual terms (cock, balls, cum, dick, suck, fuck, cunt, bush, tits, etc.) and the poetry of defiance would demonstrate the ways in which personal writing is not trivial, limiting, or narcissistic, but connected to social, political, ethical, and aesthetic questions, not to mention issues of gender or sexuality. As we have seen in earlier chapters, intimate material—Robert Hass’ vision of his mother’s nipples prior to motherhood (*SUW* 15) and Ginsberg’s identification with his mother’s genitalia, “a long black beard around the vagina” (IV, *CPAG* 234)—is often used to bring other people into focus, from the mentally ill, alcoholics, and conflicted Catholics to Jewish immigrants, victims of McCarthyism, and gay communities. Both Hass and Ginsberg raise questions about the vulnerability and agency of the mentally ill or the addict and consider the theme of displacement, whether through psychology or Jewish-American history; Ginsberg in particular puts sex in the political, historical, and literary context of the Cold War whereas Hass juxtaposes Richard Crashaw’s erotic religious poetry with his own fascination with the maternal body. Throughout his work, Gunn’s physical, sensual diction and his identification with figures of revolt and characters in extremis suggest the confessional poet’s use of taboo subjects, personae, and social context. This takes him beyond the bounds of “Englishness” as defined by critics like Fulton.

August Kleinzahler intuits that Gunn “becomes more adventurous as he grows older and is not afraid to fall on his ass trying out something different. Sometimes the poems are so emotionally bald and direct that they are deeply disturbing. They say what they have to say very *plainly*” (“Thom Gunn” 81-82). I agree with Kleinzahler, especially in light of the two poems I wish to discuss, “The Gas-poker” and “My Mother’s Pride,” which handle traumatic experience, childhood wounds, and the mother-son relationship. However, I disagree with Kleinzahler on the issue of confessional poetry: he maintains that Gunn differs from confessional poets, because plain speech differs from colloquial

and conversational speech; the anonymous “I” differs from the autobiographical “I” (79). Yet, Lowell also affected conversational speech; his poems were not conversational, but “heightened conversation” elevated to lyric (“A Conversation” 284). Although he uses a different tool box of formal techniques, Gunn approximates human experience and colloquial speech patterns. Certainly, in places, Gunn’s colloquial differs from a native American’s, yet it also differs from an English poet, even an exiled English poet as Glyn Maxwell argues.⁶⁵ In *Boss Cupid*, and particularly in the poems about his mother, I see Gunn adopting the pose of a confessional poet: he interrogates confessional subject matter, voicing, altering, or making strange traumatic experience through rhyme and meter. In *Boss Cupid*, Gunn writes about a serial killer and necrophiliac Jeffrey Dahmer (“Troubadour”), child abuse (“A Los Angeles Childhood”), rape (“Arethusa Raped”), childhood trauma (“A Home”), online sex services (“The Search”), and his mother’s suicide (“The Gas-poker”). Reading “My Mother’s Pride” and “The Gas-poker” in the context of what we might call Gunn’s American poetry sheds light not only on the poet’s oeuvre, but also on the confessional poets I have been reading. Although Gunn has been thought of as an anti-confessional poet, and this chapter could be considered an anti-creed to the whole dissertation, I wish to examine what traditions Gunn writes into while writing against. His final volume especially sits at the barriers between autobiography and anonymity. The poems about his mother, a subject he avoided for so long, introduce new questions about Gunn’s iconography, underscoring the difficulty of placing him within any single literary movement, aesthetic, or culture.

ii. *On Gunn's "My Mother's Pride"*

⁶⁵ I agree with Kleinzahler’s astute point, “Gunn does not sound especially ‘plain’ to the American reader. The diction is plain, the argument and exposition are clear, trim, and direct, but the tone is oddly formal to most American readers. Gunn’s poems certainly don’t sound the way Americans speak” (78-79). However, I do not come to the same conclusions as Kleinzahler, who argues that Gunn’s poetic voice is impersonal.

Thom Gunn's poetry has been seen as primarily love poetry, and Gunn has been defined as a love poet. Robert Pinsky writes, "Few poets have attended so carefully to the sensations of fucking, and few have so consistently put that experience into a social context" ("Coda: Thom Gunn" 289). The fourth part of Gunn's *The Man with Night Sweats* (1992) in particular contextualizes sex historically, as it elegizes victims of the 1980's AIDS epidemic, Gunn's friends and lovers in the San Francisco gay community. Hugh Haughton analyzes the "various erotic and companionable embraces" in *The Man with Night Sweats*, including even "a self-embrace" in which the speaker of the title poem hugs himself ("An Unlimited Embrace" 13).⁶⁶ Haughton also notes that Gunn's work "has always been marked by a strange combination of intimacy and detachment" (12). We see in Gunn's work an attraction to both tenderness and toughness, thematically and tonally.⁶⁷ In an interview, Ted Hughes disagrees with critics who misunderstand Gunn as a poet of violence: "If one were to answer that exam question: Who are the poets of violence? you wouldn't get very far if you began with Thom Gunn...and not merely because his subject is far more surely gentleness" ("Ted Hughes" 7). Hughes and Gunn had been grouped together as English poets drawn to violence; and published by Faber and Faber in a joint volume, *Selected Poems by Thom Gunn and Ted Hughes* (1962). In an early essay, "The Rock" (1963), Hughes states that he is excited by the "war between vitality and death" (126). I would argue that both Hughes and Gunn are preoccupied with vitality rather than violence. Gunn celebrates the vitality of masculine toughs, writing in "Lines for a Book" in *The Sense of Movement* (1957), "I think of all the toughs through history/ And thank heaven they lived, continually" (56). These toughs include Elvis Presley ("Elvis Presley"),

⁶⁶ In two interviews, Gunn notes his gratitude for Haughton's favorable review. Gunn says Haughton "traced the imagery of embracing and touching and holding hands—and even embracing oneself. It was extraordinary; it was all there" ("The Art of Poetry" 156). In another interview, Gunn says that Haughton discovered *The Man with the Night Sweats* "had this lasting image of the embrace, and I hadn't even been aware of it" ("Thom Gunn" 14).

⁶⁷ In a poem in *Boss Cupid*, Gunn writes: "I seek a potent mix/ of toughness and tenderness in men./ The paradigm/ being the weeping wrestler" ("Letters from Manhattan" 70).

the motorcyclist (“On the Move” and “The Unsettled Motorcyclist’s Vision of His Death”), the sadomasochist (“The Beaters”), the leather-jacketed boy (“Black Jackets”), the gym-owner (“To the Dead Owner of a Gym”), the sole-survivor of nuclear war (“The Last Man” in *Misanthropos*), the tattoo artist (“Blackie, the Electric Rembrandt”), the werewolf as boy (“The Allegory of the Wolf Boy”), and the hustler (“Market at Turk”).

As we see in Gunn’s oeuvre of poems about local characters, such as a homeless woman (“Old Meg”), or the social scene (“Another All-Night Party”), he is more attracted to the independence of the city than the insulation of the family. He says, “I’ve always been interested in the life of the street. I suppose it’s always seemed to me like a kind of recklessness, a freedom after the confinement of the home or the family” (“Art of Poetry” 186). Gunn doesn’t write much about his family, which sets him somewhat apart in a time when poets wrote compulsively about their families and early childhood experience. As we have seen in the work of Berryman, Lowell, and Ginsberg, the family is an abiding concern; the same is true for Sylvia Plath, Adrienne Rich, or Anne Sexton. Gunn is perhaps closest to Ginsberg in the treatment of intimate bonds; both draw on the subjects of friendship, eroticism, the boy gang, counter-culture, and love.

Gunn writes about families from an outsider’s point of view; for example, “Three” quite movingly depicts a naked trio of mother, father, and son on the beach. There is a sense of longing in the narrator’s depiction of the tanned boy “rapt in endless play” (*CPTG* 195) who doesn’t have to “learn...nakedness” the way his parents do (196). A later poem, “Geysers” harkens back to this familial nudity, by way of the communal waters: hot springs, geysers, cool pools, and a bath house in Sonoma County, California. The bathers “get up naked as we intend to stay” (*CPTG* 240), enjoy the waters, and share a joint as the barriers between people disappear: “I am part of all there is no other” (*CPTG* 244). The poem envisions the stream as maternal: “bobbing in the womb, all round me Mother” (*CPTG* 244). Gunn writes about his experience at the Geysers as “a great communal embrace” (“My Life” 185):

Everyone walked around naked, swimming in the cool stream by day and at night staying in the hot baths until early in the morning. Heterosexual and homosexual orgies sometimes overlapped: there was an attitude of benevolence and understanding on all sides that could be extended, I thought, into the rest of the world... There is no reason why that hedonistic and communal love of the Geysers could not be extended into the working life of the towns ("My Life" 185-186).

It is important to note that the community is not exclusive—to homosexuals, attractive young men, or fraternal bonds—but inclusive. Like Ginsberg, Gunn widens the scope of the family to include intimate strangers, friends, passersby, friends of friends, and lovers. In "The Missing," Gunn writes about losing friends to AIDS, recalling the strength of his community: "The warmth investing me/ Led outwards through mind, limb, feeling, and more/ In an involved increasing family" (*CPTG* 483).

Tom Sleight writes poignantly about Gunn's domesticity in his lifestyle and poetry, working against all of the criticism that sees only the independence, aggression, and free love in Gunn. Sleight comments on Gunn's biography, "I think it's instructive that his home life also reflected his communitarian spirit; he lived in a group house, with housemates, in which each in turn cooked dinner on assigned nights of the week. It was a remarkably stable arrangement and lasted from 1971, when Gunn bought the house...until his death in 2004 ("Thom Gunn's" 245). Sleight points out that Gunn lived with his housemates for thirty-three years, including his long-term partner Mike Kitay, but also had many lovers and sexual partners (245). He concludes that sexual freedom is not "necessarily incompatible with personal loyalty, homebodiness, and domestic stability" (245). Turning to Gunn's lines from "The Hug," addressed to Kitay—"I only knew/ The stay of your secure firm dry embrace"—Sleight observes that "the dryness of the embrace marks the transition from sexual to domestic love, from the physical joy of sex to the physical joy of being held by someone with whom a life has been shared" (247). Even while I write during the week in which the ban on gay marriage has just been lifted in California, there are those who would say that homosexuality and domestic stability are

incompatible. Yet, in Gunn's life and poetry, there is a constant turning back to the familial.⁶⁸

Gunn at times makes comments on the mother-child relationship by way of the erotic. In a love poem, "Touch," he writes,

You turn and
hold me tightly, do
you know who
I am or am I
your mother or
the nearest human being to
hold on to... (CPTG 169).

Gunn presents an interesting case of a poet who speaks to some of the concerns of confessional poetry, while not seeming to. This poem could be about mothers and sons. The concluding image of "Touch" suggests the womb: "dark/ enclosing cocoon round/ ourselves alone, dark/ wide realm where we/ walk with everyone" (CPTG 169). Indeed, Gunn wishes to create a feeling of inclusion—everyone is invited, everyone is walking together—within a very intimate, closed world of two people. Although Gunn broaches the subject of family indirectly, we recall that Berryman uses the mask of Henry whereas Lowell mediates his family history by way of an analyst, speculation, and secondary sources such as diaries, photographs, letters, or oral history. Even so, Gunn is more indirect when it comes to the stories of his parents. He is no Henry/Berryman spitting upon a parent's grave.

In addition to skirting one of the dominant themes of confessional poetry, the subject of one's own parents, Gunn has come out strongly against Lowell, Sexton, and confessional poetry generally. Gunn critiques confessional poetry as self-dramatization and bemoans the "veritable glut of poetry about family members" in the fifties and sixties

⁶⁸Colin Gillis argues that in Gunn's *The Man with Night Sweats*, "A form of familial love...grows out of, but does not displace or occlude, promiscuous sexuality" ("Rethinking Sexuality" 181). He discusses Gunn's poem "Blank," which tells the story of an old lover who adopted a child "without a friend or wife" (CPTG 487). Gillis claims: "The risk of single parenthood, compounded by the unpredictable outcome of adoption, is continuous with the risk taken by the young man during past chance sexual encounters" ("Rethinking Sexuality" 179).

("A Record" 111). In particular he sees Lowell as dramatizing his autobiography into a stylized poetry of "hair-raising exploits" and "flamboyance" ("Out of the Box" 84). Gunn sees a connection between confessional poetry and self-dramatization. Gunn's life story might have provided more than adequate subject matter for the confessional poems he chose not to write: when Gunn was fifteen, his mother committed suicide. Though this would have been grist and mill to the work of a Lowell, Berryman, Plath, or Sexton, Gunn does not write about this event until his last book, *Boss Cupid* (2000), perhaps due to his publically avowed dismissal of confessionalism. In avoiding the subject of his mother for so long, Gunn separates himself from the "glut" of confessional poetry about the broken family. The mother figure appears as an archetype in earlier volumes, in poems "Jesus and His Mother," "Three," "Rites of Passage," "The Geysers" and in "Three Songs," although the archetypal mother differs in important ways, in tone, valence, and depth, from the autobiographical mother in the last volume.⁶⁹

In what I see as a failed attempt to elegize his mother, Gunn introduces his mother into a poem elegizing AIDS victims, "Death's Door." In the poem, the mother joins the "armies" of the dead along with four AIDS victims, to watch the living who appear on a TV set. As time passes, the dead lose interest in the living and in each other. When the dead see "Both Minos circling and my mother" they don't "know them/ Nor do they recognize each other" (486). The poet laments, "My mother archaic now as Minos,/ she who died forty years ago"(485). Although the autobiographical phrase "my mother" appears twice in "Death's Door," the mother, when joined with Minos, is as "archaic" as myth and archetype. The emphasis on the passage of time anticipates the later elegy for his mother, "The Gas-poker," with its opening "Forty-eight years ago/ —can it be forty-eight/ Since then?" (BC 10). By contrast, the elegy offers a more intimate narrative, although the

⁶⁹ In "Breaking Ground" in *Jack Straw's Castle* (1976), Gunn writes about his aunt, with whom he lived after his mother's death. In the second section of this poem, he imagines her death as a "dispersal" of her spirit into the earth and others (CPTG 305). Because his aunt was a maternal figure, the poem evokes the mother as well.

word “mother,” is not used. Perhaps by avoiding the term, which in his poetry overall, evokes myth, Gunn gives more force to the pronoun “she.” His mother is a human being, not just a mother; in fact, the poem deconstructs authoritative, fundamental paternal archetypes of the mother as “she” and the father as “he” until all that remains are the lost boys: “Elder and younger brother” who “Knew all there was to know” (*BC* 10). There is sorrow in the astringent absence of the word “mother,” her name, or naming devices, as if through the repetition of the pronoun “she,” the poem points a finger at the self-murderer: “she did it” and she did it to me, to us, and to herself. The title itself, “The Gas-poker” while describing her weapon of choice, also indicates the poem’s poking finger and prying eye. Finally, the word “mother” is a cry or call as well as a name, one the speaker by silencing, actually amplifies. Gunn commented on his earlier reticence to write about his mother: “It took me years to write about my father (and maybe I can one day write about my mother—if Duncan has not already written the ultimate mother-poem with his ‘My Mother Would be a Falconress’) (“My Life Up” 186). It was not until *Boss Cupid*, at the very end of his oeuvre, that he could engage with his mother—and the “mother-poem.”

Gunn not only admires Duncan’s mother poem, but speaks of Duncan as a major influence; however, Gunn complicates the idea of influence as an anxiety-filled, Bloomian struggle by commenting on how he in turn influenced Duncan (“Homosexuality in Robert” 129). For example, when Gunn mentions Duncan’s *Poems from the Margins of Thom Gunn’s “Moly”* (1972), which draws from his volume, *Moly* (1971), he suggests that poets can influence each other simultaneously in different ways, and as equals not rivals. Writing of Duncan’s influences, he said, “Duncan’s influences are not of the *fathers* but rather of *allies*” (“Homosexuality in Robert” 131), and the same is true of Gunn. Brian Teare has written brilliantly about Gunn’s “reciprocal and mutually influencing poetic relationship with Duncan” that is “based on desire, elective identification, and collaboration rather than on anxiety, dis-identification, and apprenticeship,” and, as such, “acts as a gay alternative to heterosexual models of imitation and ‘influence’” (“Our

Dionysian” 185). My focus is different than Teare’s, as I am examining partnerships between mothers and poet-sons, but I wish to highlight his perceptive critique of Bloom’s model and his alternative model of alliance and collaboration. I see as an oversight Teare’s enthusiastic agreement with critic Catherine R. Stimpson, who, writing before the publication of *Boss Cupid*, says that Gunn writes about women stereotypically (64n, 312). Clearly, Gunn’s late poems, “The Gas-Poker” and “My Mother’s Pride,” revise Stimpson’s judgment, proving Gunn’s fluency in writing the feminine, in capturing his mother’s specific voice as well as her larger story.

Despite Gunn’s preference for impersonal poetry over confessional poetry,⁷⁰ Gunn’s “My Mother’s Pride” in *Boss Cupid* blurs the boundaries between the two aesthetics. As the first mother-poem in the book, after which “The Gas-poker” directly follows, “My Mother’s Pride” will be discussed in depth first. Certainly, the main clue that “The Gas-poker” is about the speaker’s mother comes from its placement after “My Mother’s Pride.” This first mother-poem in the volume’s diptych reveals the ways in which both self-distancing and intimacy can be a stance. There is the pose of coolness seen in “Elvis Presley,” “Whether he poses or is real, no cat/ Bothers to say: the pose held is a stance” (*CPTG* 57); perhaps, more tragic, is the illusion of sexual freedom, open sexuality, and self-knowledge in “Carnal Knowledge”: “Even in bed I pose” (*CPTG* 15). The poem about his mother might be thought of as a “docudrama,” the genre in film used to describe representations or reenactments of history; examples include *Roots* (1977), *Brian’s Song* (1971), or *Touching the Void* (2003). Thinking about docudrama in relation to Gunn, I would emphasize glamour, pose, and the fiction writer’s sense of “characters,” which foreground his autobiographical writing. “My Mother’s Pride” is at once a slice of

⁷⁰ Gunn argues that Thomas Hardy’s poetry is impersonal, because the speaker presents himself as a “sample human being” whose losses are “part of other people’s losses” (“Hardy and the Ballads” 94). Gunn contrasts Hardy’s impersonal poetics with confessional poetry, which he sees as “the poetry of personality” (94).

life, a fragment of family history and a character sketch out of a novel.⁷¹ Similar to the way in which confessional poets gleaned art out of their personal lives, Gunn saw his mother with a novelist's eye, as he saw King David, Bathsheba, a serial killer Jeffrey Dahmer, and Rimbaud in *Boss Cupid*.

In an earlier essay, Gunn writes briefly about his mother in terms relevant to the poem "My Mother's Pride": "When I was about four I got lost in Kensington Gardens; a policeman asked me what my mother was like: I described her as 'a proud woman'" ("My Life Up" 170). The title "My Mother's Pride," one of only two poems Gunn writes about his mother, has several implications. He portrays her as self-dramatizing and proud, especially of her wit, which Gunn showcases and questions. Further, he becomes his mother's pride and joy by remembering and recording the mother's sayings. The poem itself, not only the poet, can be read as the mother's pride and joy, as the poem is a compilation of the mother's words, a source of pride; there are three quotations from the mother, one in each stanza. Through the use of quotations, "My Mother's Pride" explores the issues of collaborating with and stealing from one's mother in the poetic process. Rather than view language as a gift the mother bestows on her child, Gunn's poem represents language as stolen goods. Confessional poetry in particular is seen as stolen goods, because of the way critics have viewed confessional poets as exploiting their romantic and familial relationships to garner material for their poetry. Gunn endorses Bishop's disapproval of Lowell's use of his second wife Elizabeth Hardwick's letters in his poetry.⁷² Gunn critiques Lowell for going further than "just imposing meaning on

⁷¹ Joshua Weiner's criticism has influenced my thinking about character here. He writes about Gunn's adolescent wish to be a novelist, and points out the many poems which "draw from historic, mythic, and novelistic material" and "are grounded in narrative situation, make use of narrative frames, and contain fictive characters" ("From Ladd's Hill" 106). Weiner illuminates the ways in which Gunn sought to "capture human character with the objective analysis of the novel...without giving up the formal virtues of lyric intensity" (106).

⁷²In March of 1972, Elizabeth Bishop confronted Lowell about altering Hardwick's letters and publishing them in his *The Dolphin* (1973): "There is a 'mixture of fact & fiction,' & you have *changed* her letters. That is 'infinite mischief,' I think...One can use one's life as material—one does, anyway—but these letters—aren't you violating a trust? If you were given permission—IF you hadn't changed them...But *art just isn't worth that much*" (*Words* 708). Here Bishop refers to Lowell's poems that used Hardwick's words:

things” to “stealing and distorting human utterances so as to dramatize them for his own ends” (“Out of the Box” 83). Gunn is conscious of stealing his mother’s phrases, depicting himself as a child-thief in the poem. Yet, it’s not clear who is being more “self-dramatizing,” the exploitative child or the theatrical mother.

The poem opens with the tension between his mother’s soliloquies and Gunn’s presence as overhearer and poet:

She dramatized herself
Without thought of the dangers.
But “Never pay attention,” she said,
“To the opinions of strangers.”

And when I stole from a counter,
“You wouldn’t accept a present
From a tradesman.” But I think I might have:
I had the greed of a peasant.

She was proud of her ruthless wit
And the smallest ears in London.
“Only conceited children are shy.”
I am made by her, and undone (BC 9).

Gunn implies that his mother not only has a heightened sense of her own importance, but a deaf ear to the world around her. She implies that the opinions of others are irrelevant. She encourages a strong sense of self and a disregard for others, and yet, she dramatizes herself with an eye to her effect on an audience. It is the mother’s self-dramatization that the poem suggests is dangerous, and not stealing, which is seen as innocuous and childish. In contrast to the child’s act of stealing, the mother’s self-dramatization could be seen as stealing the show or stealing someone else’s thunder. The mother doesn’t speak to be “heard” but to be “overheard,” to borrow John Stuart Mill’s terms (348). Mill defines poetry as essentially a “feeling, confessing itself to itself in moments of solitude” (348), and highlights the poet’s “utter unconsciousness of a listener” (348). Similarly, the mother

“The Farther Shore 1: From My Wife,” “The Farther Shore 2: Old Snapshot and Carpaccio,” “Flight to New York 1: Fox Fur,” and “Flight to New York 2: The Messiah” (*Words* 708).

speaks primarily to herself, alienating the child, yet inviting the future poet to take note of her.

Gunn as poet in turn makes a performance out of the mother's performance, stealing her thunder. He writes about his poetic process as stealing, as "a reaching out" from which "I bring back loot" ("Writing a Poem" 152). He develops T.S. Eliot's notion of poets who steal: "Immature poets imitate; mature poets steal" ("Philip Massinger" 182). By borrowing her words, the poet asserts his control over the material, and finds evidence in his mother's words to evoke the dangers of her pride. Gunn attributes to her pride a plurality of dangers, including ones his mother never thought of. Perhaps these dangers include the effect of disillusionment that follows from self-dramatization. That the mother has the "smallest ears" points to the extent of her disillusionment; her experiences become overly important to her. She is so self-important that she doesn't listen to others, and, by excluding others, she becomes more self-involved. Ultimately, the self-dramatizing person becomes alienated from herself, because she doesn't know when or how to stop performing. The mother with small ears symbolizes deafness not only to the voices of others, but her voice.

The mother's pride, ironically, is what separates the mother from her young. In the second stanza, the mother speaks beyond the child, as if speaking to amuse herself. Rather than tell him not to steal or ask him why he stole, she provides him with a rationale that is incomprehensible to him. Her argument is that you shouldn't take from someone who, like a tradesman, is less advantaged, someone who makes his or her living from selling the goods you want. The rationale the mother appeals to is beyond a child's understanding. A child might not understand the difference between hunger and desire; he might think he needs a piece of candy from the counter, because he wants it. He doesn't realize that the shop owner needs to sell candy to make a living. The poem highlights the difference between the child in the poem and the narrator. Although the child doesn't comprehend her rebuke, "You wouldn't accept a present/ From a tradesman," the narrator introduces

combative humor: “But I think I might have:/ I had the greed of a peasant” (BC 9). The comment underscores the absurdity of motherly instruction, of morality, in the light of bottomless, all-consuming desire. The hesitation seen in the questioning, child-like “But...” and qualifiers “think” and “might” quickly shifts into a confident, adult-like ownership of one’s desire. There is a hint of bragging in the extremity of his greed: so intense as to feel like a beggar’s need. The poet’s self-awareness and self-mockery allow him to perceive his greed whereas his mother is too proud to see her pride (both her son and her arrogance).

Throughout the poem, Gunn positions himself as the one supposedly in the wrong, chided by his mother, but he also reveals his mother’s vulnerability. His second offense in the poem is less heinous than stealing: shyness, a trait that his mother associates with being conceited. The conceited person is “full of notions” and has “an overweening opinion of one’s self” whereas the proud person is not necessarily “haughty” and “overbearing” but could have “self-respect of a healthy kind” (*OED*). Clearly, Gunn sees his mother as having the pride more closely linked with the seven deadly sins than with positive self-esteem. The poem reveals that it is not the child who is conceited, but the mother who generalizes that all shy children are conceited. “My Mother’s Pride” also plays with the word “conceited” to bring out another meaning, that of “conceit,” which means “that which is conceived in the mind, a notion, an idea” (*OED*). The term also means an extended metaphor in a poem; Gunn’s “Death’s Door” uses the conceit of TV, in which life is a TV show the dead watch, lose interest in. The shy child is not conceited, but has a conceit; he’s a poet. He *is* full of notions.

Gunn implies that even if he were to speak, his mother would not have listened. A woman with small ears and a lot to say in a small poem represents her failure to listen. Yet, the poem paradoxically celebrates the bravado of mother, poem, and self. The mother’s “ruthless wit” (BC 9) links her to a love of language much broader than her own voice. The line emphasizes that “she was proud of” her wit, which might suggest that she

was proud of her son's wit as well (*BC* 9). It's worth considering that Gunn's poetry has been described as displaying "wit of the severest kind" (Fraser 363). The poem may be asking whether the mother would be proud of her son's poetic wit. It's as if Gunn is retrospectively asking his mother not to simply listen to his own wit, but to him as a wit.

Gunn contrasts his wit with his mother's, and part of the wit in this particular poem, is the understated way in which Gunn evaluates his mother while seeming to give her center stage by incorporating three of her sayings. By quoting her pretentious advice, Gunn suggests that the mother fancies herself morally superior and witty. From the second line, we learn that Gunn finds his mother's self-dramatization dangerous. From the second stanza, we discover the tension between mother and son, where the mother finds she doesn't know her son: "But I think I might have:/ I had the greed of a peasant" (*BC* 9). In the third stanza, we discover that she doesn't listen to others and, perhaps, as a consequence, she is not necessarily witty, but "proud of her ruthless wit" (*BC* 9).

The poem shifts in the final line to an "I" statement that counters the mother's insistence on her personality throughout the poem. It also more immediately responds to the mother's accusation of her son as shy: "Only conceited children are shy" (*BC* 9). The poem, in a broader way, rejects what critics have seen as Gunn's English aesthetic. The last line, "I am made by her, and undone" (*BC* 9), transforms the poem from a collection of his mother's sayings to an existential statement that is personal and deeply unsettling. The word "undone" means "brought to decay or ruin," and also signifies the speaker's life becoming "unfastened, detached" (*OED*). The related term "undoing" denotes "being brought to nought" (*OED*). Read in connection with the volume's next poem, "The Gas-poker," one could determine that the mother's self-destruction brings her children to "nought"; her suicide destroys them, reducing them to nothing. The word "undone" evokes T.S. Eliot's "The Waste Land" (1922): "A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many,/ I had not thought death had undone so many" (I, lines 62-63, *Waste Land* 7), creating a sense that ruination exceeds one's ability to measure it. Since Gunn locates his

mother and himself in London (she “had the smallest ears in London”), the poem links the city with Eliot’s apocalyptic vision and allusions to Dante’s Hell. The last line strikes the reader as at odds with the rest of the poem and most of Gunn’s work; it’s as if he adopted the guise of a confessional poet for one line. Perhaps this sense fits in with Gunn’s theory of poses, in which he chooses to project a persona. Gunn writes about the early “Revelation” in France where he discovers his “theory of pose”: “everyone plays a part, whether he knows it or not, so he might as well deliberately design a part, or a series of parts, for himself” (“Cambridge in the Fifties” 162). In retrospect he thought, “viewing myself as an actor trying to play a part provided rich material for poetry” (162). Gunn’s theory of pose sheds light on the drastic change in tone at the end of “My Mother’s Pride,” where he poses as a kind of mix of a confessional poet and his mother, both of whom are self-dramatizing.

Yet, for all the emphasis on what the mother makes of herself or of what Gunn makes of her and of himself, the poem ends with a balance of making and unmaking. The poem confirms and denies the mother’s role as the poet’s creator. If the poet is not self-made, as implied in earlier existentialist poems like “The Unsettled Motorcyclist’s Vision of His Death,” does he exercise authority by choosing how to formulate this self-abnegation in a poem? If the poet is made by the mother, what does she offer him: language, his life, her sayings? Or does she make him by undoing him, by taking her life and gifting him his deepest pain? Paul Giles writes about the interplay of creation and destruction in Gunn’s work: “One of the structural patterns running through Gunn’s poetry is this aesthetic of creative destruction, whereby formal scenarios—personal identity, material regularity, literary tradition—are reflexively dismantled and renegotiated” (“Crossing the Water” 195). He points to Gunn’s “Words” from *Moly* as an example of this aesthetic: “I was still separate on the shadow’s ground/ But, charged with growth, was being altered, composing, uncomposed” (197). In the midst of transformation from man to beast, the speaker is incomplete, living between worlds in the process of change. The

speaker's known self or outer shell comes undone, but simultaneously a new self forms. The poem also represents language as a site of transformation, a stage where the poet can try on various poses. The phrase "composing, uncomposed" from "Words" is similar to "I am made by her, and undone" (BC 9) from "My Mother's Pride," suggesting the "creative destruction" of the ongoing process of being made, coming undone, and being remade. The loss of composure becomes an opportunity for growth. Although "My Mother's Pride" appears to emphasize destruction, it is a destruction that allows an influx of knowledge.

The word "undone" has the connotation of a religious awakening in which a confessant, undone by God's glory and goodness, senses his own weakness. More specifically, Isaiah has a vision where he comes to see how sinful he is, and says, "Woe is me! for I am undone; because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips: for mine eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts" (*KJV*, Isaiah 6:5). Isaiah is undone, ruined, destroyed by his vision of God; yet, this undoing allows for greater self-knowledge. Gunn alludes to the sense that being "undone" is a revelatory event, whether visionary or religious. He connects his shyness as a child, a kind of speechlessness, to the dread and silence associated with the word "undone" as the final word of the poem. The silence that follows the end of the poem is meant to be a kind of self-examination and self-knowledge.

A second appearance of "undone" in *Boss Cupid* illuminates the word's associations with freedom from entanglement, the feeling of relief, and the hope of repair and recovery. In "Sequel," the image of a tightly wound knot, a Gordian knot perhaps, is one of enslavement: a person bound to his or her addiction. Even the thought of the knot coming undone issues a sense of hope and the possibility of a different course for one's life. "Sequel," which follows "A System—*PCP, or Angel Dust*," portrays a friend's

struggle with drug abuse.⁷³ Describing his friend's inability to change, Gunn writes: "Here was a knot that would not come undone, / For all the strings in it had pulled together, / Tight from the lover's death, tight from the drug/ That seemed to ease the loss by such distortion" (*BC* 35). Although the drug appears to bring relief, it has made life more difficult, not easier for the addict. The drug has distorted the addict's perspective, so that pain seems to be less sharp, the loss of the lover less vivid. However, if the knot were to come undone, the friend would experience revelation, painful revelation about his or enslavement to the drug and his inability to grieve without it. The knot that comes undone might bring relief to the bound person, but it will also bring about instability. There is relief to imagine a life without knots or chains, but not when those knots and chains also held one's life together in another sense.

The word "undone" denotes ambivalent ruination, partly because of its sexual connotation. Consider the tropes of the femme fatale or the bad boy who one knows will become one's undoing, a kind of death wish. For example, consider Orson Welles' famous line in *The Lady from Shanghai* (1947): "When I start to make a fool of myself, there's very little can stop me" as he becomes seduced by Rita Hayworth and caught up in a crazy murder plot. T.S. Eliot portrays sex as part of a woman's self-fashioning: "Highbury bore me. Richmond and Kew/ Undid me. By Richmond I raised my knees/ Supine on the floor of a narrow canoe" (III, lines 293- 295, *Waste Land* 15). Although the woman is literally born in Highbury, she could be said to be re-born elsewhere. Her splayed legs, the creativity and adventurousness of her make-shift bed, and the sexual freedom and suggestiveness of the river, reformulate an "undoing" as a coming into being. Yet, her body becomes reordered- her heart shifts below her feet at Moorgate. While many critics read this scene in Eliot as dystopian, I would like to comment on the duality of the term

⁷³ "A System" is further linked to both of Gunn's mother poems by the metaphor of the suckling infant and the term "the lost son" (*Boss Cupid* 14).

“undone,” suggesting one’s bravado in surviving, choosing, and owning experience.⁷⁴

Gunn, like Eliot, a different sort of Anglo-American poet, follows the pattern of imagining an undoing as a sexual awakening.

If one is deliberate, the process of being undone by desire could figure as “creative destruction.” *Boss Cupid* conveys the old man’s need for young boys, even if he is left hungry afterwards, but at least not “starving” (46). “American Boy” expresses the speaker’s disgust over “old men/ With turkey-necks/ And undiminished love of sex” (*BC* 45); yet, the poet admits “Now I myself am old” and celebrates the young lover who can “expertly...maintain me/ At the exact degree/ Of hunger without starving” (*BC* 45-46). The speaker’s lust lightly torments him and provides more and more opportunities for self-parody, that come with age. The poet sees himself maintained and even mothered. In “Bringing to Light,” the mother figure diffuses into Gunn’s lover or vice versa: “lover and mother/ melt into one figure that covers its face” (*CPTG* 257). The covering of the face evokes one manifestation of an orgasm, suggesting a happy union between two figures of fertility. The shrouded face could represent blushing innocence and sexual vulnerability or an ambiguous duality. “The Gas-poker” sexualizes the mother wearing “her red dressing-gown” and playing the phallic gas-poker like a flute (*BC* 10); as in many other Gunn poems, sex and death converge, but without the romantic Wagnerian aura. “My Mother’s Pride,” ends on a note of betrayal, an incongruity: to have come out of her vagina only to be de-created; to be created by a woman who erased herself. In contrast to the love poems, “My Mother’s Pride” presents the speaker as passive in his undoing. She is his undoing; he is not complicit.

Gunn, like the confessional poets, locates his undoing in his mother’s undoing.

The last line evokes the mother’s dramatizing voice. That the word seems to be lifted from

⁷⁴ Maud Ellman claims that “the woman consents to degradation as if it were foredoomed” (“A Sphinx” 266) and describes her body as “bruised, defiled flesh” (265), emphasizing her vulnerability. Ian Hamilton asserts, “No one in *The Waste Land* raises her knees in any other spirit than that of glum complaisance” (“*The Waste Land*” 109). However, what Hamilton doesn’t acknowledge is the woman’s pluck in flaunting and inverting societal norms.

her, stolen, only heightens our sense that the undoing is the mother's work, in fact, the mother's word. We might ask if the mother's pride is "dangerous," because of the implications it has for the poet. Gunn here aligns himself with the narrative so common in confessional poetry that holds one's parents responsible for emotional wounds. According to Diane Middlebrook, confessional poetry explores childhood as "the era where... the value of one's individual life is assigned by the terms on which love is bestowed and withheld from Mother and Father" ("What Was Confessional" 647). However, Gunn subverts this story, ironizes the high note of pain in his poem. The word "undone" paradoxically also means "not done, uneffected, unaccomplished" (*OED*). The poem insists on ironic detachment, the potential and efficacy of the child as creator, and the possibility of change. One need not be the victim who is done unto, but can become a doer.

Confessional poetry is associated with looser forms, a sort of undoing of form, since Lowell relaxes his poetic forms in *Life Studies*.⁷⁵ Perhaps to suggest the shift from his mother's voice to his own, from his biography of her to his autobiography, from "she" to "I," Gunn shifts from full rhymes to a slant rhyme with the word "undone." He disrupts the rhythms of his quatrains; he uses the abcb rhyme scheme throughout the poem and then in the last line, he breaks it slightly. The strict form of the first eleven lines makes it evident that the subtle loosening of form is fully controlled by the poet, demonstrating that even the moment of self-revelation in the confessional utterance is an illusion, a pose. In keeping with Gunn's theory of poses, we see Gunn posturing himself as a confessional poet who is consciously dramatizing his ruination by putting pressure on the poem's rhyme. The overall poem's telegrammatic reticence is juxtaposed to the connotations of "undone" and the way in which it is rhymed. The rhyme of "London" with "undone" is a revelatory event. It is not a strict rhyme like the other rhymes in the poem: "dangers" and

⁷⁵ Gunn critiques both the form and content of Lowell's *Life Studies*; for Gunn, confessional poetry since Lowell discusses "violent private experience" in "flat rhythms" with "a flat clinical sound" ("Imitations and Originals" 481).

“stranger” in the first stanza and “present” and “peasant” in the second stanza. The word “London” has the emphasis on the first syllable, and the second syllable has a short “o” that sounds more like “din” than “done.” In the word “undone,” the emphasis is on “done,” and the “o” in done is more like the “Lon” of “London” than like the “don” of “London.” The word “undone” could be said to be self-rhyming as the prefix “un” rhymes with “done.” The poet draws attention to the word “undone” as the key word in the poem—it is, like the mother, self-dramatizing. James Fenton in his review of *Boss Cupid* asserts, “‘My Mother’s Pride’ is made uncomfortable for me by one daring, but rocky rhyme” (“Separate Beds” 46). Although Fenton does not identify the rhyme, it’s clear that the only daring, rocky rhyme would be the slant rhyme. Rocky or not, the rhyme subtly points out a connection between London, the poet’s mother, and his undoing. Given the story of his mother’s suicide, he was undone in London. Given the thrust of his oeuvre, he was made afresh in America. While Gunn evokes the themes of confessional poetry, from “daring” and “rocky” rhymes to the portrait of a family member and suggestions of trauma, one must remember that nothing actually happens in the poem. Only when read as a companion poem to “The Gas-poker” do we learn of the suicide. In “My Mother’s Pride” the suicide is not done, not shown.

In his pose as a confessional poet here, Gunn plays with the idea of the child as victim, but in a very muted way. He problematizes the agency of the mother, asking whether the absent mother paradoxically leaves room for the child to make himself. When Gunn says that he is “undone” by his mother, he refers not only to his emotional state of ruination, but to his mother’s act of leaving something undone. Gunn is undone in the sense that his mother has not fully made him, nor is she the haunting muse of his work.⁷⁶

⁷⁶ Clive Wilmer writes about Gunn’s decision to change his name legally from William Guinneach Gunn to Thomson William Gunn in recognition of his mother, Annie Charlotte Gunn née Thomson (“The Self You” 13). Wilmer reads lines from Gunn’s “Rites of Passage”: “I stamp upon the earth/ A message to my mother” (CPTG 185), claiming that he addresses “the buried woman who governed the poet’s life” (15). I agree with Wilmer that his mother is a poetic subject; however, I strongly disagree she is the “absent female” and “poet’s Muse” overall (15).

Similarly, the poet does not create a full portrait of the mother by writing a few poems. “My Mother’s Pride” leaves much unsaid, other portraits undone. The poet secures the child’s point of view and the child’s possibilities. Gunn suggests that he has the potential of the child for growth by stating that he is undone, as if he has all the time in the world to create a poetic identity and body of work. The poem begins with the mother’s voice ringing in the poet’s ears, but ends with the poet’s voice. The last line is an “I statement” that counters the mother’s “I statements,” sayings that defined her. When Gunn says “I am,” he uses two different adjectives to juxtapose his mother’s role and his role in self-fashioning. He is “made by her” (line 12), but not in whole, only in part. Another part of himself is what he determines.

In an earlier poem “Jesus and His Mother,” Gunn shows the way in which Mary, the Holy Mother, teaches her son Jesus to talk, yet doesn’t always understand his speech. He writes from Mary’s point of view and addresses Jesus: “I do not understand your words: I taught you speech, we named the birds, / You marked their big migrations then/ Like any child” (64).⁷⁷ He expresses the mother’s frustration at the alienation seemingly caused by her own instruction. When she gave her child his entrance into the language group, she also gave him his entrance into a world that excludes her. Versions of the phrase “One all his own and not his own” end each of the six stanzas in the poem to depict the battle for ownership over Jesus. Does he own himself or does his mother? How does language bring the two together and drive them further apart? Whereas “Jesus and His Mother” suggests Jesus’ ownership, “My Mother’s Pride” depicts the speaker as belonging to his mother (her pride or young) and the mother as belonging to the speaker (*my* mother). As evidence that Jesus and Mary are an atypical mother-son relationship, Gunn creates a deeper imbalance of power in “My Mother’s Pride.” The poem puzzles over whether he

⁷⁷ The irony of “Like any child” is that Jesus is both man and God, hardly like any child. Jesus and Mary’s relationship is also inherently different from mother-child relationships, because of the Immaculate Conception. Additionally, Jesus is not only a Messiah figure, but his mother’s Savior, amplifying the role-reversal in the poem.

belongs to his mother and whether she belongs to him, and in what sense. Does he own her sayings; spoken to him, do her words belong to him, or must he steal them? The poem attempts to speak in two voices, the voice of the child and the voice of the mother, and divorces itself from the traditional lyric or confessional utterance of a singular speaker. The confessions are mediated, as the poet seems to confess his mother's pride on her behalf. The confessions have what Deborah Forbes terms "sincerity-effects" (5) due to Gunn's use of quotations. We assume we are getting the actual speech of the mother as part of a poem. The poetic process, however, belongs to Gunn, whose mother leaves him with a germ of a poem: sayings that Gunn then forms into a poem. In the process of selection, arrangement, and composition, we could say Gunn completes what his mother has left undone: the poem.

Langdon Hammer notes that *Boss Cupid* represents a change in Gunn's work. Hammer points out that Gunn "pushes the boundary of his poetry to include, in one loose whole, the materials of legend, myth, phantasmagoria, autobiography, and 'Gossip'" ("Thom Gunn" 115). I agree with Hammer's assessment of the new ground *Boss Cupid* covers, and wish to add that Gunn's poems about his mother continue the conversation in poetry and prose about confessional poetry and about American poetry, more broadly. Gunn's ability to experiment with autobiographical, domestic, familial, confessional material doesn't invalidate his poetry of the streets, his poetry about toughs, nor his impersonal poetry. As Gunn says about the poet Robert Duncan in his elegy "Duncan" in *Boss Cupid*, "You add to, you don't cancel what you do" (3), he, too, casts a wider net by deepening his autobiography.

Boss Cupid picks up a thread in "Autobiography" from *Jack Straw's Castle* (1976): "The sniff of the real, that's/ what I'd want to get/ how it felt//studying for exams skinny/ seventeen dissatisfied" (285). One can trace this human presence in Gunn's work much earlier than the last volume. "Autobiography" expresses the dominant feeling of adolescence: "life seemed all/ loss, and what was more/ I'd lost whatever it was/ before I'd

even had it” (CPTG 285). Reading *Boss Cupid* alongside this poem, one notices how archetypal “Autobiography” is in contrast to the life-story in the mother poems. In “The Gas-poker,” especially we learn about an actual loss during the poet’s adolescence that disrupts the trope of the difficult teenage years as just a trope. “My Mother’s Pride” is a braver poem than “Autobiography,” free of generalizations about teen angst, mythical mothers, the lost breast, or the lost son. The title refers to a make of very bland, mass-produced bread, *Mother’s Pride*, made in Scotland and sold in the UK. The slogan reads “A Slice of Family Life.” Factory-manufactured, cheap bread does not evoke the warm, yeasty smell of home-made bread, a family’s secret recipes, hospitality, family identity, or local pride. Gunn’s title is ironic, as the personal pronoun “my” suggests that the poem is home-baked, in contrast to the manufactured bread. Through the pronoun, Gunn conveys the vast difference between “My Mother’s Pride” and “Mother’s Pride,” between the autobiographical and the anonymous. In Gunn’s work, the title certainly perks the ears of readers who have never before seen the words “My Mother” from him in print, representing a different level of intimacy. One might consider the age of the poet, and his sense of himself as old in the pages of *Boss Cupid*; the volume ends with the line, “A brief bow following on the final leap” (“Dancing David” 111). In a volume which he thought of as his last, Gunn achieved a new version of “the sniff of the real.”

iii. *Coda: On “The Gas-poker”*

The mother figure in “My Mother’s Pride” comes into view more fully in “The Gas-poker” when Gunn describes her suicide. The words “dramatized,” “dangers,” and “undone” from “My Mother’s Pride” are hauntingly tied to the mother’s suicide, the subject of the next poem in *Boss Cupid*. Although Gunn’s mother, Charlotte Thomson Gunn committed suicide before Sylvia Plath, the elegy for her subliminally links the two

suicide mothers. Both women commit suicide by gassing themselves in London; they take measures to protect their children from carbon-monoxide poisoning; they leave notes to get a doctor or a cleaning lady, but do not leave suicide notes.

Many of Plath's confessional poems and dramatic monologues focus on motherhood and suicide. Plath writes about her experiences as a mother in poems such as "Morning Song" and "Child" in *Ariel* (1965), and depicts motherhood in various personae in poems such as "Three Women" and "Childless Woman" in *Winter Trees* (1971). Plath also writes about suicide through dramatic personae, most famously in "Lady Lazarus" in *Ariel*. In "Lady Lazarus" the speaker says she has killed herself and resurrects herself for the audience's examination at a kind of freak show. She kills herself every ten years: "Dying/ Is an art, like everything else./ I do it exceptionally well. // I do it so it feels like hell" (245). For the crowd, she offers a "big strip tease" (245) and "For the eyeing of my scars, there is a charge...//And there is a charge, a very large charge/ For a word or a touch/ Or a bit of blood" (246). Plath's actual suicide on February 11, 1963 has caused many readers to see her persona poems as confessions, particularly the posthumous poems in *Ariel*, ten of which were published in *Encounter* eight months after her death (October 1964), among them "Lady Lazarus." Forbes comments, "To many of those left to absorb the shock of her death, her suicide seemed in a stroke to fuse the poet with the often self-annihilating speakers in her later poetry, and to conflate the metaphorical realm of poetry with the literal actions of the poet's life" (75).⁷⁸ Referring to the poems in *Encounter*, Lowell writes to Elizabeth Bishop: "You probably know the story of her suicide. The poems are all about it...She almost makes one feel at first reading that all other poetry is about nothing. Still it's searingly extreme, a triumph by a hair, that one almost wishes had never come about" (*Letters* 438-439). Lowell later tells Bishop that Plath is "gothic and

⁷⁸ Forbes goes on to argue that Plath's later poetry deals with suicide as a theme. I agree with Forbes that Plath uses self-distancing hyperbole and personae, however I see this as feature of confessional poetry, not a departure from it. For example, as discussed in Chapter 1, Berryman's *The Dream Songs* conveys the performative aspect of confession.

arid" (*Letters* 595). Lowell, like many others, reads Plath with the extra-poetic information of her suicide, and comes to see a poem like "Lady Lazarus" as more private, and urgent because the poet killed herself.⁷⁹ Seamus Heaney even refers to Plath's "Edge," as "a suicide note," although he acknowledges it as "problematic" to say so ("Indefatigable Hoof-taps" 165).

Gunn, in an interview, stated that he wanted to avoid self-dramatization in "The Gas-poker," because he didn't want to sound like Plath. He describes the subject and point of view in "The Gas-Poker" as follows:

The second poem about my mother is called "The Gas-Poker." She killed herself, and my brother and I found her body, which was not her fault because she'd barred the doors, as you'll see in the poem. Obviously, this was quite a traumatic experience; it would be in anybody's life. I wasn't able to write about it till just a few years ago. Finally I found the way to do it was really obvious: to withdraw the first-person, and to write about it in the third-person. Then it came easy, because it was no longer about myself. I don't like dramatizing myself. I don't want to be Sylvia Plath. The last person I want to be! I was trying in this poem to objectify the situation (*Thom Gunn in Conversation* 19).

Gunn distances himself so vehemently from Plath in order to distance poetry from suicide and to emphasize making rather than unmaking. Suicide is the ultimate form of self-dramatization, an extreme and final statement about the self. Elisabeth Bronfen writes in particular of Plath and Sexton's suicides, stating that "death emerges as an act of autonomous self-fashioning" (400). Suicide is self-display, yet suicide is the murder of the self. Jacqueline Rose says in "Sylvia Plath—Again," "It is a paradox about suicide that the murderer, who lives on forever, is the one who didn't survive" (50-51).

Suicide haunts not only Plath's work, but Sexton's, Berryman's, and confessional poetry generally. In "Expression," Gunn has written about his so-called "juniors" (321) presumably the confessional poets, whose work revolved around self-expression and self-dramatization. David Fulton points out, "So strong is Gunn's sense of the Confessional

⁷⁹DeSales Harrison rejects biographical readings of Plath that interpret her suicide as the key to her work. He rightly points out that Plath calls into question what it means to have a self and have a story: "What can be said about a writer for whom the preservation of sanity and a coherent speaking self were in the end impossible?" (145).

poets' immaturity that he invents a generation gap" even though "he is fifteen years younger than Berryman, twelve younger than Lowell, and despite the heights from which he looks down on her, one year younger than Sexton" (49).⁸⁰ It is as if Gunn identifies with the poets before confession, the older generation of impersonal poets T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound, and looks down on the younger generation of confessional poets. Gunn directly alludes to Plath's "Daddy" as a prototype of the genre when he writes, "...they hate Daddy" (321) in "Expression" (1982):

For several weeks I have been reading
the poetry of my juniors.
Mother doesn't understand,
and they hate Daddy, the noted alcoholic.
They write with black irony
of breakdown, mental institution,
and suicide attempt, of which the experience
does not always seem first-hand.
It is a very poetic poetry (CPTG 321).

On the one hand, Gunn critiques the way the junior poets focus only on their narrow lives, on Mother and Daddy, without any concern for the outside world. On the other hand, Gunn critiques these poets for the illusion of extremity, and questions whether these poets wrote from experience or exaggerated their experience. "Expression" highlights two problems with self-dramatization: its exclusiveness and self-conscious posturing.

Elizabeth Bishop, another poet with a shadowed family history, expresses a similar complaint about confessional poetry. Bishop argues that Lowell's confessional poetry succeeds because of what it leaves out, whereas Sexton dramatizes herself. She writes to Lowell about Sexton, "I feel I know too much about her, whereas, although I know much more about you, I'd like to know a great deal more" (*Words* 327). She says that Sexton intentionally makes herself "intensely *interesting*" whereas Lowell's aesthetic is "*sublimated*" (*Words* 327). In an article in *Time*, Bishop says of confessional poets, "You

⁸⁰ Gunn says that the only confessional poet he likes is Ginsberg: "I'm not interested in confessional poetry. The closest I come to liking confessional poetry is liking Allen Ginsberg" (*Thom Gunn in Conversation* 23). Elsewhere he pinpoints Ginsberg's "Kaddish" as exemplary for infusing humor into horror (*Shelf Life* 107). He critiques Lowell for "dramatiz[ing] himself endlessly and tediously" (*Shelf Life* 84) and Sexton for her aesthetic of "immediate effects" (*Shelf Life* 49).

wish they'd keep some of these things to themselves" (qtd. by Cory and Lee 67). Lowell describes Plath's work as "all spearhead" (*Letters* 595), commenting on how extreme and piercing the work is meant to be. Although Bishop puts Lowell in a different category than Plath and Sexton, Lowell himself wonders about the definition of confessional poetry, whether this kind of poetry creates feelings of shame in the audience, makes even the author flinch. In February of 1974, he writes to Bishop, "By the way is a confessional poem one that one would usually hesitate to read before an audience? I have many (they are a perfectly good kind) but have none in my last lot, and you have none ever" (*Letters* 624).⁸¹

Gunn, like Bishop, seeks to distance himself from such forms of self-dramatization. He intentionally elides the first person, the word "mother," and specific names. The poet emphasizes the gap of time between the event and the composition of the poem, demonstrating that he doesn't want to exploit his mother's suicide or the emotional trauma of losing her. Gunn uses cerebral words that evoke the mind rather than the heart. In the short poem, the words "know," "thinking," "mind," and "knew" (twice) all point towards thinking. The poem's insistence on the mind precludes any notion of composition as an overflow of confessions or guilty feelings. Gunn attempts to separate himself from the self-dramatizing "junior poets" by using the third-person plural to write about his mother's suicide in "The Gas-poker." Although Gunn uses the third-person point of view, he also suggests the first-person in the opening and closing of the poem. In the opening, Gunn draws attention to the present absence of his mother in his earlier work, noting how long it has taken him—nearly fifty years—write about her:

Forty-eight years ago
 —Can it be forty-eight
 Since then?—they forced the door
 Which she had barricaded
 With a full bureau's weight
 Lest anyone find, as they did,

⁸¹ Lowell refers to the manuscript of his last volume, *Day by Day* (1977).

What she had blocked them for (*BC* 10).

The poem opens with a seemingly personal reflection that the speaker has waited so long to write the elegy, creating the expectation that the poem will move from the internal monologue, the self-questioning, onward to a poem written entirely in first person. What is so immediately strange is that Gunn appears to shift from first person to third person plural. He hasn't in fact used first person in the self-questioning, but has suggested the perspective of a singular speaker. The poem returns to this posture of first person in the closing stanza where an image stays in the mind of the speaker, suggesting a singular point of view, a particular memory, and fascination. The emphasis, however, is on something blocked. Gunn frames the poem by ending in a way that conveys a singular eye, but not quite an "I":

One image from the flow
Sticks in the stubborn mind:
A sort of backwards flute.
The poker that she held up
Breathed from the holes aligned
Into her mouth till, filled up
By its music, she was mute (*BC* 11).

This "one image" haunts the psyche, suggesting a human presence. It implies that the "they," the central pronoun of the preceding stanzas, involves an individual "mind" that saw, imagined, and invented the scene. The image is as specific as the mind is general. The image implies the "I" while also denying it. The mind is characterized as "stubborn" as if its persisting were intolerable, as if the mind had a mind of its own.

The rest of the poem, however, is written completely in third person. "My Mother's Pride" is in first person, and notably doesn't allude to Gunn's brother, who is integral to "The Gas-poker" for carrying the burden of the story. In "The Gas-poker," not only does Gunn write in the third person, but in the third person plural, in which the "they" both dissolves the individuality of an "I" and a "he" and redistributes the pain and burden of the narration on the two brothers, the "they." Once, we get the separation of the children into

two individuals, "Elder and younger brother" (*BC 10*), but the terms appear to be meaningless as we don't know the difference between the two, why it matters, how it factors in the poem. The adjectives seem to be redundant since an elder brother presupposes a younger brother, and vice versa.

Gunn distorts perspective not only by using third-person plural, but also by creating confusion about place:

In her red dressing-gown
 She wrote notes, all night busy
 Pushing the things about,
 Thinking till she was dizzy,
 Before she had lain down.

The children went to and fro
 On the harsh winter lawn
 Repeating their lament,
 A burden, to each other
 In the December dawn,
 Elder and younger brother,
 Till they knew what it meant.

Knew all there was to know.
 Coming back off the grass
 To the room of her release...(*BC 10*)

This confusion distances the reader from the lived experience behind the poem. The reader doesn't know whether the mother is in the house. She is wearing a "red dressing-gown" and stays up "all night" before laying down, "dizzy" (*BC 10*), which suggests a bedroom. Yet, the writing of notes evokes a desk in a living room. The mother pushes a full bureau, which presumably is full of dishes. Is she in the kitchen or dining room? The children are first depicted as pacing outside on the grass before breaking into the "room of her release" (*BC 10*). The space is defined by her escape out of it and the world, rather than by the architecture of a house. Gunn offers a sparse narration of the moments before and after her suicide.

The children are outside at "dawn," perhaps wondering what they should do, if they should try to get into the mother's locked room. We assume the children only noticed

the locked room in the morning, but we don't know. The children are seen worrying, wondering, and pacing on the lawn in the morning. It's what they don't know that worries them, as much as what they do know. The word "blocked" is foregrounded at the outset. Gunn has to imagine what happened: that his mother was up all night writing and pushing the furniture around. We as readers, like the poet at the time, are blocked from seeing and understanding.

Edward Guthmann in *The San Francisco Chronicle* writes about Gunn's legacy, and includes quotations from Ander Gunn, the poet's younger brother who describes the discovery of the mother's body. Ander was thirteen and Thom was fifteen. They were upstairs together. He says:

It was all quiet downstairs. We went downstairs and there was a note pinned to the door of the sitting room saying, 'Don't try to get in. Get Mrs. Stoney,' who was the charwoman employed by my mother to clean the house. We pushed the door open with great difficulty because it had a bureau and several other things pushed against it. And there she was lying on the floor with a gas poker rigid over her face with a rug over her mouth. And the place was full of gas. It was all packed with newspaper to stop the gas from getting out. Rigor mortis had set in, and we turned the gas off and opened all the windows" (par. 26).

From Ander Gunn's description, we can see the acute selection and stylization in Gunn's poem. "The Gas-poker" doesn't specify the note she leaves on the door; the poet says that all night his mother was writing notes. The reader imagines that the mother is writing a long suicide note, not a note that is more like a sign than a letter, a sign that says in essence, Keep Out! Although Gunn portrays his mother as a kind of writer, she is the one who wrote what he couldn't write about directly. Ander's narration gives the reader a sense of space; we learn that the boys were upstairs, the mother downstairs that night. The poem evokes the fragmented sense of time and space; it has been forty-eight years, but it feels like yesterday; it wasn't only a physical room where she died in a real house, but a metaphorical "room of her release" from pain.

In the poem, the mother plays a discordant music. Her "backwards flute" creates the opposite of music: decomposition. Her death is figured as muteness. In her swan song,

she inhales carbon monoxide and lies down on the ground. She drew breath from the gas-poker, which is a kind of distorted flute, “until,” Gunn writes, “filled up/ By its music, she was mute” (BC 11). A gas-poker is a “hollow poker perforated with holes through which gas can be made to flow, and which on being lit provides heat for kindling a fire” (OED). The mother’s notes, musical notes on the “backwards flute” and epistolary notes, prevented Gunn from writing about them. And yet, despite Gunn’s silence about his mother, he still can’t believe forty-eight years have passed. This signals how her death must haunt him. David Fulton comments that Gunn’s elegy “with its restrained grief and its concentration not on the protagonists (all unnamed), but the death weapon as a tragically inverted version of the flute of pastoral elegy is...a model of neoclassical impersonality” (51). I agree that the poem’s devices create an impersonal frame for the poem. For example, the restricted point of view, the lack of names, the sparse details, and the formal restraint of the abcd bdc rhyme scheme and the rhyming of all the first lines convey a degree of control over the poignant, heartbreaking subject matter. However, the poet gives up on some rhymes, rhyming words with themselves, perhaps mirroring the mother’s act of giving up. The word “up” in “filled up” and “held up” rhymes with itself in the last stanza, enacting the mother’s ultimate act of giving up (BC 11). Earlier in the poem, the sound of “did” in “barricaded” rhymes with “did,” and “brother” rhymes with “other” (BC 10), but nowhere else in the poem does a word rhyme with itself. There are moments where the poet gives us glimpses of himself in “The Gas-poker” as in the last line of “My Mother’s Pride.” At the end of “The Gas-poker” as in the final lines of “My Mother’s Pride,” the rhyme scheme undoes itself. Gunn reveals the self in trauma, repeating the word as if repeating the event or image in his mind.

Gunn distances himself from his mother’s death, refusing to even name her as his mother. As a result, she becomes a haunting figure. Like Gunn, James Merrill has written about the mother figure as a present absence, but unlike Gunn, Merrill portrays the mother as the collaborator throughout the writing process, line by line, breath by breath. In *The*

Changing Light at Sandover (1982), “The Book of Ephraim,” Book X, Merrill describes his mother as absent from his work, because she is so present as to be assumed. Book X opens with the word “X-ray” and offers a new description of the painting *La Tempesta*, which figures St Theodore slaying a dragon and rescuing his mother. Merrill writes that St Theodore lusted after his mother, whose beauty was striking: “her beauty such,/ The youth desired to kiss her,’ as the quaint/ Byzantine legend puts it...” (*Changing* 83). Merrill revises the overdone Oedipal myth by offering X-ray vision to see the faded figure of the mother: “this curdling/ Nude arisen, faint as ectoplasm” (83) and to see what is not there, the water “which no longer fills/ The eventual foreground” (83). The suggestion is that one needs X-ray vision to see his mother in his work. And yet, he explains her absence by her overwhelming presence. Merrill writes of “the absence from these pages/ Of my own mother. Because of course she’s here/ Throughout, the breath drawn after every line,/ Essential to its making as mine” (83-84). The operative word is “throughout” because Merrill draws attention to the continual presence of his mother, the way she collaborates with him on every line. The breath Merrill takes, the literal breath and the breath of inspiration, is a reminder of the mother who gave him life and poetic ability. To emphasize his collaboration with his mother, Merrill downplays his own agency and authorship, and uses the passive tense when he writes about the breath being drawn between verse lines.

Gunn, unlike Merrill, conveys the tension between himself and his mother as part of the process of creating, destroying, and recreating the self. He doesn’t turn to his mother as the muse who has the words for him, the breath for him. In “My Mother’s Pride,” he turns to her and critiques her while sliding into her role and voice. In “The Gas-poker” he shows us two different figures of writers, who don’t seem to co-exist. The Gunn brothers take the “appropriate measures” (11) to have the mother’s body removed, to call the police, to “turn off the gas” (10), suggesting the poet’s use of rhyme and meter to sublimate the emotional content, to elide the mother’s body, to undercut her wit. Ultimately, the measures fail, as the poem turns to a repetitive rhyme, a dead rhyme,

taking breath from the dead. He employs the internal tension between confession and anti-confession, between the impersonal and the personal voice, between formal restraint and looser forms, between English traditional forms and American improvisation, to tell the story of his family's undoing.

Gunn's two poems about his mother "My Mother's Pride" and "The Gas-poker" together convey something of what the mother knows and what the son knows about her. The Gunn brothers in finding their mother's body "knew all there was to know" (BC 10). The implication is that, in addition to solving the mystery of why the door was barricaded that morning (i.e., all there was to know that day), the boys come to experience the fact of their mother's suicide as final and calamitous. Her death makes all other knowledge trivial in comparison. On a larger scale, the mother poems represent a kind of knowledge that could inform other avenues of knowing which Gunn explores such as sexual experience in "Carnal Knowledge." "The Gas-poker" performs two types of knowing through the dominant sound of "O" on the poem: one is the epiphany, the "oh" moment; the other is the revelatory moment of tragedy, the "ow" note of pain. The "oh" sounds repeat in words "wrote," "notes," "fro," "know," "flow," "poker," "hole"; the "ow" is heard in the following: "gown," "down," "mouth". A cry of private pain emerges through assonance. Rather than say that form restricts feeling, the sounds echo throughout as "Oh," "O," "Ow," "Woe" and "No," evoking what the poet-son knows but can't say.

iv. Conclusion

Despite Ian Hamilton's assertion that Gunn "was to be identified with the Red skins—the Beats, the Objectivists—rather than with the Pale-faces of the academy or the confessional" ("The Call" 782), he was identified with neither. Yet, the Anglo-American poet in San Francisco was perhaps one of few British poets to engage with confessional

poetry even from a critical standpoint. One thinks of A. Alvarez, Ted Hughes, John Haffenden, and Ian Hamilton as in differing degrees interested in confessional verse. Gunn's position as English and therefore anti-confessional is complicated by his transatlantic passage towards American myths, scenes, gay subculture, characters, and literary politics. I am not the only one to assert that *Boss Cupid* tends toward the confessional. Paul Giles links *The Man with Night Sweats* with Lowell's poem "Night Sweats" (1964), and goes on to discuss elegy in *Boss Cupid* as autobiographical in the same grain:

Gunn's poems about AIDS are particularly resonant for the way they refuse morbid, thanatological consciousness, and so he rewords Lowell's "will to die" into an elliptical, understated description of death as a merely biological occurrence, an event without epistemological significance. Similarly, "The Gas Poker," a 1992 poem about his own mother's suicide, was "modelled," as Gunn put it, on a "Hardyesque kind of poem" to convert the abjection of personal despair into an aesthetic balance of emotional empathy and formal detachment. Consequently, Gunn's poems do not involve a simple negation of the confessional style, but rather its reinscription within a more complex aesthetic framework ("Across the Water" 213).

Gunn's poems about his mother lack some of the locating devices we might expect in a detailed, confessional narrative. The poems don't get all the names down. Yet, Gunn turns to his mother's sayings, the room of her release, her last breath, her mouth, and small ears. Despite the discomfort, he sees her murder weapon, titles his elegy after it. The backwards flute is stuck in his psyche: whose story is this and whose music? Who's speaking in the elegy? For all the mother's chatter in the first poem, there is only muteness in the next. The poet is a shy child first, then a communal "they" and "a mind." Gunn manages the feat of confessing, not speaking. This approach suggests the unspoken or buried nature of confession: what is unsaid is more telling than what is said. Particularly in connection to some of the themes of confessional poetry, such as divorce, madness, or suicide, silence should be expected as a response to trauma. "They sought an utterance," Gunn writes ("The Antagonism," *BC* 5), and the same could be said of the poet, specifically concerning his mother's suicide. In contrast to Ginsberg, Lowell, Berryman,

or Plath, Gunn contributes to our understanding of confession as something held back, even within moments of intimacy. Gunn's two poems about his mother reflect reticence and tight formal control; however, the traumatized mind in "The Gas-poker" and the "rocky" rhyme in "My Mother's Pride" suggest a thin line between keeping one's cool and losing it. Gunn's iceberg aesthetic, with most of the feelings and associations under the surface, extends our understanding of the poetic notion of confession. A personal poem need not contain a single "I" statement. Gunn's contribution to the confessional mother story situated in the thesis at large is a welcome reminder that the fundamental and intimate relationship between a mother and child can be represented in various and sublimated ways. The "I" in a poem can be absorbed into "the mind," an inanimate object, a persona, or "you."

Gunn's "The Artist as an Old Man" reflects on the nature of self-portraiture. The artist is "Vulnerable because/ naked because/ his own model" (BC 61). The assumption that confessional poetry is narcissistic doesn't hold up when one considers that the artist observes himself with the detachment and attentiveness he would have directed at a nude model or a still life. He is both subject and artist. The artist "looks into/ his eyes/ or it might be yours" (BC 61-62). Gunn, more poignantly than the confessional poets, because he is an outsider, reveals that the self might be "you." One of the most important premises of confessional and post-confessional poetry is that the individual doesn't really own his or her experiences and the poems about them, but borrows and recasts stories from family history, culture, religion, texts, storytellers such as mothers and analysts, and psychoanalytic archetypes.

As we saw in select poems by Berryman and Lowell, the mother's role is integral in co-authoring one's childhood and transition to becoming a poet. By contrast, Ginsberg and Bidart take on aspects of the mothering role to tell their mothers' stories. They transform a shared painful history with a mentally-ill mother into an earnest spiritual and

artistic quest. Whereas Ginsberg merges his voice with his mother's, Bidart dramatically kills his internal mother to create a distinct identity. Hass and Williams struggle with the legacy of the confessional poets, reframing the child's suffering and the adolescent's angst to emphasize the limitations of poems that focus primarily on the child's pain and perspective. In "My Mother's Nipples," Hass searches for a song to inject meaning and hope into his mother's story, and finds that his own song is caught up with finding hers. Williams represents a more confrontational mother-son relationship than Hass, and reflects on the emerging poet's hunt for poems that redefine the self and break away from the mother's control. Nonetheless, Williams' seemingly independent stance reveals the fundamental role of the mother in the process of self-fashioning; indeed, both mother and son are engaged in the same task of rescuing him from the chaos of silence and the dark of pre-linguistic existence. Gunn's work also represents a struggle for words, albeit a different one, to end his forty-eight-year-long silence on the subject of his mother. In his last volume, he emphasizes the paradoxical reticence, formality, closure, and enclosure within his most intimate poems about the memory and tragic story of his mother. In this small sample of poems about mothers and sons, we see the story of the poet's artistic origins and process situated in relationship to the mother's history and selfhood.

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