



**‘My landscape is a hand with no lines’: Representations of Space in the Poetry
of Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath, and Anne Sexton**

A Doctoral Thesis

by

Mohammed Fattah Rashid Al-Obaidi

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Supervised by

Dr. Brian Jarvis

Dr. Deirdre O’Byrne

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Abstract

This thesis is the first study using contemporary spatial theory, including cultural geography and its precursors, to examine and compare representations of space in the poetry of three mid-twentieth-century American poets: Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath, and Anne Sexton. Because of the autobiographical content often foregrounded in their work, these poets have been labelled ‘Confessional.’ Previous criticism has focused primarily on the ways in which they narrate (or draw on) their personal lives, treating accompanying descriptions of their surroundings primarily as backdrops. However, these poets frequently manifest their affective states by using the pathetic fallacy within structures of metaphor that form a textual ‘mapping’ of the physical space they describe. This mapping can be temporal as well as spatial; the specific spaces ‘mapped’ in the poem’s present are often linked to memories of earlier life or family. These spaces include psychiatric, general, and penal institutions, parks and gardens, nature (especially coastal settings), and the home (almost always a place of tension or conflict). Each poet addresses these broad types of space differently according to their evolving subjective relationship to them. These relationships are in turn strongly influenced by their social class and gender: for the two women, their experience of their own bodies as prescribed space, in relation to the restrictive and objectifying female role that was imposed on them, is critical. Also, critical in shaping the poets’ experience of space are post-World-War II socio-cultural and demographic changes in the United States, notably suburbanisation, consumerisation and the consolidation of a ‘therapeutic culture’. Interwoven with these influences are major political concerns of the period such as the Cold War with its accompanying surveillance and conformism and the threat of nuclear annihilation. In the work of all three poets, awareness of these modern fears fused with traditional Gothic motifs to permeate their descriptions of spaces with anxiety, bitterness, and even dread in a rejection of the synthetic optimism of the ‘American Century’ and commercial culture. Other criticism has touched on many of these themes in relation to one or another of the poets, but this study, by way of the theme of space, offers comparison and synthesis that aims to shed new light on their work and its relation to the period during which they wrote.

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Introduction

The confession as a genre or cluster of genres has a long history, from the *Confessions* of Augustine of Hippo by way of Rousseau's *Confessions* and De Quincy's *Confessions of an English Opium Eater*, to popular mid-twentieth-century pulp magazines like *True Confessions*.¹ The term 'Confessional' was first applied to the American poet Robert Lowell's seminal *Life Studies* in a 1959 review by M.L. Rosenthal, in which he described the work as going 'beyond customary bounds of reticence or personal embarrassment [...] Lowell removes the mask. His speaker is unequivocally himself, and it is hard not to think of *Life Studies* as a series of personal confidences, rather shameful, that one is honour-bound not to reveal.'² Three claims Rosenthal makes here are central to the meaning of the term 'Confessional': that the poem's speaker is 'unequivocally himself', that the poems go beyond 'customary bounds... of personal embarrassment', and that these 'personal confidences' are in some sense *shameful*. Shame, however, is precisely defined by 'customary bounds' of morality or propriety: shame is individually felt but socially imposed. In the Abrahamic tradition, the first instance of shame is of course that of Adam and Eve in the Garden after they have eaten the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge and realise that they are naked which causes them to cover themselves. This self-covering, paradoxically, is an instant indicator of their guilt to God when He comes to visit them that evening. Hence, while nakedness is innocent — where innocence means the lack of self-awareness — self-exposure is shameful. Indeed, some critics at the time reacted to Lowell's work (and subsequently to that of Plath and Sexton) with outright hostility on precisely these grounds.

The poets labelled Confessional, of whom the three examined in this study were the first and most famous, received this appellation for several reasons.³ Contemporary readers and critics, following M. L. Rosenthal's review of Lowell's 1959 *Life Studies*, believed that

¹ Jo Gill, ed., 'Introduction', *Modern Confessional Writing: New Critical Essays* (New York: Routledge, 2006), pp. 4-6. Similar studies which trace the history of confession as a genre have been written by Jay Martin, 'Robert Lowell', *Seven American Poets*, ed. by Denis Donoghue (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1975), pp. 209-49 and Samuel Maio, *Creating Another Self: Voice in Modern American Personal Poetry* (Kirksville, MO: Truman State University Press, 2015).

² M.L. Rosenthal, *Our Life in Poetry: Selected Essays and Reviews* (New York: Persea Books, 1991), pp. 109-112. One of the names given to this genre by Rosenthal is 'impure art', p. 154.

³ W.D. Snodgrass's collection *Heart's Needle* (1959), an account in poems of the painful aftermath of his divorce, is generally agreed to have been a vital precursor to the Confessionals, with a strong influence on all three of the poets considered here and particularly Sexton. However, Snodgrass' subsequent trajectory as a poet took him in a different direction, so he is not typically grouped with those he influenced.

they were reading the poets' intimate, often extreme, and even abject experiences revealed in explicitly autobiographical verse and to a significant extent this assumption was well-founded. Certainly, all three poets used an 'I' that went beyond the 'I' of English Romantic lyric to be the subject of narratives that included direct first-person address to madness, incarceration, suicide, adultery, and other generally taboo topics. To some extent the way had been cleared by the Beats, at the time only beginning to be accepted by the literary establishment.⁴ While the Beats' influence was indirect — none of the three, at least initially, had much in common with them stylistically — their work granted these other writers a kind of permission. A similar radical poetic subjectivity emerged in the three as they began using their own personal lives as raw material. 'Raw' is the operative metaphor here. Lowell famously (and ingenuously) described his poetry in *Life Studies* as 'raw, huge blood-dripping gobbets of unseasoned experience...dished up for midnight listeners.'⁵

More recent criticism takes a skeptical view of such sensational claims. The raw material was not as unseasoned as it sometimes looked to readers accustomed to the demure poetic conventions of the day, even if its extremity remained or was enhanced; nor is the speaker of the poems always a transparent avatar of the poet. The mere fact of poetry as verbal artifice, as crafted thing, means necessarily that the poem's subject is always already a construct within the text — as are the events described, however much they may be derived from first-hand experience. Gill is worth quoting at length on this point:

Confession, then, is not a means of expressing the irrepressible truth of prior lived experience, but a ritualized technique for producing truth. Confessional writing is poetic not mimetic, it constructs rather than reflects some pre-textual truth. It is not the free expression of the self but an effect of an ordered regime by which the self begins to conceive of itself as individual, responsible, culpable and thereby confessional. Most importantly, confession takes place in a context of power, and prohibition, and surveillance.⁶

Power, prohibition (and its refusal) and surveillance are at the heart of Confessional poetry as a cultural phenomenon of the late 1950s and early 1960s. Deborah Nelson has written of the centrality of the issue of privacy to this period, as the Cold War drove the creation not only of a massive government domestic surveillance apparatus and its shadow in the way ordinary

⁴ Also known as the Beat generation who sprung from New York and San Francisco. The key figures of this movement are Allen Ginsberg, Gary Snyder, Jack Kerouac and others.

⁵ Eleanor Spencer, ed., *American Poetry since 1945* (New York: Palgrave, 2017), p. 168.

⁶ Jo Gill, *Modern Confessional Writing*, p. 4.

people were propagandised and intimidated into surveilling each other for signs of ‘subversive’ deviance, but also of a mass media machine that increasingly invaded the lives of ordinary people, breaching the walls of their previously private existence. This process subjected the American middle class to a form of what Michel Foucault calls ‘panopticism’: the compulsion to behave as if one were being observed by a controlling and potentially punitive power whether one is or not. The paradox here is that if personal privacy (defined as ‘freedom’) was what distinguished ‘free’ America from the ‘totalitarian’ USSR, that privacy must be breached in order to protect it from the threat posed by the USSR.⁷ In an inversion of the same paradox, the Confessionals pre-empted this penetration by a form of self-exposure even as they feared and resented it.

As noted, Lowell, Plath, and Sexton were the first three poets to be described as Confessional. Other poets contemporary with them whose work is either classified as Confessional or as directly tributary to the tendency include not only W.D. Snodgrass and John Berryman, but also Theodore Roethke. The three poets selected for this thesis were chosen only in part because their fame is linked to this label. At least as important is the fact all three grew up in the Boston area and more generally on the New England coast, which given the spatial orientation of this study makes comparison more productive. Most important for the purposes of this study, however, is the consequent mixture of commonalities and differences in their work with respect to their accounts of three main categories of space: the domestic, the institutional or carceral, and the exterior or ‘natural’. (In Lowell’s case, public urban space has been added as a sub-category.) Moreover, in the pivotal year of 1959 they were together in Lowell’s workshop at Boston College, they knew each other’s work well, and were reciprocally influenced by each other to varying degrees. With a few necessary exceptions noted below, the temporal scope of this study is from 1959 to 1967 (one poem is from before 1950, and three were published after 1970). Again, this is both to facilitate comparison and because this period is of such enormous historical and literary importance. Central to the argument of this study is that certain broader social, cultural, and historical factors of the period strongly affected these poets’ respective experiences of *space*. The impact of these factors is examined in the work of each in turn. This examination accordingly

⁷ Deborah Nelson, *Pursuing Privacy in Cold War America*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), pp. xii-xiii.

combines attention to the socio-political, the cultural, and the geographical, drawing on bodies of theory that can provide useful insight via each of these optics.⁸

Space, Place, and Text

For the purposes of this study, space is understood first and most importantly in terms of *types* of space — principally domestic, institutional or carceral, and outdoor or natural — and second as place, considered as a sub-category of a given type of space. Accordingly, ‘place’ is used first of all to mean *a specific location*, usually named, that can be identified on a map or with a set of three-dimensional coordinates: say, for instance, Lowell’s father’s bedroom on the second floor of the family home at 91 Revere St., Boston, Massachusetts. All three poets write about such particular, pre-existing places: the McLean Psychiatric Hospital, Logan Airport in Boston, Hardcastle Crags in Yorkshire, and numerous others, most not explicitly named in the verse but easily identifiable from the poets’ biographies. Landscape, as Martin Jones has stated, is ‘the physical manifestation of place. Places as social constructs may exist as abstract ideas, on maps or in written documents, but when we actually go to a specific place, or we see a place represented in photographs, art or film, what we are experiencing is the landscape of that place’.⁹ To Jones’ place-as-landscape, we may add place-as-building—that is, place as constructed space.

Yi-Fu Tuan discusses three ways of looking at the relationships between space, place, and time: ‘time as motion or flow and place as a pause in the temporal current; attachment to place as a function of time, captured in the phrase, “it takes time to know a place”; and place as time made visible, or place as memorial to times past.’¹⁰ While a physicist would tell us that time does not ‘flow’, and that we do not ‘move through’ it, we are incapable of imagining time except in spatial terms: either time moves past us, or we move through time. All three of the poets whose work is considered in this study tend to view places as ‘time made visible’. Especially for Lowell, places are ‘memorials to times past’ — the historical past, the personal past, or both. What begins as a space becomes a place by way of experience; we might even say that the more people experience a given space, the more of a

⁸ For more detail on this point see ‘Methodology’ below.

⁹ Martin Jones, Rhys Jones and Michael Woods, *An Introduction to Political Geography: Space, Place and Politics* (New York: Routledge, 2004), p. 116. By landscape he meant the ‘visual’ and ‘pictorial appearance of a place’ which comprises gardens, roads and so on.

¹⁰ Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), p. 6. His perspective is somewhat similar to Massey’s; her ‘pinpoint in space’ is much like Tuan’s ‘pause’: both are charged with memories.

place it becomes. Tuan notes that space becomes place through familiarity, and experiences ‘endow it with value’.¹¹

Another way to say this is that spaces are permeated by time, as in feminist cultural geographer Doreen Massey’s conception of space and place. Like Henri Lefebvre, whose seminal *The Production of Space* is cited throughout this study, Massey views space as a continual creation. Massey develops Michel Foucault’s critique of the popular conception of space, whereby most people ‘implicitly think of space as a kind of flat surface out there — we ‘cross space’ — and space is therefore devoid of temporality: it is without time, it is without dynamism, it is a kind of flat, inert given’.¹² Massey and Foucault insist that the perception of space comes out of the dynamic, temporal, social and affective relations between people and various sorts of places (domestic, public, cities, rural, or suburbs). Space is not a dead surface; it is ‘pincushion[ed]’ by a ‘myriad of stories’.¹³ In cultural-geographic terms, the convergence of such narrative ‘pins’ within a space, like the pins used to mark locations on a map, constitutes a *place*. Moreover, the narratives that people bring to a space may have originated elsewhere and ‘elsewhen’, as the names of many New England towns encode narratives brought by the colonists from England, or as each of these poets brought their personal pasts to bear on the spaces they then map in their work. These personal narratives (as well as narratives of other places they may never have experienced in person, like the ruins of Hiroshima) then infuse the poet’s experience of the space in the poem’s present. In this way they create a ‘place’ that exists only as and within the text itself.

Common Places, Shared Times, Divergent Histories

It is therefore of particular importance for this study that Lowell, Plath, and Sexton were all from the same geographical region — eastern or coastal Massachusetts — and that they knew each other personally. Though Lowell was the instructor for the class, they seem to have reciprocally influenced each other, if not formally, then in terms of feeling permission and motivation to address in their work what were then considered private matters. These matters included their bouts of depressive illness, which in Lowell’s case involved full-fledged manic-depressive psychosis; their periods of hospitalisation; and the problems in and failures

¹¹ Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place*, p. 202.

¹² Quoted in David Edmonds and Nigel Warburton, *Big Ideas in Social Science* (Los Angeles, CA: Sage, 2015), p. 128.

¹³ Quoted in Edmonds and Warburton, *Big Ideas in Social Science*, p. 131.

of their marriages. These facts are so well-known as to be almost biographical banalities but, precisely for this reason, and in order to give coherence to what follows, they must be interrogated.

Each poet came to their rejection of T. S. Eliot's then-dominant credo of poetic impersonality by different biographical and educational routes. Lowell had published two collections (*Lord Weary's Castle* (1947) and *The Mills of the Kavanaughs* (1951) that were both formally strict and impersonal in Eliot's sense, before writing the poems that became *Life Studies*; and more than half of that collection focused at least as much on his family as on himself.¹⁴ Similarly, Sylvia Plath, with an already solid knowledge of Anglo-American poetic tradition, had been writing well-wrought, mostly descriptive poems that only indirectly dealt with her affective life until she moved to England with Ted Hughes. It was under increasing emotional duress there that she broke through into poetry of great power and intense intimacy. By contrast, Anne Sexton had no formal literary education and began to write poetry as a therapeutic exercise suggested by her psychiatrist; later she attended poetry seminars run by John Holmes and workshops by Lowell. Her emotional life and personal experience were therefore her subject matter from the start.

Second, though all three poets came from the same region, they did not write about it in the same ways. In Plath's case, while she began to expose painful emotional subjectivity in poems she wrote while at Yaddo and that were collected in *The Colossus*, her most important poetry was not written in New England at all, but near the Devonshire coast and in London. (As we will see, the ocean and the shore are important elements in the work of all three). Moreover, their experience of place whilst growing up was conditioned by their respective situations in the socioeconomic hierarchy of New England. Lowell was born into a famous upper-class Boston family, though even in his parents' time changes in the regional economy, and the corporatisation of American capitalism, were already causing its decline. Even so, he was never economically insecure. Sexton came from the commercial upper-middle class and married a fairly successful man who initially worked for her father's company. She used this financial security as a way to move quickly beyond paid employment, focusing on her

¹⁴ The present work examines one poem of Lowell's (and none by the other two) from before 1959: 'In the Cage', written in 1947, which appeared in *The Mills of the Kavanaughs* (1951) and which shows his predilection for self-exploration. This is because it describes directly an experience he had while in prison, and because its language and sensibility are accordingly much closer to the poetry of *Life Studies* than to most of the rest of the earlier collection. In this sense, the poem is a forerunner of Lowell's Confessional style and subject-matter.

writing and on building what became a spectacularly successful literary career. Plath, by contrast, came from the lower strata of the educated middle class. Her father, a German immigrant, was a not-very-well paid academic, and his death pushed the family lower still in the class hierarchy. As a result, Plath had to begin working to help support her mother and brother in high school, and continued to have to take on relatively menial jobs from time to time even after the move to England. Both during and after her marriage to Hughes, she was often in financial difficulties. These facts contributed to her driving ambition to be a professional writer and probably also to the emotional circumspection and formal carefulness of her earlier poetry. All three poets, therefore, grew up in families that were undergoing degrees of downward social mobility.

Third, though all three suffered from mental illness that included severe depression, they did so to differing degrees and with differing symptoms: Lowell's illness was manifested first of all by manic psychosis followed by depression; Sexton experienced recurrent depression that included episodes of severe paranoia and eventually agoraphobia complicated by deepening alcoholism; Plath also suffered primarily from depression and acute anxiety which reinforced each other. These differences had a bearing on their respective experiences of both domestic and institutional space. By the time he began working on the *Life Studies* poems, Lowell had undergone at least two psychotic episodes for which he had been hospitalised so that there was nothing novel or recuperative about the experience for him. For Sexton, by contrast, her first few stays in mental hospital were a relief from what she experienced as the intolerable demands of marriage and family, though as time went on and she was not 'cured', she became bitter and disillusioned about psychiatry in general. Plath's only experience of confinement in psychiatric hospital was from when she was barely out of her teens, during a depressive breakdown that included a nearly successful suicide attempt and following an ineptly administered treatment with electroconvulsive therapy.

All three poets were caught up in the sometimes-dramatic shifts in the treatment and view of mental illness that took place during the 1950s and 1960s and in the development of what has been called a 'therapeutic culture'. At the start of this period, Freudian analysis dominated psychotherapy for the upper-middle class. The other hand, the only other treatment for suicidal depression was ECT — or, in extreme cases, prefrontal leucotomy. However, several new classes of psychoactive drugs became available even as psychiatric opinion began to lean away from Freudianism. Among these new drugs were the

antipsychotic phenothiazines, of which chlorpromazine (Thorazine) is the most well-known and meprobamate (Miltown) which was used as a tranquiliser and sedative. All three were treated with these new drugs at one time or another. Lowell also took lithium for many years as a treatment for his mania.

Meanwhile, writing and art were increasingly being used as forms of therapy — as in the case of Sexton. As a corollary, psychological benefit to the writer or artist began to be seen as a legitimate goal of the work itself. Abstract Expressionism elevated art as an expression of the suffering individual psyche.¹⁵ This focus on the therapeutic strengthened the reassertion of individualism that emerged as a counterweight to social-realist and socially engaged art and literature from the Depression and World War II. Again, together with suburbanisation, the emphasis on individual ‘adjustment’ rather than social improvement had a profound effect on the cultural experience of both domestic and public space. This also led to feelings of isolation, a theme in the work of all three poets, and to a pervasive sense of inadequacy. Continual struggle with these feelings, mingling resistance with capitulation in complex ways, marks the work of all three poets. All three, moreover, were under more or less continual medical or psychiatric supervision throughout their adult lives. Treatment afforded these poets respites, but in the end there was no permanent refuge or ‘safe space’ from their illness; wherever they were, it found them.

Another area of commonality was their writing about their marriages and domestic lives. All three had children, and all three had marriages that failed, in part because of their own ‘difficult’ personalities and bouts of mental illness. Crucially, their marital and familial experiences — as also their experiences as hospital patients — were conditioned by biological sex, by assigned gender roles and the interaction of these roles with sex and sexuality, and by the structural inequality between genders that was re-accentuated during the two decades following the end of World War II. Again, these differences affected their perceptions of domestic space in particular. For Lowell, this space often appears as a kind of lost paradise, in which he himself is the destructive serpent. For Sexton, domestic sanctuary is both rarely described and almost always in the past tense — the blissful home is a space she no longer occupies. In her earlier work especially, domestic space is felt as confinement,

¹⁵ Jackson Pollock’s innovative method of painting was partly prompted by a suggestion from his psychiatrist. For further information about this method, visit <https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/art-1010/abstract-exp-nyschool/abstract-expressionism/v/moma-painting-technique-pollock>.

both more subtle than incarceration in mental hospitals and more destructive. For Plath, perhaps the most committed to family life, the disintegration of the marriage appears as an almost literal shattering of the spaces it has occupied, which brings about a further disintegration of her sense of her own bodily space and integrity. Yet she too expresses profound alienation from the housewife role defined for post-war middle-class women. Within the confining space of the home, with its falsehoods and pretences, both Plath and Sexton felt estranged even within the space of their own bodies.

Accompanying the massive ideological campaign to define womanhood as submissive domesticity there was a huge social-geographical shift of middle-income white Americans from urban neighbourhoods into mostly newly-built suburbs. Again, the relationships of each of the poets to this process correspond to their respective socioeconomic statuses and therefore also to certain spaces and places. However, all three experienced the scaling down from a multigenerational environment to the nuclear family for which the new suburbs were designed and whose supremacy they in turn reinforced. Likewise, the work of all three is affected by the technologies that made suburbanisation possible and that accompanied it: the private automobile (powered by cheap petroleum) and television as a medium of advertising and ideological conditioning. As middle-class women, Plath and Sexton both responded powerfully to the domesticated feminine ideal promulgated as part of suburbanisation and consumerisation.

Contemporary with suburbanisation and consumerisation was the Cold War, which also had profoundly disruptive effects on multiple aspects of social life. These two phenomena have often been treated separately, but recent studies have shown a closer and more complex relationship. For one thing, the explosive growth of the military-industrial complex fuelled by the Arms Race with the USSR — including the space program — generated technologies that were rapidly ‘spun off’ into consumer goods. But even before this process was well advanced, the new, spotless suburban home and its all-electric kitchen had become a centrepiece of American propaganda. In the then-famous ‘kitchen debate’ in 1958, a model General Electric kitchen at an exhibit of consumer goods in Moscow was the backdrop against which Vice-President Richard Nixon ‘lectured’ Soviet premier Nikita

Kruschev about the superiority of American technology and way of life.¹⁶ The homes that young housewives like Anne Sexton — or Betty Friedan, author of *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) — had already begun to experience as a combination of doll's house and glossy solitary cell were being touted by Nixon and by appliance companies like General Electric and Whirlpool as the apotheosis of freedom. The two women's poetic responses, again, differ: Plath brings the politics of the 'kitchen debate' into her own kitchen, while Sexton brings the electric kitchen to the fore without any apparent trace of politics — though her description of being 'placed' in such a kitchen later became, in the context of second-wave feminism, profoundly political in a new way.¹⁷

The social uprooting and isolation created by suburban life combined with the anxieties of the Cold War to create a double wave of paranoia about both the Communist threat and the surveillance undertaken by the police and government agencies such as the FBI. All three poets write about the anxious experience of being watched and judged by unfriendly eyes with no place to hide. This experience together with the constant background threat of mental breakdown encourages their poetry to gravitate towards the Gothic and an atmosphere of menace, disorientation, estrangement, and potential disintegration. Each one encountered this experience not only in the institutions in which they were at various times confined, but at home and in public spaces as well. This experience led to the sense that there was no longer any truly private space. In this way, these writers' deliberate self-exposure in poetry of what had previously been considered private matters can be viewed as a form of defiance.

Taken together, all these factors strongly affected the ways the three poets experienced and described the spaces they occupied and moved through. Of the three, Lowell was the most explicitly socio-geographical as well as the most directly historical; he is the most likely to name the places he writes about and to compare his present experience of them with both their biographical and historical past — though he also plays the role of observer-

¹⁶ 'For the purposes of this collection, therefore, we define the kitchen as a complex, technological artifact that ranks with computers, cars, and nuclear missiles. We also claim that the modern kitchen embodies the ideology of the culture to which it belongs. Modernist kitchens are places filled with gadgetry, of course. More to the point, they are assembled into a unified, modular ensemble and connected with the large technological systems that came to define the twentieth century.' Ruth Oldenziel and Karin Zachmann, eds. 'Kitchens as Technology and Politics: An Introduction' in *Cold War Kitchen: Americanization, Technology, and European Users* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009), 1-33, p. 2.

¹⁷ Sexton's kitchen space, though electric, is almost lifeless ('I roam a dead house, frozen kitchen', Sexton writes in 'Lost Lie'), while Plath's is described phantasmagorically as eerily and furiously animated.

critic of his environment. Both Plath and Sexton, however, also sometimes name places that have been especially important to them in their poems — Sexton because of powerful emotional connotations, and Plath also because she is discovering entirely new terrains, the Yorkshire moors and the Devonshire seacoast, in a context of increasingly problematic personal relationships. Of the three, Plath in her poetry from 1959 on is the most Expressionist in the sense of creating an indissoluble perceptual fusion between psychic and external spaces, to the point at which the poet's subjectivity starts to dissolve, and Lowell the least, with Sexton in between. But the pathetic fallacy is in all three crucial to their rejection of impersonality and their insistence on the primacy of subjective experience in their relationships to space and place.

This use of the pathetic fallacy, while frequent if not ubiquitous in their accounts of domestic and hospital space, especially pervades the poets' descriptions of nature and the outdoors — but again, in different ways for each. The geographical zone of convergence is the New England coast (supplemented, in Plath's case, by the coast of Devonshire). This study argues that this is because it is a liminal space in various mostly symbolic ways — not only between land and sea but between humanised and wild nature, order and chaos, conscious and unconscious, and past and present. In the work of all three, trees, animals, and birds are personified, but what they communicate again manifests the poets' own anxieties. In an inversion of personification, all three also figure humans as animals. These tropes again serve to weaken or dissolve the boundaries between human and natural, subjective and objective, in response to a given space or place. This study argues that such dissolution is as characteristic as self-exposure and emotional extremity in the work of the Confessionals, whose poetry therefore can be characterised to varying degrees as Expressionist.

Research Questions

Before moving on to outline the methodology which will inform this study, I will briefly underscore the key research questions to be explored and answered in the subsequent chapters.

First and most generally, how does subjectivity intersect with space in the work of each of the three poets? How do their experiences of space (manifest as both specific place and as type of place) and time (manifest as both duration and memory) affect each other? As subjectivity is also rooted in the body, how do these poets figure their bodies in various types

of space, and why are images of dolls, dummies, and mannequins recurrent in the work of the two women and not in Lowell's?

Next, what are the social pressures operating on this subjectivity? How do then-recent and contemporary historical events and processes manifest themselves in their poetry? How are advertising and consumerism manifested in the poets' descriptions of both private and public spaces? And how are institutional spaces such as mental hospitals, prisons and jails, and public places (parks etc.) depicted in relation to control, surveillance, and the Cold War? How do these poets manifest contradictory feelings of entrapment, on the one hand, and emotional fulfilment on the other, or between present unhappiness and past happiness, in their accounts of domestic space?

Third, how does the subjectivity of each poet intersect with the non-human? To what extent do each of these poets respectively represent 'nature' (figured as animals, plants, and landscape) as solace, and to what extent as menace? How is the pathetic fallacy or prosopopeia manifest in their descriptions of places and of their non-human or non-living occupants — animals, plants, objects, buildings, topography, and so forth?

Methodology

Cultural geography has focused on the ways in which social groups produce and transform types of space. However, as we have noted, the poets' descriptions are individual 'mappings' in which subjective affect attaches to elements of that space as it is perceived or remembered, so that these elements form a meta-space within the textual system of the poem. By means of this affective mapping, they can be said to be converting space into place by creating such a textual analogue.¹⁸

Accordingly, the method used in the analysis of the texts under study is to apply a variety of theoretical optics, including historicist (in the sense exemplified by the exposition above), biographical, feminist, and post-structuralist, and to a lesser extent psychoanalytic. However, the single most important group of theoretical approaches used comes from social and cultural geography and its precursors. These precursors have been especially valuable because their work articulates general theoretical positions rather than being applied to

¹⁸ Space is also defined by the relationships of the people and objects that occupy it, as in pictorial or monumental space—for example, the spatial relationship between the White House and the Capitol in Washington DC, say, or between the figures in Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J.)* (1907).

specific empirical studies. The earliest of these is Guy Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle* (original *La société du spectacle*, 1967), followed by Henri Lefebvre's *The Production of Space* (1991, original *La production de l'espace*, 1984). Both these thinkers (who influenced each other at different points in their careers) fall partly within one strand of the 'Western Marxist' tradition. They are hence well suited for analysis of the ways in which American capitalism developed after World War II, which as discussed earlier profoundly affected the organisation of social and domestic space. Edward W. Soja's pioneering *The Political Organization of Space* (1971) comes from a different, more sociological perspective, but his later work synthesises Lefebvre's spatial theory with more recent postmodern and postcolonial thought, notably in *Postmodern Geographies* (1989) and with his concept of Thirdspace, a space that is both real and imagined.¹⁹ Among the more recent sources in cultural geography drawn on are Setha M. Low's *Embodied Spaces* (2003) and *Spatializing Culture* (2017), the more empirical work of Doreen Massey including *For Space* (2005) and papers from various collections and symposia, including essays in feminist cultural geography. Also crucial, as might be expected, especially to the examination of carceral and clinical spaces, will be the work of Michel Foucault: *Discipline and Punish* (1975) (original *Surveiller et punir: Naissance de la prison*) but also *The Birth of the Clinic* (2003) (original *Naissance de la clinique: une archéologie du regard médical*, 1963) and *The History of Madness* (2006) (original *Folie et Dérailson: Histoire de la folie à l'âge classique*, 1964) and on the same topic two books by Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1956) and *Asylums* (1961). Attention to gender studies has likewise been essential with reference both to domestic spaces and to the body understood as space, in particular the work of Judith Butler, and again, Setha Low. The body-as-space issue has been critical to the readings of both Plath and Sexton. The study will draw on work that addresses the impact of mass consumer advertising, especially on women. In recent years, various theories of space have begun to be incorporated into literary criticism. A pioneer in this work has been Jo Gill, whose work is also referenced extensively; another especially pertinent example is Jake Adam York's *The Architecture of Address* (2004).²⁰ As might be expected, standard works of

¹⁹ Edward W. Soja, *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1996), p. 6.

²⁰ In researching theory relevant to the present work, Gaston Bachelard's classic *The Poetics of Space* was considered; however, Bachelard focuses on the ways aspects of the interior architecture of buildings, and especially houses, are manifested in poetry. On examination, Bachelard's examples proved less relevant to the poets under study, who generally describe such interiors prosopopeically as reflections or extensions of their

criticism on all three poets have been of use alongside recent and innovative essays and monographs.

The goal has been to develop a multilayered close reading of each poem studied and its relation to the poet's overall approach to space and place, including biographical and historical contexts and circumstance. This layering of analytical grids allows for the uncovering of tensions and contradictions within the meanings of a poem, which in turn are often revealed as social rather than solely personal in origin. That said, given the apparently autobiographical or 'confessional' content of the work of all three authors, the biographical aspect will be of particular relevance, particularly in conjunction with historical and psychological assessments. However, since all three poets created fictive personae in order to express their responses to their own situations, biography will not as a rule be mapped one-to-one onto the explicit or implied narratives in the poems.

A generally historicist approach — situating the poems in a rich context of political, social, and economic events and tendencies, past and present — combined with cultural and political geography has been of particular importance in addressing the poems of Lowell given the historical centrality of his family to the city of Boston, his continual concern with questions of war and militarism, class, race, conformism/authoritarianism, and social justice and the ways in which these affect his experience of space and place. Despite the more intimate and ostensibly narrow focus of the poetry of both Plath and Sexton, questions of gender and power (in a second-wave feminist and Foucauldian sense) recur in the work of both. The approach to the writing of these two women examines how their experiences of both biological femaleness (as mothers and as sexual beings) and middle-class white femininity of the Cold War period, shape their accounts of the domestic interior, nature and the outdoors, and the hospital or psychiatric institution. Given the extreme cultural and commercial pressure on young women to return to submissive domesticity starting in the late 1940s and only challenged on a large scale in the later 1960s, the superficially personal in the writings of Plath and Sexton can be interrogated to reveal the social and historical. For example, the recurrent imagery of dolls, doll's houses, and dismemberment in the poetry of both should be understood as covert political dissent; the images express how the imposition of compulsory femininity via social and cultural expectations made women *feel*. This is

psychic states. For example, Plath's domestic space is not a 'place' in terms of Bachelard's intimacy or Tuan's familiarity; but it becomes one in a conflicted or even hostile way within the meta-space of the poetic text.

particularly true of Plath, who in the last year of her life wrote poems in which both the Holocaust and the threat of nuclear war appear repeatedly.

One important intersection of psychoanalytic and feminist perspectives is the way in which domestic spaces become grotesque — comic, horrific, or a blend of the two — as they are biologised as an externalisation of the inner spaces of the female body, while the body is objectified as a commodity or a building, a mannequin or toy. This intersection contributes to the Gothic sensibility in the work of both Plath and Sexton, present in lesser degree in Lowell's also. More specifically, infusing the work of all three to one degree or another is the terrifying imminence of human extinction, already foreshadowed not only by the obliteration of two Japanese cities but by Nazi genocide and the vast slaughter of World War II.

The present study is by no means exhaustive. The 'spatial turn' in poetry criticism is relatively new, however, and it is hoped that the combined application of various theories of space in combination with more familiar approaches to the poems herein examined will offer a lively and distinctive contribution to the field. Selected poems by each of the poets are examined in turn: Lowell, Plath, then Sexton. The final chapter synthesises the insights gained by comparing and contrasting related readings of each of the three.

Chapter One

‘The Aquarium is Gone’: Robert Lowell in Space

Introduction

Robert Lowell’s depictions of public, institutional, private, and natural spaces explore a decay of human and civic values in Cold-War American society. This decay is caused, in his view, by the substitution of commercial and imperialist imperatives for the traditions of social justice and the common good that he believed were part both of his own heritage and of the American ideal. In his poetry after 1959, he pursues this exploration of space and place in conjunction with a candid mapping of his own character and psychology, including his bipolar disorder. Like Plath (as we will see in the next chapter), Lowell infuses the depiction of space and place with his subjective responses to them, using the pathetic fallacy. Unlike Plath’s, however, these responses often directly address historical and social issues as he experiences them in particular places; the issues are mapped onto these places in the meta-space of the poem.

In *Life Studies* (1959), Lowell views the decline of his family partly through the eyes of his childhood self and partly through contemplation of his younger adult past from the viewpoint of his writing present. These observations are almost always precisely situated in a particular place, whether interior or exterior. By including in the volume poems about his stay in a mental hospital, his return home, his time in jail, and his changing relationship to the small Maine resort town where his family kept a summer home, he implicates himself in this narrative of familial decline. In this way, he extends his self-interrogation to poems about his domestic, therapeutic, carceral, and marital troubles, again localising the experiences quite precisely in particular spaces.

As part of his commitment to this socio-historical and socio-geographical subject-matter, Lowell is predominantly a city poet, particularly of his hometown of Boston. In his preface to an interview with Lowell, Ian Hamilton remarked that ‘since the publication of *Life Studies* and from the last decade, Lowell only wrote about four places: Harvard and

Boston, New York and Maine.’¹ Commenting on this, Lowell responded that ‘these were the places I lived in and also symbols, conscious and unavoidable.’² Hence Lowell in much of his most important work is a regional poet of New England and the Northeast.

Lowell’s comment that in his poetry, the places he lived in were both experiential realities and symbols, applies to other aspects of his representations of place, notably animals. His images of nonhuman living creatures range across a continuum from the literal to the purely metaphorical. However, quite often, the most sharply realistic descriptions of animals, birds, or fish are also some of the most intensely symbolic, in keeping with Ezra Pound’s famous dictum that ‘the natural object is always the *adequate* symbol.’³ Lowell, to be sure, does not always adhere to Pound’s recommendation. Sometimes his animals are not just metaphors but *stretched* metaphors, like the figuration in ‘Fall 1961’ of himself and others in the shadow of nuclear annihilation as ‘a lot of wild/ spiders crying together,/ but without tears.’⁴ In many cases, however, Lowell uses animal imagery—or simply descriptions of the animals themselves — to give an emotional atmosphere to a depiction of a place and, more importantly, to his relationship to that place.

What we might call Lowell’s lyrical localism, as well as the content of the poems themselves, invites an approach that makes use of concepts from cultural geography and related bodies of critical theory. Sara Blair states:

Although accounts of the new geography and its aims proliferate, none has mapped its shared interests with American studies insofar as the latter concerns literary texts, literary history, and literary historiography [...] Cultural geography provides powerful new models and vocabularies for revisiting certain definitive (and apparently intractable) problems in American literary studies, long perched on a hotly contested border between literature and culture, the aesthetic and the social.⁵

Lowell engages with multiple dimensions of public, institutional, and natural spaces: sensory, social, cultural, political, historical, and ideological. Through his observations, the human-modified environment becomes a mirror the poet holds up to himself, not merely as a

¹ Ian Hamilton, *Robert Lowell, Interviews and Memoirs*, ed. by Jeffrey Meyers (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1988), p. 154.

² Ian Hamilton, *Robert Lowell, Interviews and Memoirs*, p. 154.

³ Ezra Pound, ‘A Few Don’ts by an Imagiste’ *Poetry*, March 1913, retrieved from <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/articles/detail/58900>. [accessed 14 March 2017].

⁴ Robert Lowell, ‘Fall 1961’ in *The Collected Poems*, eds. by Frank Bidart and David Gewanter (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003), p. 329. Hereafter will be cited as *CP* and only line number(s) will appear in parentheses.

⁵ Sara Blair, ‘Cultural Geography and the Place of the Literary,’ *American Literary History*, 10, 3.1 (Autumn, 1998), 544-567, p. 545.

monadic individual but as a product of a specific familial, cultural, and socio-political history. Lowell's spaces are thus infused not only by personal time, in Massey's sense of 'stories', but by historical and social time from which his own poetic persona is inextricable.⁶ Hence descriptions of or allusions to them, particularly public and other exterior spaces, cannot be read in either a purely objective and/or a purely semiological way. They are not social-geographical analytical reports. The reality of a space, as Henri Lefebvre explains in *The Production of Space*, is definable in layers, each of which interacts with the others: its functionality and the social relations that currently define that functionality; the history and evolution of those relations and functionality; its physical actuality, including its dimensions, objects it contains, and so forth; and the sign or signs by which and as which it is understood, also arising from those relations past and present (though these may be mystified or distorted by ideology).⁷ This layering can be both simplified and dynamised into what Edward Soja calls a trialectic between Firstspace (the actual physical space); Secondspace (the way in which the space is conceptualised and discussed); and Thirdspace (the fusion of Firstspace and Secondspace that is how the space is actually experienced and *lived* materially and affectively).⁸ When such a real space is represented in a poem, any or all of these layers may be described or alluded to as aspects of Soja's Thirdspace, but the verbal (semantic) construct of the space in the text becomes a new sign or system of signs and must be read as such. However, a spatial analysis of this text, which is an account of the writer's imaginative experience of the space during a certain period of time, must take in the prior physical, social-relational, and semiological dimensions of that space. In what follows I have attempted, where possible, to maintain a dialectical relationship between the signified (the space as it appears in the text) and the referent (the space itself as defined in Lefebvre's sense, though this referent of course is another signified in the chain). Where no such precise referent can be identified, I have recourse to its metaphors and other tropes in relation to whatever elements of 'objective' description can be extracted from the poem. In *The Poetics of the American Suburbs*, Jo Gill writes:

⁶ She states that '[t]he social spaces through which we live do not only consist of physical things: of bricks and mortar, streets and bridges, mountains and sea-shore, and of what we make of these things. They consist also of those less tangible spaces we construct out of social interaction.' Doreen Massey, 'Space-time and the politics of location,' *Architectural Design* 68 (1998), 49-61, p. 49.

⁷ Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, p. 226.

⁸ Soja defines Thirdspace as 'a fully lived space, a simultaneously real-and-imagined, actual-and-virtual locus of structured individuality and collective experience and agency'. Edward W. Soja, *Thirdspace*, p. 6.

I argue that geography (topography, spatiality) also “permeate[s]” this poetry, and must be taken into account in our reading of its aesthetic form and social function. In light of recent theoretical work in cultural geography by Michel De Certeau, Edward Soja and other scholars [...], we must understand that social and subjective domains while historically and discursively constituted are also inflected spatially.⁹

This chapter is a contribution along the same lines, and draws strongly on the work of Gill and others in this area, though it addresses spaces beyond the suburbs. My goal in the present chapter, as in this study as a whole, is to contextualise the close readings of poetry in the way Gill specifies. In pursuit of this goal, the chapter below is divided into four sections.¹⁰ The first addresses public space in Lowell’s poetry, through close readings of ‘The Public Garden’, ‘For the Union Dead’ (1959), ‘July in Washington’, ‘The Mouth of the Hudson’, and ‘Central Park’ (all 1964). The second section deals with Lowell’s poems of confinement and will consider ‘In the Cage’ (1947), ‘Memories of West Street and Lepke’ (1959), ‘Visitors’ (1976), and ‘Waking in the Blue’ (1959). The third section examines poems of domestic and marital space including ‘Home after Three Months Away’ (1959), ‘The Drinker’ (1964), ‘Night Sweat’ (1959), ‘Man and Wife’ (1959), and ‘The Old Flame’ (1964). The fourth and final section looks more deeply at the intersection of the personal, the social, and the natural in poems set on the Maine coast with particular attention to ‘Water’ (1964) ‘Soft Wood’ and ‘Skunk Hour’ (both from 1959).

Lowell in Public Space: Circles within Circles

In this section the close reading of the poems mentioned above will intersect with a range of overlapping issues, namely: the transformation of public space and the erasure of historical memory by capitalist development; the intersection of personal and historical memory; how both U.S. imperialism and democratic politics are materialised in public space; social class and sexuality as they are manifested in public spaces like parks; social isolation in the capitalist city; and ecological degradation.

An important prefatory note is simply that Lowell loved Boston, the home of his family for many generations and a place of enormous historical importance. Again and again,

⁹ Jo Gill, *The Poetics of the American Suburbs* (New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p. 5.

¹⁰ There are of course poems which belong to more than one space: ‘Skunk Hour,’ ‘Memories of West Street and Lepke,’ ‘Home after Three Months Away’ and ‘My Old Flame’, for example. Each of these poems crosses over between different zones so I have placed these poems as ‘transitional’ texts between the spaces/sections with which they intersect.

even as late as 1975, a few years before his death, in poems like ‘Return in March’ or ‘Phillips House Revisited’, he is glad to back, as he writes in ‘Bright Day in Boston’:

Joy to idle through Boston,
my head full of young Henry Adams
and his unnoticed white silk armband,
worn for a day to free the slaves. (ll. 1-4)

The progressive, relentless betrayal of this love by capitalist modernity is an overarching theme in his poetry. ‘An epoch ago the instant/ when one could live anywhere/ unendangered, unendangering/ anything but respect...’ he writes, but now Boston is ‘a city of murder, an American city’. The downward arc of civility and community Lowell perceives in Boston’s history is paralleled in miniature by the madness-driven curve of his own personal relationships. The transition between tenses in this poem creates what Debord has called ‘spatial alienation’:

Time is a necessary alienation, being the medium in which the subject realizes himself while losing himself, becomes other in order to become truly himself [...] the alienation suffered by the producers of an estranged present. This is spatial alienation [...].¹¹

Debord’s persistence on the prevalence of time over space could be analysed through Lowell’s conflicted spaces, not only between past and present but also between the power of history and (the tools of) modernity. Lowell’s spaces are opaque since they are concrete, abstract, mental, and social (a mixture of Lefebvre’s triad).

In ‘The Public Garden’ (1964), Lowell describes a visit to Boston’s oldest city park.¹² The poem begins with a series of adjectives in a syntactically ambiguous sentence: ‘Burnished, burned-out, still burning as the year/ you lead me to our stamping ground.’ Is the referent of this string of anaphoric near-rhymes ‘you’, who is thus compared to the year — or is it the year itself, in which case ‘you lead me to our stamping ground’ becomes a modifier of ‘year’? Either way, the ambiguity suggests that the addressee is ‘burnished’ — shining or polished by long use — and yet simultaneously ‘burning’ and ‘burned-out.’ ‘Stamping-

¹¹ Bill Brown, *Not Bored! Anthology 1983-2010* (Cincinnati, OH: Colossal Books, 2011), p. 322.

¹² Ruth Sherry further points out that Boston Common and the Boston Public Garden are virtually contiguous, but that the Common belongs to the People of Boston, while the Garden belongs to the City. This distinction is important because it delineates two different aspects of the city’s history: the Common is unregulated and ‘unimproved’ land[...]; the Garden is a controlled space with rules [...]. The importance of the Common to the city’s culture will be discussed in the section below on ‘For the Union Dead’. Ruth Sherry, ‘For the Union Dead’: A Bostonian’s Notes.’ *American Studies in Scandinavia*, 12.1, (1980), pp. 33-38 (34).

ground’ as a term for this place suggests long familiarity, as ‘our’ also implies acquaintance with the addressee. The Public Garden, then, is a space in which these two people have spent time as a couple. The tone and the deliberate use of a cliché like ‘stamping ground’ remind us, as will other lines in the poem, of ‘My Old Flame’ (discussed below) — itself a clichéd title revived by the tender lyric that follows.

The Garden is surrounded by ‘the city and its cruising cars’, making it a kind of oasis of tradition in the midst of heedless modernity. (In part three of ‘Charles River’, Lowell’s perception of natural space is shattered by the cars: ‘No stars, only cars, the stars of man’). In Lefebvre’s terms, this is a monumental space. Lefebvre defines this type of space as follows:

Monumental space offered each member of a society an image of that membership, an image of his or her social visage. It thus constituted a collective mirror more faithful than any personal one. [...] Of this social space... everyone partook, and partook fully — albeit, naturally, under the conditions of a generally accepted Power and a generally accepted Wisdom. The monument thus effected a ‘consensus’, and this in the strongest sense of the term, rendering it practical and concrete.¹³

Unlike his treatment of the neighbouring Boston Common in ‘For the Union Dead’, however, the poem makes relatively little reference to the Garden’s monumentality — to its several statues of Abolitionist, Civil War, and Revolutionary War heroes, for example, which parallel the Colonel Shaw monument in civic significance. Lowell’s more personal focus in this poem does not escape the monumentality of the Public Garden or the Ether Monument and its fountain; it exists within it, as the image of the stone lions ‘suck[ing] on empty fawcets’ confirms. The fountain that forms the affective and mnemonic centre of the poem, the locus of its yearning to restore an idyllic and even ecstatic past, is in fact the ‘Ether Monument’ (image below), erected to commemorate the first use of ether as an anaesthetic in nearby Massachusetts General Hospital in 1845. To the informed reader, this is ironic; ether dulls agony and induces oblivion, while the contrast between the dry fountain in the present and the poet’s experience of childlike play in its waters is a source of evident emotional pain. The Garden seems at first to be in good condition:

All’s alive —
the children crowding home from school at five,
punting a football in the bricky air,
the sailors and their pick-ups under trees
with Latin labels. (ll. 4-8)

¹³ Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, p. 220.

Lowell's use of olfactory and visual images enhances the scene and provides the reader with a sweeping sensorial and spatial overview of the Garden. The air is 'bricky' because the time is sunset — but also presumably because Boston is a city of brick buildings. The contrast of the sailors and their 'pick-ups' with the primly informative Latin labels on the trees reminds us that this is a monolithic democratic space open to all regardless of class and education. The reader's first clue that something is amiss comes in the next sentence: 'And the jaded flock/ of swanboats paddles to its dock.' The swanboats rather than their occupants, in a classic Lowellean metonymy, are 'jaded': bored, tired. The next line states the problem succinctly: 'The park is drying.' In any description of a garden, of course, 'drying' rhymes conceptually as well as phonically with 'dying'. The next few lines provide more spatial diagnostic details:

Dead leaves thicken to a ball
inside the basin of a fountain, where
the heads of four stone lions stare
and suck on empty fawcets [sic]. (ll. 11-14)



Figure 1: The Ether Monument in the Boston Public Garden¹⁴

¹⁴ *The Ether Monument in the Boston Public Garden* in *Cryan* <<http://www.cryan.com/blog/20170406.jsp>> [accessed 7 April 2017].

This, then, is late autumn, and the fountain in the park has been turned off, leaving the stone lions metaphorically thirsty, unnourished (though in fact the ‘fawcets’ are below the lion-face reliefs, not in their mouths). This suggests that the Garden is also neglected: ‘the park is taking on the characteristics of an arid wasteland.’¹⁵ A similar perception of a ‘wasteland-like’ nature, though in a wider view, is suggested by Hayes, who claims that ‘nature in Lowell is described as the site of error, transgression, fault, offense, punishment, crime’.¹⁶ As ‘[n]ight deepens,’ the couple watch the ‘shedding park-bound mallards, how they keep/ circling and diving in the lanternlight,/ searching for something hidden in the muck.’ The couple may be engaged in a similar hungry search in the darkness for something hidden in the ‘muck’ of old feelings. Taken together, the thirsty stone lions and the hungry mallards, as well as the ‘jaded’ swanboats, invest the Garden with a sense of discontent and loss.¹⁷

The scene is now illuminated by the moon, personified in a series of oxymorons that suggest the emotional contradictions within the setting. The moon is both ‘earth’s friend’ and ‘always a stranger!’ It ‘cared so much’ for the couple, and yet ‘cared so little.’ Stripped now of romantic connotation, the moon’s light ‘lies like chalk/ over the waters.’ Like the swan boats in the ‘drying’ Garden, ‘Everything’s aground.’ Then, as often in Lowell’s mature lyrics, there is a nostalgic turn, in which the ‘summer’ the speaker asks the addressee to remember is figured as the lost paradise of their relationship:

Bubbles filled
the fountain, and we splashed. We drowned
in Eden, while Jehovah’s grass-green lyre
was rustling all about us in the leaves
that gurgled by us, turning upside down... [Ellipsis in the original] (ll. 24-28)

By conjuring the last summer’s memory, Lowell uses the fountain, as he does with the aquarium in ‘For the Union Dead,’ as a spatial nexus which ties the vibrant past to the wasteland-like present of the Garden. The metaphor of ‘Eden’ implies innocence; like the primordial couple, the poet and his addressee frolic, watched over and serenaded (as wind in the leaves) by ‘Jehovah’. In an embedded metaphor, the ‘autumn’ of the poet’s middle age is

¹⁵ Rudolph L. Nelson, ‘A Note on the Evolution of Robert Lowell’s “The Public Garden”’, *American Literature*, 41.1 (March, 1969), 106-110, p.109.

¹⁶ Paula Hayes, *Robert Lowell and the Confessional Voice: Studies in Modern Poetry* (New York: Peter Lang, 2013), p. 94.

¹⁷ In this they resemble the frustrated, unhappy, but living caged lion and the starving kitten in ‘Central Park’ to which we turn below. Moreover, the Garden is perceived as a museum of fossilised animals.

implicitly contrasted with the ‘summer’ of his youth, but now ‘the fountain’s failing waters flash around/ the garden.’ As the water fails, so does the ‘burning’ of passion between the former lovers. The visit to the Public Garden has been a failure: ‘Nothing catches fire.’

The poet has so infused the space of the Garden with his mood that it is difficult to know how much of the decay is his own projection. One hint that the description may have at least a partially objective foundation is the way Lowell initially locates the park: ‘The city and its cruising cars surround/ the Public Garden.’ The verb choices here have a vaguely military resonance. As in ‘For the Union Dead’, Lowell is intensely aware of how the imperialistic spread of the private automobile and its requirements — smooth asphalt-paved streets, parking garages — is occupying and reshaping the urban space he inhabits. There is a hint that the Garden’s decay may in part be caused by the decline in pedestrian traffic that also accompanies the invasion and conquest of the city by the private car. The Garden, like the Common, is a space of *threatened* monumentality — though the threat that seems to concern the poet most is the loss of present civic value manifested in the neglect to which he alludes.

Lowell’s concern with public and historical space in Boston takes a different (and much expanded) form in ‘For the Union Dead’. In this poem he expresses grief and bitterness at the replacement of the past by commercial modernity, which erases and deforms the old city and in so doing falsifies historical memory.¹⁸ Lowell’s act of remembrance serves not purely as history, but as an anxious metahistorical commentary on what the past has become. It is a symptom and a complaint: ‘the aquarium is gone.’ Boston is a city of immense importance to the history of the United States. Besides being one of the starting points of the Revolution, it was also a center of abolitionism from at least the 1840s on. To Lowell, the reconfiguring of Boston by capitalist technology and commercialism actively erodes the foundations of history and cultural traditions in which he is deeply and personally invested.¹⁹

The specific struggle that forms the background to Lowell’s poem was over the building of a subterranean parking garage under Boston Common. Since 1640, Bostonians

¹⁸ In this regard, Paul Breslin calls the tools of modernity ‘the forces of forgetfulness and commercial greed’. Paul Breslin, *The Psycho-Political Muse: American Poetry Since the Fifties* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), p. 74.

¹⁹ Lowell’s first quoted remark in Ian Hamilton’s *Robert Lowell: A Biography* shows how proud he was of his birthplace: ‘Like Henry Adams, I was born under the shadow of the Dome of the Boston State House.’ Ian Hamilton, *Robert Lowell: A Biography* (New York: Faber & Faber; 2011), p. 1.

had been accustomed to thinking of the Common as their collective property — as indeed, under English-derived common law, it was. The garage plan was therefore fiercely resisted.

Low states that

One of the most effective ways to investigate the social construction of space is through an analysis of ‘contested spaces,’ those ‘sites where conflicts in the form of opposition, confrontation, subversion, and resistance engage actors’ – often with differential access to power and resources [...] These conflicts frequently center on the control of the construction of local meanings, but they also reveal broader social struggles over deeply held beliefs and practices as well as political and economic realities that shape everyday life.²⁰

Similarly, Lowell shows how the Common becomes a site of a capitalist technology and commercialism conflict. In this regard, Martin Jones states that ‘conflicts of this type arise because places are never neutral entities with undisputed objective meanings. Rather they are socially constructed’.²¹ An eventual compromise required restoring the topography of the Common to its former state, but symbolically, the impact was devastating to traditional Bostonians.²² Lowell’s poem was composed as part of this struggle, and when he read it aloud on the Common during the Boston Arts Festival, he helped to galvanise public opposition to the project and to the commercialisation of the city’s public space.

As Paul Breslin points out, the focus of the narrator shifts in an archaeological way around this central event, offering a chronology of the city’s history starting in the colonial era, moving through the nineteenth century with the Civil War, and finishing with the poem’s present, with flashbacks to the prehistoric epochs of fish and reptiles.²³ The conflicts and convergences between the prehistoric, the historical, and the contemporary become a tragic drama, as the old churches and the Civil War monument seem to vainly resist the ‘dinosaur’ steam shovels and contemporary commercial activity. The resistance is vain because the garage is a symptom, not a cause, of the processes that will lead to the vitiation of an already compromised historical memory and civic consciousness. The opposition between the historic city, with the role it played in a struggle for the nation’s unity and the freedom of

²⁰ Low quotes herself and Denise Lawrence-Zuñiga from *The Anthropology of Space and Place: Locating Culture* (Oxford and New York: Blackwell, 2003), p.18: Setha Low, *Spatializing Culture: The Ethnography of Space and Place* (New York: Routledge, 2017), p. 75.

²¹ Martin Jones and et. al., *An Introduction to Political Geography*, p. 115.

²² ‘The city’s proposal to build a parking garage under the Common – a project mooted for years and finally realized at the beginning of the 1960’s – produced the most heated struggle of such a kind in recent times’, Ruth Sherry, p. 35.

²³ Breslin, *The Psycho-Political Muse*, p. 78.

black people, and the contemporary one, becomes monstrous. Central to this opposition is the automobile and all it meant — including the way it was transforming both space and the American psyche.

We can return at this juncture to Henri Lefebvre's concept of the monumental space alluded to above in the reading of 'The Public Garden'. Lowell's mapping of the public spaces of 'historic Boston' — the Public Garden, the Common, the Statehouse, and so on — constitutes such a space. In 'For the Union Dead', Lowell chooses the Common as a specific sub-region of this space. As Jake Adam York notes, Lowell's comprehensive engagement with the meanings of the Common as a space is not neutral: 'He subtly alters the relationships of these meanings so they will communicate his own sense of Boston's social crisis [...]. In other words, Lowell uses the space of the Common to transmit his argument [...]'.²⁴ Citing Lefebvre,²⁵ York goes on to argue:

As Lowell describes the Common, he translates it into the 'codes' of a 'literary text,' and, at least for a time, 'reduces that space' to 'a message' that can be read, turning 'the inhabiting of it' into 'a reading.' As we read, we enter the Common Lowell constructs through language, and gradually come to inhabit his reading, as if it were a space.²⁶

In other words, by semiotically and historically reading the Common and its situation as a text, Lowell reciprocally creates the Common as a virtual space within the poem. Though under different spatial guises: desolated, dreamt of, buried, imagined, renovated, and finally 'gone,' Lowell's textuality of space is found everywhere.

The poem opens with a semi-paradoxical spatial image: 'The old South Boston Aquarium stands/ In a Sahara of snow now.' The snowy wasteland and the desert are both empty, sterile expanses, a resemblance reinforced by the whispering alliteration of 'stands [...] Sahara [...] snow', and the open, windblown half-rhyme of 'snow [...] now.' This shows how Lowell's use of formal devices such as line break, full or partial rhyme, alliteration and

²⁴ Jake Adam York, *The Architecture of Address: The Monument and Public Speech in American Poetry* (New York: Routledge, 2005), p. 2.

²⁵ 'Semiology raises difficult questions precisely because it is an incomplete body of knowledge which is expanding without any sense of its own limitations; its overt dynamism creates a need for such limits to be set, as difficult as that may be. When codes worked up from literary texts are applied to spaces—to urban spaces, say—we remain, as may easily be shown, on the purely descriptive level. Any attempt to use such codes as a means of deciphering social space must surely reduce that space itself to the status of a message, and the inhabiting of it to the status of a reading. This is to evade both history and practice.' Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, p. 7.

²⁶ York, *The Architecture of Address*, p. 3.

enjambment (as we will see below in ‘Water’) evokes a subjective experience of place. The sense of ruin and desolation is reinforced with details of the building’s decay — ‘[i]ts broken windows are boarded. / The bronze weathervane cod has lost half its scales.’²⁷ From this exterior view, the poet moves to remembering the interior he knew as a child: ‘Once my nose crawled like a snail on the glass;/ my hand tingled to burst the bubbles/ drifting from the noses of the crowded, compliant fish.’ Though the speaker announces the death of the aquarium, he still recalls the ‘snail,’ ‘bubbles’ and ‘fish’ that contradict the concurrent spatial site of the aquarium. These lines prepare us for the ironic contrasts that will appear as the poem unfolds.

In the next few lines, the poet finds himself attracted to the world he saw captured in the aquarium’s tanks long ago: ‘I often sigh still/ for the dark downward and vegetating kingdom/ of the fish and reptile.’ This ‘dark kingdom’ lacks not only light but walls or limits — it is an unbounded space like that of his imagination. The poet sighs for their ‘vegetating kingdom’ because ‘fish and reptile’ are also cold-blooded, relatively simple creatures, which represent an escape from the emotional turbulence to which his illness continually subjects him.

The dreamy interlude is interrupted mid-line by an abrupt juxtaposition that jerks the reader into the near-present: ‘One morning last March/ I pressed against the new barbed and galvanized/ fence on the Boston Common.’ We have moved in both space and time — to a different part of Boston and to the recent past. Now the poet as an adult is pressing against not glass but metal, as the historic heart of the city is being dug up for an ‘underworld’ (not merely *underground*) garage. This is only the first of what becomes a web of metaphoric linkages between various pasts and the poem’s present which function as a textual analogue of what Lefebvre calls the ‘texture’ of a space. He contends that ‘[t]ime and space are not separable within a texture so conceived: space implies time, and vice versa’.²⁸ The poet here gives us our first clue to the reason for the disruption and destruction of an urban space that at the time of writing had been there for almost three centuries: the rise of the automobile as a

²⁷ Sherry notes that ‘in Boston, indeed in Massachusetts generally, the cod is also intimately associated in the public mind with the existence and identity of the state. The significance of the cod for the early economy of the colony is a familiar fact, and the name given to Massachusetts’ most striking geographical feature, ‘Cape Cod,’ reflects the cod’s importance in the life of the early settlers.’ Ruth Sherry, ‘For the Union Dead’: A Bostonian’s Notes’, p. 33.

²⁸ ‘These networks are not closed, but open on all sides to the strange and the foreign, to the threatening and the propitious, to friend and foe’. Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, p. 118.

dominant means of transport. In this regard, Guy Debord writes: ‘The dictatorship of the automobile — the pilot product of the first stage of commodity abundance — has left its mark on the landscape with the dominance of freeways, which tear up the old urban centers and promote an ever-wider dispersal. [...] But the technical organization of consumption is only the most visible aspect of the general process of decomposition that has brought the city to the point of consuming itself’.²⁹

The digging machines, in keeping with the ‘underworld’ space they are creating, also seem to the poet archaic, even prehistoric — steam shovels become (yellow) ‘dinosaurs’ that grunt as they ‘gouge.’ Yet their saurian quality and the subterranean spaces they are creating also link them to the ‘dark downward kingdom’ of the reptiles he has longed for — as if he dreamed of a space that was at once primordial and infinite, in ironic contrast to the new garages, the finned cars and the mechanical dinosaurs (one might recall the new version of such melodrama — that is *Jurassic Park*). However, the poet denies himself the luxury of personal nostalgia. He describes the fish in the now-empty Aquarium tanks as having been ‘cowed, compliant’ — an allusion which takes us forwards to the poet’s anxiety about present-day Bostonians. In the poem’s present, the monument to Civil War hero Colonel Shaw is ‘shaking’ and ‘propped by a plank splint against the garage’s earthquake’ — imagery that suggests a wounded and traumatised soldier. Even the Statehouse, the central repository of the city’s history and that of Massachusetts, is threatened — held up precariously and ironically in terms of colour symbolism by ‘a girdle of orange, Puritan-pumpkin colored girders.’ The monument and the Statehouse, in Michael North’s words, are ‘microcosmic summations of an entire culture.’³⁰ They are spatially expressive, like a weathervane, since they have their impact(s) on the identity of the place, perhaps because of their ascribed personal meaning to the speaker. Hence the built landscape, including Boston’s historical residues, has extended its functional meaning into a symbolic dimension.

The next three stanzas are devoted to a detailed description of the St.-Gaudens bronze relief [See Figure 2. Below] on the monument to Colonel Shaw and his ‘bell-cheeked Negro infantry’, so lifelike that ‘at the dedication/ William James could almost hear the bronze Negroes breathe.’ York notes that the decrepit cod weathervane on the South Boston

²⁹ Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, Thesis 174, trans. by Ken Knabb. Retrieved from <http://bopsecrets.org/SI/debord/7.htm>.

³⁰ Michael North, *The Final Sculpture: Public Monuments and Modern Poets* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press 1985), p. 30.

Aquarium and the ‘Negro’ soldiers are linked by being made of bronze, suggesting that their images too are part of the city’s historical decay. But the two descriptions of the soldiers subtly contradict each other. In the actual relief, the troopers are indeed extraordinarily lifelike — each face is fully individual, at least as much so as the face of Colonel Shaw himself. ‘Bell-cheeked’, however, suggests a racially caricatured image of black men much



Figure 2: The Shaw Monument, Boston³¹

more common in 1897 when the relief was cast. The poet may be suggesting that the people of Boston did not perceive them as individuals as they marched past, that although free men they were not the equals of whites — a suggestion reinforced by the fact that they are three times referred to as ‘his’ (Shaw’s) Negroes (or ‘niggers’). York argues that ‘bell-cheeked’ gives the soldiers a metaphoric likeness to the fish blowing bubbles in the Aquarium, thereby metaphorically suggesting that their march through the city on their way south to the front was merely another spectacle. This seems to be reaching, and as I have indicated, the point about the incomplete humanity of the men from the white citizens’ viewpoint can be made without it. As York also notes, the ‘fish-bone’ links the monument back to the Aquarium and the fish that, like the black soldiers, are gone and half-forgotten. It is worth noting that

³¹ National Service Park, *The Shaw Monument, Boston* in *National Service Park Gallery* <<https://www.nps.gov/saga/learn/historyculture/the-shaw-monument.htm>> [accessed 18 July 2017].

Thurston's opposition to linking the children to the fish seems invalid since the animal analogy is clear.³²

The animal imagery used to describe Shaw exemplifies what the poet evidently views as New England's civic virtues. He is 'lean as a compass-needle./ He has an angry wrenlike vigilance,/ a greyhound's gentle tautness;/ he seems to wince at pleasure,/ and suffocate for privacy.' American wrens tend to have dull gray and brown plumage, like the modest clothing of the Puritan settlers, and as insectivores they wait intently for their prey. Greyhounds, by contrast, are as the poet writes, gentle in temperament, but 'taut' in their lean, long-legged build. The monument, representing Shaw's moral 'compass needle', points in the right direction, and as such, given the reconfiguration of Boston's urban space in the service of a burgeoning car culture, 'sticks like a fishbone/ in the city's throat.' The transformation of the monument into a *fishbone* not only brings more animal imagery into the scene by metamorphosing the soldiers (resembling the image of the 'Negro schoolchildren's' faces floating in a TV screen) into a school of fish, but also subtly transfigures the ditch into aquarium tanks that form, in the poem's metaphoric system, a graveyard. We learn that '[t]wo months after marching through Boston/ half of the regiment was dead.' Lowell makes explicit reference to this in the poem: its Latin epigraph is an inscription on the sculpture, and means 'They gave all for the Republic.' The poem's spatial focus then expands to a melancholy view of rural New England:

On a thousand small-town New England greens
the old white churches hold their air
of sparse, sincere rebellion; frayed flags
quilt the graveyards of the Grand Army of the Republic. (ll. 41-4)

Historical memory of the struggle for the Union (and, as the war progressed and black men like Shaw's soldiers volunteered) against slavery is preserved in the spaces of small-town church graveyards, but the memory, like the flags, is 'frayed.' Another ironic contrast with the real if worn 'sincerity' of their commitment is made in the next stanza:

The stone statues of the abstract Union Soldier
grow slimmer and younger each year —
wasp-waisted, they doze over muskets
and muse through their sideburns... (ll. 45-8)

³² York, *The Architecture of Address*, p. 13.

In parallel with the commercial reconfiguration of Boston's space, its history is, in the words of Guy Debord, becoming a 'spectacle', whereby 'everything that was once lived moves away into its representation'.³³ These newer statues no longer refer to specific people and events. Unlike St.-Gaudens' strongly individual black soldiers, they are 'abstract', falsely beautiful — and they 'doze' and 'muse', lacking the real Colonel Shaw's 'angry, wrenlike vigilance' as represented in the bronze. In falsely representing history, they put it to sleep.³⁴

Next, in yet another mordant turn, the real nobility of Shaw and his troops and their sacrifice is simultaneously emphasised and (almost literally) undercut by the blunt description of their resting place after combat: 'the ditch,/ where [Shaw's] body was thrown/ and lost with his "niggers."' Though they are memorialised in bronze, the actual bodies of these men are 'lost' in an unmarked grave where they were presumably tossed by Confederate soldiers, for whom giving a white man a common grave with black men was an insult. To the poet, however, it is the opposite: Shaw lived and died by his evident conviction in the humanity of his men and their right to freedom.

'The ditch is nearer', the poet writes in the next line, presumably contemplating the excavations of the steam shovels.³⁵ It is not only Shaw and his men who are at risk of being buried under the 'New Boston', but 'the honour of a city and a region whose people led the struggle for the Union and human equality.'³⁶ Following the excavation of the city described by the poet, we progress from the quasi-natural space of the Aquarium, populated by fish and reptiles, to the human-crafted Civil War monuments, and then to the modern era, which is represented by advertisements.

There are no statues for the last war here;
on Boylston Street, a commercial photograph
shows Hiroshima boiling
over a Mosler Safe, the 'Rock of Ages'
that survived the blast. (ll. 54- 58)

³³ Guy Debord, Thesis 1, p. 7.

³⁴ Michael Thurston, 'Robert Lowell's Monumental Vision: History, Poetic Form, and the Cultural Work of Postwar Lyric,' *American Literary History*, 2000, 12.1, 2 (Spring/Summer 2000), pp. 79–112.

³⁵ The physical and spatial connectedness of the 'ditch' and commotion of the shovels is compared to the horror of the nuclear.

³⁶ Michael Thurston, 'Robert Lowell's Monumental Vision', p. 79.

Lowell once announced that ‘we have emerged from the monumental age.’³⁷ The erasure of statues unveils the twentieth century as an *un-*‘monumental age’ where the location of the statue has been exploited by advertisers and builders. For Lowell, the connotation of such erasure, and perhaps absence, from ‘Boylston Street’ is emblematic. Lowell’s refusal to accept such erasure of the monuments for the commercial necessities of modernity is a demand to preserve the weighty symbolic values and historical contexts of these monuments. He is not only elegising the erasure of these modified or about-to-be-demolished spaces, but also critiquing the power behind what is soon to be built. The only ‘memorial’ to World War II in the new Boston is a heartless advertisement for a safe (which protects money but not human beings) that remained intact through one of the greatest atrocities of the war: the dropping by the United States of an atomic bomb on a densely-populated city. The brutally sardonic part-rhyme of ‘Boylston Street’ with ‘Hiroshima boiling’ underlines the poet’s point about dehumanisation. ‘The blast and heat of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima did not destroy the vaults of Teikoku bank.’³⁸ Such a ‘monument’ is in keeping with the cold, oblivious, even amnesiac transformation the city is undergoing.

In the famous last stanza, the city’s true rulers are no longer people but ‘giant finned cars’ which ‘nose forward like fish’ now that the aquarium — the space of the poet’s childhood dreams and of a living natural history — is gone. The ‘compliant’ streamlined form the poet admired in fish as a child, mechanised and enlarged into the automobile, becomes frightening and destructive. Lowell summarises in one haunting image what he feels his country and his culture have become, and the moral betrayals fuelled by capitalism and militarism that have brought them down: ‘A savage servility slides by on grease.’ Nearly a century after the outbreak of the Civil War that led to the end of legal human slavery in the United States, the mechanical slaves have become the masters.³⁹ Lowell’s bitter description of the ‘finned cars’ can also be analysed in relation to Cold War politics.

Cars were designed and advertised to resemble the exciting hardware of the Cold War: streamlined, finned like missiles, fitted with elaborate-looking controls,

³⁷ Michael Thurston, “Robert Lowell’s Monumental Vision: History, Form, and the Cultural Work of Postwar American Lyric,” in *American Literary History* 12.1, 2 (Spring/Summer 2000), pp. 79–112.

³⁸ Shaun Usher, ‘Your products are stronger than the atomic bomb,’ *Letters of Note* 1, (2010). URL: <<http://www.lettersofnote.com/2010/09/safe.html>> [accessed 23rd April 2015].

³⁹ ‘To want to redesign architecture to accord with the needs of the present massive and parasitical existence of private automobiles reflects the most unrealistic misapprehension of where the real problems lie.’ Thesis 4.

decorated with gleaming chrome and abstract representations of rockets or airplanes. In ads, cars were posed next to jet fighters and radar dishes.⁴⁰

The design of cars became crucial for consumers. The missile-inspired-cars are a reflection of the aesthetic of the Cold War politics in which streets become a stage for a spectacle — platforms for power-display. These associations emphasised America's role as a superpower in competition with the Soviet Union.

Much later, in the late poem 'Suburban Surf' (1978), the sounds of car traffic have become partially naturalised. The poet is lying awake next to his wife:

No conversation, then
suddenly as always cars
helter-skelter for feed like cows

suburban surf comes alive, (ll. 6-9)

The sounds of the traffic have become 'surf' in '[l]ong, unequal whooshing waves [that] break in volume,/ always very loud enough to hear [.]' Simultaneously, in a mock pastoral image, they are like cows. Yet the 'surf' projects 'glassy, staring lights/ lighting the way they cannot see —' He goes on to describe them as '*méchants*, mechanical'. 'Méchant' means 'wicked' in French. The poet, now living in the suburbs, has become accustomed to the 'surf' of traffic but is aware that the headlights 'light the way they cannot see', that their occupants are thoughtless, like cows crowding in 'for feed', and that they are fundamentally evil devices that help 'mechanise' the lives of those driving them.

Urban (and suburban) space, then, as Lowell creates its textual analogue in 'For the Union Dead', is a giant museum of fading values and aspirations where history melts into air like the bubbles and balloons floating up through the verse. The capitalist city, as the Situationists (a group formed around the time when Lowell was writing these city poems, and whose intellectual leader was Guy Debord) remind us, continually devours itself — and its own history. That is why space for nature (even in a constructed form like the South Boston Aquarium, or to a lesser extent the open spaces of Central Park or the Public Garden), may be seen by developers as no longer necessary and may be cleared or demolished for yet more modern buildings to emerge in their place. In this regard, Lefebvre states that 'An existing

⁴⁰ Thomas Frank, *The Conquest of Cool: Business Culture, Counterculture, and the Rise of Hip Consumerism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), p. 61. Hence appeared what is later known as a 'Googie architecture style'.

space may outlive its original purpose [...] it may thus in a sense become vacant, and susceptible of being diverted, reappropriated and put to a use quite different from its initial one'.⁴¹ In a broader sense, the public space is fetishised for the sake of the ruling power. Such open spaces also typically contain reminders of history in the form of statues, monuments, and so forth. By linking past and present via the 'texture' of metaphors in the poem's meta-space, Lowell simultaneously critiques the present and hints at how the inadequacies of the past partly led to them. But even where these spaces and their commemorative artifacts are preserved, their meaning can be falsified or contaminated by commercialism.

In 'July in Washington', Lowell contrasts nature with the architecture of power while suggesting that power has also contaminated the natural space. This architecture is described through the image of the traffic circles and radiating streets that form the underlying plan 'inside the Beltway' (that is, encircled by U.S. 495) in Washington: Dupont Circle, Logan Circle, Truxton Circle, and others. The poet condenses these circles into a single metaphorical 'wheel' whose 'spokes' of power spread out across the world. This concentric and imperial organisation of space can be viewed as the extension, by means of technologies of transport and communication, of the radial configuration of traditional monarchical capitals. Whereas Lowell in 'For the Union Dead' recreates in dense detail the space of Boston Common and its environs via a web of metaphors linking past and present, the representational space of 'July' is more an overlay of coordinating points linked associatively by historical, political, and geographical understanding to which it for the most part alludes only indirectly.

The poem opens: 'The stiff spokes of this wheel/ touch the sore spots of the earth./ / On the Potomac, swan-white/ Power launches keep breasting the sulphurous wave.' Stephen Yenser comments: 'Repeated references to 'circles' and the image of 'the sulphurous wave' on the Potomac suggest that the American capital is an infernal hub of colonialism whose 'stiff spokes' prod at 'the sore spots,' the underdeveloped and vulnerable nations of the world.'⁴² Within one couplet, the poem has widened its space from the District of Columbia to the entire planet — and in the next has contracted again.

⁴¹ Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, p. 167. This is what the developers are eager to achieve and what 'reactors' are trying to resist.

⁴² Stephen Yenser, *Circle to Circle: The Poetry of Robert Lowell* (Berkeley, CA: The University of California Press, 1975), pp. 230-1.

On the Potomac river, ‘swan-white power launches’ — as opposed to actual swans, or the paddle-powered swan-boats of the Public Garden — move through the sulphur-smelling, polluted water. Where the swanboats in the Public Garden were ‘jaded’ and ‘paddled’ to shore, these are *power* launches, moving swiftly on power’s errands. But, like the sun itself in ‘The Mouth of the Hudson’, the river is contaminated with sulphur compounds. The launches’ power and whiteness may be in part a veiled allusion to the demography of Washington DC, which was and is really two cities: the hub of the Federal government, with its wide, stately streets, neoclassical buildings, many monuments, and in those days almost exclusively white legislators and administrators; and surrounding it the rest of the District of Columbia, which was and is predominantly poor and black. Glancing at the shore, the poet watches as ‘[o]tters slide and dive and slick back their hair,/ raccoons clean their meat in the creek’. Yenser reads these images as metaphors for the dishonesty and rapacity of legislators.⁴³ However, the placement of this couplet immediately before the next, with its depiction of the green-oxidised bronze statues of U.S. heroes as ‘rid[ing] like South American liberators above the breeding vegetation’ suggests that the animals are carrying on their usual lives in spite of the pollution. Their unself-conscious naturalness is both a contrast to the power launches and a bridge to the vegetative imagery that follows. Given the frequently antidemocratic and exploitative role played by the United States in Latin America since at least the late nineteenth century, this simile carries a political sting. Their greenness leads the poet to the conceit that the statues, like the vegetation they resemble in their colour, are the ‘prongs and spearheads of some equatorial/ backland that will inherit the globe.’ Central Washington DC, like the historic Boston of ‘For the Union Dead’, is a monumental space in Lefebvre’s sense. But its monumentality, which is its attempt to achieve permanence, is undermined in the poem by the likening of the statues to *South* American liberators and tropical vegetation. As Lefebvre remarks:

Monumental ‘durability’ is unable, however, to achieve a complete illusion. To put it in what pass for modern terms, its credibility is never total. It replaces a brutal reality with a materially realized appearance; reality is changed into appearance. What, after all, is the durable aside from the will to endure? Monumental imperishability bears the stamp of the will to power.⁴⁴

⁴³ ‘Neither meliorism nor mythology is possible in a world whose leaders are unctuous as otters that ‘slide and dive and slick back their hair’ and rapacious as raccoons that “clean their meat in the creek.”’ Stephen Yenser, p. 293. Like the oily cars that ‘slide by on grease’ in ‘For the Union Dead’.

⁴⁴ Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, p. 222.

Together these metaphors conjure the vanguard of an imagined invasion from the global South — a metaphorical texturing that short-circuits the chronological time between past and future. The armature on which this texturing is elaborated is the radial wheel or circle of circles that is the poem's image of power and its projection.⁴⁵

In the next few lines, the poet reinforces the sense of decadence of the imperial republic: 'The elect, the elected [...] they come here bright as dimes, and die dishevelled and soft.// We cannot name their names, or number their dates — circle on circle, like rings on a tree — '. His implication is that the system gradually strips politicians of their will and dignity and that they are forgotten, even as the 'rings' of America's imperial power continue to expand blindly through space and time, subliminally figured in the traffic circles of inner Washington.

Abruptly breaking off this lamentation for the republic he also mourns in 'For the Union Dead', the poet addresses the melancholy that afflicts those who still yearn for the vision of an expansive, unbounded America, here represented as 'another shore, some further range of delectable mountains, // distant hills powdered blue as a girl's eyelid.' The space of the poem abruptly widens again, to take in an Arcadian imaginary territory of freedom. 'It seems the least little shove would land us there', beyond the corruption and repression of official Washington. The final couplet is initially mysterious: 'that only the slightest repugnance of our bodies/ we no longer control could drag us back'. If 'bodies' is taken to mean the individual human bodies of the poet's 'we' — presumably, Americans in general — this is hard to make sense of. The clue is 'bodies *we no longer control*' (italics mine). These are the legislative and judicial bodies of the republic, over which the citizens have lost sovereignty. Even the 'slightest repugnance' of these bodies toward advancing the nation to greater freedom and possibility on the 'other shore' would indeed hold them back. As Michael Hoffman remarks: 'The poem is not far short of a discreet call to the barricades.'⁴⁶ In the end, then, this is a more subtly hopeful poem than 'For the Union Dead'. It envisions an alternate possibility, however remote, in place

⁴⁵ 'A spatial work (monument or architectural project) attains a complexity fundamentally different from the complexity of a text, whether prose or poetry. As I pointed out earlier, what we are concerned with here is not texts but texture. We already know that a texture is made up of a usually rather large space covered by networks or webs; monuments constitute the strong points, nexuses or anchors of such webs'. Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, p. 222.

⁴⁶ Michael Hoffman, 'His Own Prophet', *London Review of Books*, 25.1, 17 September 2003, pp. 3-8; retrieved from <https://www.lrb.co.uk/v25/n17/michael-hofmann/his-own-prophet>.

of the narrative of relentless commercial and imperial brutalisation the poet presents elsewhere.

‘Fall 1961’ is a companion piece to ‘July in Washington’. The poem describes the experience of living through the Cuban Missile Crisis, which took place in October of that year.⁴⁷ It is centred on the image of a grandfather clock: ‘Back and forth, back and forth goes the tock, tock, tock [...] Time, which may be a count-down to the end of the world, is monotonously counted out in the poet’s home. ‘All autumn, the chafe and jar/ of nuclear war;/ we have talked our extinction to death.’ Helpless as a tiny fish in a glass bowl, the poet ‘swim[s] like a minnow/ behind my studio window.’ Painfully, he realises that in the face of this threat, ‘A father’s no shield/ for his child’ — a realisation similar to Anne Sexton’s in her poem from the same period, ‘The Fortress’.⁴⁸ Likewise, his diction and imagery in the poem converge with Plath’s late work, also from around this time:

Our end drifts nearer,
the moon lifts,
radiant with terror.
The state
is a diver under a glass bell. (ll. 11-5)

In their helplessness, the poet and his fellow citizens are ‘a lot of wild/ spiders crying together,/ but without tears.’ This is a curious, convoluted image. To begin with, all spiders are ‘wild’ in the sense that they cannot be domesticated. Nor can spiders ‘cry’, alone or together, with or without tears. But spiders are small, fast-moving, and hide in crevices. He anthropomorphises them as ‘wild’ with terror; they are ‘crying without tears’ because they are stricken with grief at the prospect of annihilation. This mass grief and terror was the obverse of American imperial military power and the project of first ‘containing’ and then eventually destroying the Communist threat.

In ‘The Mouth of the Hudson’, Lowell examines the backstage of the spectacle of the ‘American Century’. The nation’s global dominance was made possible by its emergence from World War II, alone among the industrialised nations, relatively

⁴⁷ In response to the threat of a second invasion of Cuba, the Castro government had received several Soviet nuclear missiles. The US demanded their immediate removal; the USSR refused. For several days, people around the world were terrified that global holocaust was imminent. Finally, a compromise was reached and the missiles were withdrawn.

⁴⁸ In this poem, Sexton, cuddling under a quilt in her home with her young daughter, laments her inability to protect her child from all the threats and dangers of the world, chief among them death in nuclear war.

unscathed and with a vast new productive capacity developed first to manufacture consumer goods and then expanded to create war materiel. But this second wave of American industrialisation, which like the first wave was carried out with little or no regard for environmental consequences, soon began to damage severely the air, water, and soil around the factories and mills and along the rail lines that linked them.

The witness to this devastation in the poem is a ‘single man’ who ‘stands like a birdwatcher’ in the dirty, soot-flecked snow on top of a ‘discarded, gray Westinghouse Electric cable drum’.⁴⁹ The poet is willing to ‘name names’ in this indictment: Westinghouse was at the time a leading manufacturer of home appliances such as washing machines and television sets. The poet, then, is here alluding to the environmental price paid for consumerism. Whatever ‘America’ is, it is not the merchandise being brought to this transportation hub from all over the country by the ‘condemned freight-trains’. The long lines of cars that ‘jolt and jar/ and junk’ in the freight-yard have become ‘chains’, suggesting, along with ‘condemned’, both prisoners and slaves.⁵⁰ Society, far from being freed by all these consumer goods touted as ‘modern conveniences’, is being enslaved by them, as the ‘servile’ cars in ‘For the Union Dead’ enslave the historic Boston and its civic values. It ‘transforms the world’, in Debord’s words “‘This economy has transformed the world, but it has merely transformed it into a world dominated by the economy. The pseudo-nature within which human labor has become alienated demands that such labour remain forever *in its service*; and since this demand is formulated by and answerable only to itself, it in fact ends up channeling all socially permitted projects and endeavors into its own reinforcement’⁵¹

The watcher atop the cable drum allows his attention to drift ‘with the wild ice/ ticking seaward down the Hudson’. The ice is compared first to ‘the blank sides of a jigsaw puzzle’ and then, because of the ‘ticking’ sounds of the ice fragments striking each other in the current, to a clock. The ticking clock of the ice recalls the ‘tock, tock, tock’ of the clock in the poet’s home in ‘Fall 1961’ (one may recall the Biblical resonance of the ‘Fall’ and the trajectory of missiles (which fall to earth)) — another doomsday clock, though here the doom is environmental degradation rather than nuclear war. The puzzle represented by the scene is

⁴⁹ This description is odd, given that no birds appear in the poem. But that is precisely the point. The observer is a birdwatcher without birds.

⁵⁰ The harsh alliterative onomatopoeia of ‘jolt and jar and junk’ echoes ‘Fall 1961’: ‘All autumn, the chafe and jar of nuclear war [...]’. Lowell feels bruised by the jerky impacts and abrasions of capitalist technological civilization, with its heedless environmental destruction and lurching towards mass nuclear extinction.

⁵¹ Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, Thesis 40.

insoluble because the pieces are upside-down, hiding their true meanings and relationships. Together, the clocklike ticking and the unreadable jigsaw pieces transported by the current, jolting each other like the chained freight cars, suggest a fragmented, commoditised experience carried along by an alienated, mechanical time.

The only other human figure in this cold, grimy world is a ‘Negro toast[ing]/ wheat-seeds over the coke-fumes/ of a punctured barrel.’ The black workingman trying to feed himself is simultaneously poisoning it with carbon monoxide and other toxic materials, as well as the ‘chemical air’ that ‘sweeps in from New Jersey’ across the river. The poet’s criticism does not stop with the visual ugliness of the scene but also addresses the smells and everything they imply about how industry and coal combustion are poisoning the air, where

ledges of suburban factories tan
in the sulphur-yellow sun
of the unforgivable landscape. (ll. 21-3)

In Lowell’s later years, he was able, painfully, to acknowledge how the river that flowed through his beloved Boston had suffered a similar fate. In ‘Charles River’ (1973) he writes: ‘No stars, only cars, the stars of man, mount sky and highway’ and describes how a stone embankment that had flanked the river had been narrowed ‘by highways down to a stubbly lip’. He continues:

Once — you weren't born then — an iron railing,
cheerless and dignified, policed this walk;
it matched the times, and had an esplanade,
stamping down grass and growth with square stone shoes: (ll. 6-9)

The erasure of the ‘cheerless and dignified’ nineteenth-century post-Puritan city by the needs of the automobile continues. But the poet does not allow himself the luxury of nostalgia. He adds, sardonically: ‘The Charles, half ink, half liquid coal dust, bears witness to the health of industry.’ There was no Golden Age of capitalism. He is resigned, aware of his own complicity: ‘but who/ can hope to enter heaven with clean hands?’

Gill discusses similar suburban scenery depicted in Kenneth Rexroth’s poem ‘Gic to Har’. She meticulously examines the spatial surroundings of what she calls ‘suburban modernity’.⁵² Industry is churning out the merchandise whose by-products are fouling the

⁵² As in Lowell’s poem, Rexroth’s initial negative stimulus is the clanking of freight cars, which develops into an anger against the proliferation of factories and their waste. Another parallel to Lowell’s poem is the fact that Rexroth bitterly recalls the beautiful song of the Grosbeak, which induced an epiphanic experience in him as a

environment, to the point where the sun itself is yellowed by the sulphur compounds in the air. The landscape is ‘unforgivable’ by the speaker of the poem, but also by anyone prepared to face the reality of what industrial consumer capitalism was doing to America and the world.

As we have seen, then, Lowell’s middle-period poetry (1959-1967 in particular) is rife with abused, contaminated spaces: his ‘landscapes are full of rubble, sewage and filth — the end products of erosion, corruption and decay.’⁵³ One of the most provocative of Lowell’s urban poems is ‘Central Park’, in which the poet describes the famous New York park and deplores its miserable condition. Like ‘For the Union Dead’, this poem, written when the Civil Rights movement was nearing its peak, addresses race relations, though in a less direct fashion. Though the park’s actual form is oblong, in Lowell’s poem it is figuratively at the centre of concentric rings of social issues, chief among them inequality and the damaging effects of both wealth and poverty.

Central Park is one of the most popular places in New York for both locals and tourists. Situated in the heart of the city, it was designed by the architect Frederick Law Olmsted as a space in which to enjoy nature, play, and rest. If the poem is read without the title, though, one might not (unless one was acquainted with the park during the period when Lowell wrote about it, circa 1965) deduce that Central Park is the location. This is because of Lowell’s depiction of a shabby, dirty, overcrowded and generally unpleasant landscape. The park is yet another monumental space whose effort at permanence is being undermined by changes brought on by late capitalism.

Axelrod argues that Lowell’s roaming through the park was a ‘vacation from [his] furies — from a Vietnam War that raged on and on, from a New York City bristling with physical threat and intellectual fierceness, from a [second] failing marriage.’⁵⁴ Yet the narrative of the poem seems less an account of a ‘vacation’ than a psychological as well as geographical journey wherein the poet’s fury and grief build against the moral and social defilements brought about by pervasive institutional violence and social injustice. However, Axelrod is correct that ‘Central Park’ was written at the same time that protest against the

boy, and which he no longer hears — as Lowell’s ‘birdwatcher’ sees no birds. Jo Gill, *The Poetics of the American Suburbs* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p. 174. Gill deftly explores the range of disparate feelings among American poets towards suburban modernity. She yokes these variations to cultural and technological developments.

⁵³ Hugh B. Staples, *Robert Lowell: The First Twenty Years* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1962), p. 14.

⁵⁴ Steven Gould Axelrod, *Robert Lowell: Life and Art*, p. 214.

Vietnam War was raging on the streets and '[c]ivilian demonstrators flock[ed] to New York's Central Park to rally around Vietnam veterans protesting the war; more demonstrations followed in San Francisco and Washington D.C.'⁵⁵ Yet the poem makes no mention of the war or the protests. Having been jailed for his refusal to be drafted in World War II, Lowell maintained an even stronger principled opposition to the war in Vietnam. He also criticised the government's neglect of the poor and its failure to act quickly enough on the demands made by the Civil Rights movement. The park in the poem becomes a stage to deliver these latter criticisms. The spread of demonstrations and marches against the war as against racial injustice, while it does not appear directly in the poem, is hence vital to its context.

Curiously, though, unlike 'For the Union Dead', 'Central Park' opens not with a literal and detailed description of some part of the locale analogous to the shuttered aquarium, but instead with a self-description of the poet, apparently in some altered mental state, moving through the space of the park: 'Scaling small rocks, exhaling smog,/ gasping at game-scents like a dog,/ now light as pollen, now as white/ and winded as a grounded kite.' The poet seems both light-headed and out of breath. The 'dog' simile integrates the poet into the metaphoric system that will liken the Park's lower-class occupants to various animals: bees, a lion, a kitten. The poet, while observant of what is around him, heightens the pathos and eventually nightmarish quality of his observations through his diction, to the point at which the wealthy people of New York become mummies in gilded cave-tombs and criminals and police hide behind every bush.

This introductory passage is followed by an hallucinatory vision of many pairs of 'lovers' lying on the park's lawns half-undressed, occupying 'every inch of earth and sky': 'one figure of geometry,/ multiplied to infinity' — as Alan Williamson observes, 'as inexorably geometrical as a cubist painting.'⁵⁶ Since they cannot legally be naked in the park, when the poet speaks of 'each precious, public, pubic tangle/ an equilateral triangle' he is presumably referring literally to their revealed armpit hair, though he makes the genital connotation obvious.

⁵⁵ Ivy Kenneth Blecher, 'Three Centuries of American Wars: The History of American Wars, Vietnam War Protests' URL: <<http://www.history-of-american-wars.com/vietnam-war-protests.html>> [accessed 05 June, 2015].

⁵⁶ Alan Williamson, *Pity the Monsters: The Political Vision of Robert Lowell* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), p. 88.

The lovers, crowded together in a space now perhaps too small to accommodate them all comfortably, have filled ‘every inch’ with their eroticism, and Lowell’s language seems to express an odd mixture of revulsion and tenderness: ‘The stain of fear and poverty/ spread through each trapped anatomy, and darkened every mote of dust.’ (The verb ‘darkened’ here may be a hint at the skin colour of the poor and fearful). Nature, including human nature, is contaminated by social misery. The lovers have not escaped the conditions of their lives, though they are trying to during this brief time lying together in the sun: ‘All wished to leave this drying crust,/ borne on the delicate wings of lust/ like bees, and cast their fertile drop/into the overwhelming cup.’ Sexual fluids are here metaphorically likened to honey as the lovers are to bees. But if ‘this drying crust’ is the earth itself, what is ‘the overwhelming cup’?⁵⁷ Williamson argues that it is a kind of fusion of pleasure and death — not a new concept by any means, as ‘death’ is a well-worn and widely used euphemism for orgasm.⁵⁸ But given the ‘stain’ that has spread across them, this sweetness is already poisoned, and the lovers’ wish to escape the ‘drying crust’ of their existence though sexual ecstasy cannot be fulfilled.⁵⁹

The next verse paragraph is a jump-cut to the image of the caged lion ‘[d]rugged and humbled by the smell/ of zoo-straw mixed with animal’, who ‘prowled his slummy cell,/ serving his life-term in jail.’ From ‘every inch of earth and sky’ the poem’s space has compressed into a stinking ‘slummy cell.’ As several critics including Williamson have observed, the lion has become a figure for a poor man, probably black, who even in the ghetto slum where he lives is already serving a ‘life-term.’⁶⁰ This refers back to the image of the impoverished lovers seeking a brief escape as they sunbathe and is reinforced by the next two lines: ‘glaring, grinding, on his heel,/ with tingling step and testicle...’ This is, potentially, both a racialised and racist image of the angry, hypersexual black man as a caged beast — a figure of nobility and courage, no longer ‘drugged and humbled’ but ‘glaring’ from his unjust and cruel confinement. But while the lion is literally caged, other people in the park are also

⁵⁷ Note the similarity to the image of ‘drying’ park in ‘The Public Garden’. This phrase recalls the ‘drying’ Public Garden, but broadens the desiccation to the entire world even as it also suggests a piece of stale bread — the food of the poor.

⁵⁸ Alan Williamson, *Pity the Monsters: The Political Vision of Robert Lowell*, p. 31.

⁵⁹ Vereen Bell views this passage in more general terms: ‘Whatever the innocent individual ambitions may be, they all come out the same in the end, absorbed into time’. Vereen M. Bell, *Robert Lowell: Nihilist as Hero* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983), p. 107.

⁶⁰ Alan Williamson, *Pity the Monsters: The Political Vision of Robert Lowell*, p. 28.

in a sense imprisoned.⁶¹ The space of the zoo becomes a metaphor for the institutionalised space as a whole, as it contains erotic energy that wants to break free. The lovers in their tile-like, repetitive crowding are also imprisoned in their daily lives, unable to escape the ‘drying crust’ or, like the lion, to fully express their sexuality.

In another remarkable transition, the poet shifts attention from the imprisoned but still vigorous lion to a brief, sad anecdote about an abandoned ‘one-day’ kitten, ‘deprived, weak, ignorant, and blind,/ squeaking... left behind.’ The clue that the social metaphor is being extended to the children of the urban poor is that the kitten is ‘dying with its deserter’s rich/Welfare lying out of reach’. Welfare is the standard American term for public assistance, then newly reorganised as the Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) program initiated under President Johnson. Yet society has ‘deserted’ the poor, and social welfare payments are not reaching children, who are dying ‘ignorant and blind.’⁶² The kitten is the metaphorical child of the strong, fierce, but imprisoned lion, abandoned to misery in the midst of a plenty it cannot access.

As ‘shadows... stained the afternoon,’ ‘a single, fluttery, paper kite/ grazed Cleopatra’s Needle, and sailed/ where the light of the sun had failed.’ The kite reminds us of the poet’s likening himself to a ‘winded kite’ at the start of the poem; now the kite of the poet’s imagination is airborne, perhaps lifted by mania, but has gone into darkness. The spatial boundaries of the park no longer constrain the poet because night has fallen, and the boundaries of time are likewise being erased. The poet, in this ‘jungle hour’ (another reference to the iconography of white racism) imagines the fear haunting the wealthy whose luxury apartments and hotels overlook the park, ‘the rich in his slit-windowed tower’, and addresses him/them directly: ‘Old Pharaohs starving in your foxholes,/ with painted banquets on the walls.’ As cruel as they are, the rich are ‘tyrants with little food to spare’; they are ‘starving’ for spiritual rather than physical nourishment. In death, their tombs become defensive ‘foxholes’ — a military term for a cavity dug in the ground by soldiers under fire. As the image of the dead pharaohs becomes more literal, the poet comments sardonically on

⁶¹ In *Discipline and Punish*, Michel Foucault compares institutionalised places like factories, schools, universities, and hospitals to prisons. These institutions, according to Foucault, are mere extensions of jails: ‘the prisons exist to hide the fact that we live in a carceral society.’ Roger Pol Droit, ‘Michel Foucault, on the Role of Prisons,’ *The New York Times on the Web* (5 August 1975). Retrieved from: <https://www.nytimes.com/books/00/12/17/specials/foucault-prisons.html>.

⁶² Despite the fact that the majority of Welfare recipients were white, because black people were the victims of institutional racism and thus disproportionately poor, the popular image of the welfare recipient was a black woman from the ghetto.

the failure of their efforts to escape death and take their riches into the afterlife with them: 'all your embalming left you mortal,/ glazed, black, and hideously eternal, all your plunder and gold leaf/ only served to draw the thief.' The wealthy whites turn black in death, their eternal pseudo-life as mummies is a 'hideous' caricature, and they fall prey to robbers. The monumentality of the Park as a space is simultaneously affirmed and denied, less by the poor making use of it in an ephemeral struggle to enjoy their lives, than by the delusional and selfish wealthy, whose material possessions allow them to remain in denial about their own deaths.⁶³ For Lowell, the park turns into a space of pervasive threat, potential entrapment, and surveillance. 'We beg delinquents for our life' where 'behind each bush [is] perhaps a knife' in a 1960s New York beset by crime, but 'each landscaped crag, each flowering shrub/ hides a policeman with a club.' Finally, the space of the park belongs to no-one, and is a place of fear for rich and poor alike, where the menace of criminal violence is matched and mirrored by the threatening surveillance and potential counter-violence of the police.⁶⁴ Crime and repression are two sides of a vicious, degenerative cycle brought about by social inequality and ruthless commercialism at home, and imperialist aggression abroad. In 'Central Park', Lowell fuses this awareness with an excruciating sense of disconnection, fear, and helplessness brought on by his own encroaching manic illness. The public space here is contested spatially, ethically, economically, politically, psychologically, and socially. From his time in prison and from some of his forced stays in hospital, Lowell knew far better than most people of his class what it was like to be constantly coerced, regulated, and surveilled, and how casually and heartlessly brutal the official guardians of Order could be to those who violated it.

Lowell Confined: Madness and Choice

Robert Lowell produced an extraordinary amount of poetry during and following his confinement in multiple hospitals and prisons. Lowell's later experience with confinement

⁶³ Lefebvre comments: 'A monumental work, like a musical one, does not have a 'signified' (or 'signifieds'); rather, it has a horizon of meaning: a specific or indefinite multiplicity of meanings, a shifting hierarchy in which now one, now another meaning comes momentarily to the fore [...] To the degree that there are traces of violence and death, negativity and aggressiveness in social practice, the monumental work erases them and replaces them with a tranquil power and certitude which can encompass violence and terror.' Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, p. 222. The Park's former 'tranquil power and certitude' is unable to encompass the violence and terror that now more and more pervade it, because the extent of social inequality and injustice will not allow it.

⁶⁴ Lefebvre notes: 'State-imposed normality makes permanent transgression inevitable. As for time and negativity, whenever they reemerge, as they must, they do so explosively. This is a new negativity, a tragic negativity which manifests itself as incessant violence,' p. 23.

was as a result of an ‘extended and persistent’ bipolar disorder that lasted for more than thirty years, despite repeated hospitalisations and attempts at treatment.⁶⁵ During these three decades, Lowell was confined in several countries: the USA, Germany, Switzerland and the United Kingdom. However, incarceration (or the sense of being imprisoned in his daily life outside institutions) remained prominent in his early-to-mid-period poetry. Although experiences of institutional confinement take up less of his later poetry, confinement as an underlying theme is seldom altogether absent.

Lowell refused the military draft during World War II because of ethical objections to how the War was being conducted. In a rejection of his prominent Puritan-descended family’s tradition of New England Protestantism, he had recently (in 1941) adopted Catholicism, which seems to have served as a moral framework for how he ‘rebelled against the terrible bloodshed of civilian bombing.’⁶⁶ He was not a pacifist and therefore did not qualify as a legal conscientious objector for ‘alternative service’ such as working in a military hospital. For this reason, he was sentenced to a year in Federal prison. Lowell made public his ethical objection (which was supported by the Church as a legitimate position, though the Church did not condemn the War as such), as Paul Mariani relates, in a letter to both President Roosevelt and the Federal District Attorney for Southern Massachusetts.⁶⁷ Here he argued that as long as the United States insisted on the unconditional surrender of its enemies, and did not stop bombing the civilians in northern Germany in particular, then the war was unjustifiable.⁶⁸ This moral impulse to stand against the oppressive and unjust military actions of the United States was not limited to the firebombing of Hamburg and Dresden. Lowell would also protest the nuclear bombing (and total destruction) of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and later, as noted above, would join the mass protest movement against U.S. involvement in the war in Vietnam.

Ironically, Lowell’s poor vision meant that there was little chance that he would actually be accepted to serve in the Army. His refusal to appear at the Draft Board for inspection was a largely symbolic gesture. Hence Lowell’s history of institutional confinement begins not with his bipolar disorder and hospitalisation, but with incarceration as

⁶⁵ Kay Redfield Jamison, *Touched with Fire: Manic-Depressive Illness and the Artistic Temperament* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994), pp. 112-14.

⁶⁶ Henry Hart, *Robert Lowell and the Sublime* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1995), p. 118.

⁶⁷ Paul Mariani, *Lost Puritan: A Life of Robert Lowell* (New York: Norton, 1996), p.104.

⁶⁸ Robert Lowell and Jeffrey Meyers, *Robert Lowell, Interviews and Memoirs*, p. 143.

a common felon. He later said of this time: 'I was quite scared going in, but I only spent five and a half months in jail, then six and a half on parole in a Catholic cadet nurses' dormitory, mopping corridors. It was filthier work than jail, but I was free and with my wife.'⁶⁹ He continues:

Jail was monotonous and weak on incident. I queued for hours for cigarettes and chocolate bars, and did slow make-work like wheeling wheelbarrows of cinders. I found life lulling. I slept among eighty men, a foot apart, and grew congenial with other idealist felons, who took homemade stands.⁷⁰

In retrospect, then, prison was not a place that Lowell was unwilling to recall. He could get cigarettes and chocolate bars, he made some friends, and he could exercise. Though the prison ward was crowded, life inside was 'lulling,' and, strikingly, 'gentler' than his college time.

Lowell served his sentence in three different institutions. The first ten days' imprisonment took place in West Street Jail in New York City, while most of his five and a half months in custody were in the Federal Correctional Centre in Danbury, Connecticut. The balance of his sentence, six months on parole, was spent, as he records, serving at St Vincent Hospital.⁷¹ The two poems examined in this section are 'In the Cage', published in *Lord Weary's Castle* (1946) and 'Memories of West Street and Lepke' which appeared in the final section of *Life Studies* (1959). 'In the Cage', though written earlier, describes his experience of incarceration as a felon in Danbury, though as we will see in strikingly different terms than his later-life recollection of it. 'Memories' is a more extended account, written in the conversational free-verse style he adopted for *Life Studies*, of his time in the West Street Jail.

The thirteen-year gap between composing these poems generates differing perceptions of what Foucault calls 'carceral space.'⁷² This difference in how he viewed spaces like prison, and later hospital, could not only be attributed to the setting, but also to the 'time of production' as Lowell's comprehension of institutionalised spaces was deepened through his several engagements with these institutions and his fear of them declined through familiarity.⁷³ But fear is strongly evident in the first of his prison poems.

⁶⁹ Paul Mariani, *Lost Puritan: A Life of Robert Lowell* (New York: Norton, 1996), p. 107.

⁷⁰ Quentin D. Miller, ed., *Prose and Cons: Essays on Prison Literature in the United States* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2005), p. 135.

⁷¹ Ian Hamilton, *Robert Lowell: A Biography*, pp. 91-97.

⁷² Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, p. 270.

⁷³ Quentin D. Miller, ed., *Prose and Cons*, p.133.

‘In the Cage’ is the only published poem of Lowell’s derived directly from his Danbury experience, and was written a few years after his incarceration. Though the prison is at times described as a space of chaos, it is also one of supervision, containment and correction. The prisoners are organised into groups whereby their existence in space and time is ordered. This is very much in keeping with Erving Goffman’s functional definition of the ‘total institution.’⁷⁴ Lowell conveys the containment of the inmates by ‘visible and invisible boundaries: the hall, the houses, the garb; the walls that inscribe him and do not let him out’.⁷⁵ ‘The lifers’ are introduced first by their distinctive prison uniforms of ‘laundered denim’ and then by ‘their houses’ — the spaces by which they are identified.

Lowell, as we have seen, associates himself with another group of prisoners. Hamilton tells us that Lowell ‘dressed sloppy just like all of [these prisoners], ill-fitting clothes, shoes’ and grouped himself with ‘these privileged characters [who] got the best jobs.’⁷⁶ According to his own account, these included being on ‘one of those pick-and-shovel gangs. Dig up a hole, fill it in again’.⁷⁷ He later described prison as ‘a boring yet ultimately congenial place.’⁷⁸ The poem, however, is sharply at variance in tone and structure with these recollections of Danbury.

The poem’s setting is the prison mess hall. As in many prisons, the mess-hall is surrounded by one or more tiers of cells facing onto catwalks (which the poet ironically describes as ‘balustrade[s]’) that run along two or three sides of the hall, starting one floor up. The description of the scene opens with the ‘lifers’ ‘fil[ing] in from their houses’ in double file: ‘twos/ Of laundered denim’. We are made aware that beyond the already expansive and high-ceilinged hall space is a much larger carceral space comprising multiple cell blocks or ‘houses’ in which prisoners are segregated according to multiple criteria, including length of sentence, type of crime, and race.⁷⁹ The highly controlled order represented by the lifers, however, is immediately challenged in the noise of the hall:

⁷⁴ ‘The central feature of total institutions can be described as a breakdown of the barriers ordinarily separating three spheres of life’. Erving Goffman, *Asylum: Essays on the Social Situation of Mental Patients and Other Inmates* (New York: Doubleday Anchor, 1961), p. 6.

⁷⁵ Judith Harris, ‘To Bedlam and Almost All the Way Back’: The Image and Function of the Institution in Confessional Poetry’ in *Signifying Pain: Constructing and Healing the Self through Writing* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2003), pp. 219-232.

⁷⁶ Ian Hamilton, *Robert Lowell: A Biography*, p. 92.

⁷⁷ Ian Hamilton, *Robert Lowell: A Biography*, p. 92.

⁷⁸ Judith Harris, *Signifying Pain*, p. 232.

⁷⁹ Michael Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, p. 277.

On the wall
A colored fairy tinkles blues
And titters by the balustrade;
Canaries beat their bars and scream. (ll. 3-6)

The ‘colored fairy’ is an effeminate Black homosexual. He ‘tinkles blues’, perhaps on a piano against the wall below the catwalk, and ‘titters’. The two feminine-associated verbs ‘tinkles’ and ‘titters’ combine with ‘fairy’ to reinforce the sense of violating the masculine code that is implied by the prison milieu and ‘twos/ in laundered denim.’ Meanwhile, perhaps in time with the music, ‘[c]anaries beat their bars and scream’. In the slang of the day, a ‘canary’ could mean an informer (so called because informers ‘sing’ to the police or prison authorities). Alternatively, it could be another term for a gay man — canaries being brightly coloured songbirds. (This possibility is underscored by the rhyme of fairy/canary.) This image of bright colour prepares a sharp break between octet and sestet:

We come from tunnels where the spade,
Pick-axe and hod for plaster steam
In mud and insulation. (ll. 7-9)

Taking the reader back in time, the imaginative space of the poem has progressively narrowed from mess-hall, to cells, and now to underground tunnels. Line by line, the space is becoming more constrained, even subterranean, as if the circles of Dante’s Hell were concentric rather than one above the other. The sound has shifted from the fairy’s tinkling and tittering to the canaries’ screaming. It is at this moment that ‘we’ arrive in the mess-hall, depicted as a site of controlled chaos.

The ‘Bible-twisting Israelite’ is the last specific personage — the last inmate — to appear in the poem. And by the reference to ‘his Harlem’ we can identify both his religion and his race. The ‘Black Israelites’ were an African-American (and West Indian) cult who believed that they, not European Jews, were the true children of Israel. At the same time, it is worth noting that in this heavily controlled and surveilled space, the only two individuals mentioned are Black men — and both are decidedly violators of cultural norms: the ‘fairy’ because of his effeminate homosexuality and the ‘Israelite’ because of his cultish religious beliefs. What is the poet preparing us for by focusing on these two profoundly marginalised men? He continues:

It is night,

And it is vanity, and age
Blackens the heart of Adam.⁸⁰ (ll. 11-3)

In a way foreshadowed by the ‘Bible-twisting Israelite’, we have left the concrete (in the literal as well as epistemological sense) space of the prison mess hall and entered the space of Judeo-Christian myth. This transition is accomplished via the simple phrase ‘it is night.’ These words form a kind of hinge from the material to the spiritual: it is literally night in the prison, the end of the day and the hour of the evening meal — but it is also night in the soul. ‘And it is vanity’, the poet insists, echoing Ecclesiastes I.⁸¹ The verses Lowell is alluding to here are some of the most melancholy in the Old Testament:

What profit hath a man of all his labour which he taketh under the sun? [...] The thing that hath been, it is that which shall be; and that which is done is that which shall be done: and there is no new thing under the sun. [...] I have seen all the works that are done under the sun; and, behold, all is vanity and vexation of spirit.

These are strange and bitter sentiments for a young ‘fire-breathing Catholic C.O.’ to be echoing. Perhaps he knew that his efforts to object to the war on the basis of morality would be fruitless. Now that he was in the constraining space of a prison and sharing it with hardcore criminal ‘lifers’ and marginalised Black men, few if any of whom seemed to care about the morality of how the United States was conducting the war, he confronted how little his righteous stand meant. But, as Randall Jarrell observes, Lowell was not at all a typical Catholic convert; indeed, his Catholicism was a ‘photographic negative’ of the usual variety.⁸² Hence, for the poet, what he is witnessing in the Danbury mess-hall is nothing less than the spiritual degeneracy of the entire human species — ‘Adam’, though Eve is absent, as she often is from such patriarchal symbolism — whose heart is ‘blacken[ed]’ by age. Vanity — futility — has spread out ‘like rings on a tree’ (as in ‘July in Washington’) from the poet’s decision, to his fellow prisoners, and outward to ‘man’ as a whole.

The poet concludes: ‘Fear, the yellow chirper, beaks its cage.’ These words are first of all an obvious back-reference to the human ‘canaries’ beating their cages and screaming. But this canary’s scream is reduced to a ‘chirp’ — an insignificant, unthreatening sound. Yellow,

⁸⁰ Given the several references to black men in the poem, ‘blackens’ here may carry a racist overtone. However, at the time the polite term for African-American was ‘Negro’ rather than ‘black’. The association of blackness and darkness with evil is omnipresent in European cultural iconography, however; and ‘blackens’ also suggests charring, as by the lightless fires of Hell.

⁸¹ The Holy Bible: *Authorized King James Bible Version* (Cambridge Edition, 1932), 18-29 (28-9).

⁸² Quoted in Jonathan Price, *Critics on Robert Lowell* (Coral Gables, FL: University of Miami Press, 1972), p. 7.

after all, is the colour traditionally assigned to cowards. Given the dark sentence that precedes it, in which, by using the synecdoche of ‘Adam’, he indicts himself along with his fellow prisoners, it seems likely that this epithet refers to the poet’s own fear. The fear ‘beaks’ (not beats or breaks) ‘its cage’. It is trying to escape, and the space into which it will escape is the poet’s own psyche. He enters a cage within a cage, underlining the animal status of the prisoners — and himself.⁸³ Once again, as with the minnow and spiders in ‘Fall 1961’, fear is imaged as a small, helpless creature looking out from a confined space.

What is the poet afraid of? Perhaps the futility of his sacrifice, small as it is against the enormity of violence he is protesting by going to prison. Or even worse, it may be the damnation of all humanity with its age-blackened heart, in which he necessarily partakes. The picture the poem’s nightmarish imagery gives us is indeed ‘a vision of hell.’ Yet hellish as prison is, there are worse places, worse confinements, and the poet fears them. Even then, in 1949, Lowell was becoming aware that his worst Hell was his own psyche, driven by unbalanced brain chemistry into an infernal cycle of manic delusions of grandeur followed by crushing depressive despair.

Whatever the location — Maine, Boston, New York, or the hospitals and prisons in which he was institutionalised — Lowell’s portrayal of spaces always comes from a ‘persona at odds with his environment.’⁸⁴ Lowell’s poetic recollection of his brief stint at the West Street Jail before being sent off to Danbury could hardly be more different in tone and form than ‘In the Cage’. The earlier poem is a tightly measured sonnet (albeit with some important departures from tradition, notably by being in tetrameter with an unusual rhyme-scheme). ‘Memories’ is composed in the irregularly measured, loosely rhymed, autobiographical and more-or-less vernacular mode that made *Life Studies* such a radical departure for mainstream American poetry. We come to intuit the spatial differences between the two prisons through the respective structures of the poems. But beneath the easy-going surface of ‘Memories...’ are darker undercurrents.

The poem consists of accounts of two spaces: the poet’s Marlborough Street, Boston home in the present, where he is a husband and father and a university lecturer; and West Street Jail in New York in 1941, where he was held before being sent to Danbury Federal

⁸³ This is similar to the way Sexton presents herself and the other patients in ‘You, Doctor Martin’.

⁸⁴ Barry Spurr, ‘The Art of Robert Lowell’, *Sydney Studies*, 69-84, p. 76. file:///C:/Users/Amori07/Downloads/376-1179-1-PB.pdf.

Prison. The texture in this doubled representational space is comprised less of a simultaneous weaving together and contrasting of past and present, as in 'For the Union Dead', than of the contrasting material circumstances and associations of the poet himself in these two places. He introduces time into space; as Lefebvre contends: 'space is the envelope of time'.⁸⁵

The poem opens in Lowell's present, 'the tranquilized *Fifties*' (italics in original), with the poet sketching his comfortable and undemanding life as a university lecturer and family man:

Only teaching on Tuesdays, book-worming
in pajamas fresh from the washer each morning,
I hog a whole house on Boston's
'hardly passionate Marlborough Street'. (ll. 1-4)

Marlborough Street, dryly described in these terms by Bostonian novelist Henry James was at the time part of a wealthy Boston neighbourhood.⁸⁶ Lowell continues to emphasise and satirise his social privilege, which was absent in 'The Cage'.

where even the man
scavenging filth in the back alley trash cans,
has two children, a beach wagon, a helpmate,
and is 'a young Republican'. (ll. 5-8)

This is of course an absurd hyperbole: nowhere, not even in upper-crust Boston, is this true of a homeless vagrant. But in these lines Lowell is also satirising his real neighbours and their lifestyle in a parody of a marketing demographic: married with children, politically and culturally conservative ('young Republican' with a wife described in patriarchal terms as a 'helpmate') and a 'beach wagon'. In this way, he is defining by ironic negation the expansive space he now occupies, 'hog[ging] a whole house' with his second wife and his child. He implicates himself as a partial member of this demographic in the next few lines:

I have a nine months' daughter,
young enough to be my granddaughter.
Like the sun she rises in her flame-flamingo infants' wear. (ll. 9-11)

As Williamson and other critics note, Lowell is describing his baby daughter also in the language of commerce — in this case department-store advertising — with 'flame-flamingo infants' wear'; however, in classic Lowellian style, he rescues this description's banality by

⁸⁵ Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, p. 339.

⁸⁶ Marlborough Street begins at the Public Garden and extends westward to Newbury St. and Charlesgate.

preceding it with '[l]ike the sun she rises', managing to convey real parental delight. At the same time, with 'pajamas fresh from the washer each morning', he implicates himself in post-War consumerism as an inescapable fact of what he immediately describes as 'the tranquilized *Fifties*'. In the self-questioning fashion of his Puritan forebears, he continues: '...and I am forty. Ought I to regret my seed-time?' By linking time and space in this way, Lowell reminds us of what Lefebvre dryly comments on — the prison-home relationship: 'The facade (to see and to be seen) was always a measure of social standing and prestige. A prison with a façade — which was also the prison of the family — became the epitome and modular form of bourgeoisified space'.⁸⁷ On this question, in a sense, the whole poem hinges. The poet explains:

I was a fire-breathing Catholic C.O.,
and made my manic statement,
telling off the state and president, and then
sat waiting sentence in the bull pen
beside a negro boy with curlicues
of marijuana in his hair. (ll. 14-19)

He now describes his denunciatory statement to the court 'manic' — out of place in the 'tranquilized' era he now inhabits. But the 'tranquillity' he assigns to the decade is not an organic aspect of Lowell's life or even of the time in which the poem is written. Rather, it refers to 'the treatments, whereby the 'manic' declarations of his youth are being (at least partially) controlled by the pharmaceuticals available to him in the 1950s.'⁸⁸ By this point, specifically, his own mania was being 'tamed by Miltown' as he puts it in 'Man and Wife,' along with chlorpromazine, first administered to him in hospital in 1954. Lowell further deprecates his statement to the court by describing it as 'telling off the state and president'. (But it is also worth noting that he refers to the 'president' with a lowercase 'p', which subtly implies continuing disrespect.) As in 'In the Cage', he then signifies his newly lowered social status and lack of social and political power by placing himself in the company of a black man, in this case 'a negro boy with curlicues/ of marijuana in his hair'.

Having taken the reader back through time via the brief episode in a federal courtroom, the poet shifts the scene to the West Street Jail. The poet's confinement at first seems more social and even aesthetic than literal:

⁸⁷ Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, p. 261.

⁸⁸ Colin Ambrose Clarke, *In the Ward: Issues of Confinement in Mid-twentieth Century American Poetry* (Washington: The George Washington University Press, 2001), p. 78.

Given a year,
I walked on the roof of the West Street Jail, a short
enclosure like my school soccer court. (ll. 20-25)

The rooftop is an ‘enclosure’ — no doubt surrounded by high chain-link fencing — but the poet can still walk around and look out over New York, though clearly over a poorer part of it, to the Hudson River.⁸⁹ He does, however, allude to earlier feelings of confinement at his boarding ‘prep’ school by comparing the rooftop space to its soccer court. The ‘sooty clothesline entanglements’ link the poet metaphorically to the ‘bleaching khaki tenements’ they are strung between. Metaphorically, the poet is ‘airing the dirty laundry’ of his past as a prisoner; like a ‘sooty clothesline’, this strand links the two spaces of the poet’s past and present. As Alan Williamson notes:

[...] Lowell’s vision of anomalies and disconnections becomes still more intense and maddening. The pervasive costume imagery absorbs — though with a grimmer irony than usual — so palpable a reality as the New York slums: ‘bleaching khaki tenements.’ The prisoners, defined by garments ranging from ‘rope shoes’ to ‘chocolate double-breasted suits,’ are worlds unto themselves, and worlds full of self-contradiction.⁹⁰

Lowell thus creates a sort of ‘character space’ within the jail, whose only described physical spaces are the roof enclosure, the laundry room, and Lepke’s cell — a negative space existing between the other inmates he describes, who are mutually estranged.⁹¹ The first character introduced is Abramowitz, with whom the poet ‘yampered metaphysics’ as they ‘stroll[ed]’ on the roof. Abramowitz is initially a comic figure, a kind of upside-down caricature version of Lowell himself: Jewish, ‘fly-weight’ and sickly from his vegan diet, where Lowell is Protestant-turned-Catholic, tall, and seemingly healthy. But the story of Abramowitz takes an ugly turn when ‘[he] tried to convert Bioff and Brown,/ the Hollywood pimps, to his diet’. His antithesis, ‘hairy, muscular, suburban’ — and violent — the two gangsters ‘blew their tops and beat him black and blue.’ Clearly, the relative freedom of the jail has a negative side: the guards do not protect the ‘fly-weight’ and weak from the ‘muscular’ and aggressive —

⁸⁹ The image of the Hudson caught in ‘sooty entanglements’ anticipates ‘At the Mouth of the Hudson’ with its pervasive imagery of grime and soot from ‘suburban factories’ polluting the water and its surroundings.

⁹⁰ Alan Williamson, *Pity the Monsters: The Political Vision of Robert Lowell* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1974) http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/g_l/lowell/lepke.htm [accessed 5 November 2016].

⁹¹ Even though Lepke’s cell is not yet identified in this version, an earlier version prior to this refers to it in spatial somatic language: ‘His [Lepke’s] cell door hung open like a loose grin/usually, nobody bothered to lock him in’. Lepke’s freedom vanishes in the poem’s *Life Studies* version as the cell’s ‘loose grin’ is replaced by the description of the character as ‘flabby, bald, lobotomized’. Nikki Skillman, *The Lyric in the Age of the Brain* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 2016), p. 59.

the 'felon idealists' from the hardcore criminals. As a carceral space, therefore, the jail lacks the usual level of control associated with penal institutions in the developed world. The figures of the poet and the two pimps triangulate Abramowitz — a nonviolent American Jew at a time when Jews in Nazi-occupied Europe were being rounded up, starved, and slaughtered. In this way the poet suggests a later guilty identification with Bioff and Brown in his refusal to fight an enemy that was committing genocide.

Next, the poet relates his encounter, in the person of the 'J. W.', with a religious sect previously unfamiliar to him, probably because its membership was (and is) almost entirely drawn from among the poor and the working class: the Jehovah's Witnesses. This class division has meant that Lowell and the Witnesses have inhabited very distinct social and even geographical spaces. Again, the 'J. W.' provides both ironic contrast and likeness to the poet, being a religious objector to war but unlike him in regard to theology and social background.

The story of the 'J. W.' provides a bridge to the concluding (and crucial) figure of the poem, the condemned gangster Czar Lepke. When the poet first sees Lepke, the former boss of a criminal organisation that performed murder for hire, it is from behind, 'piling towels on a rack.' As David Kalstone notes, this activity links Lepke to the poet and his 'pajamas fresh from the washer each morning.'⁹² But the connections to Lowell's 'present' self are more extensive. Lepke is seen 'dawdling off' to his 'little segregated cell, full/ of things forbidden to the common man:/ a portable radio, a dresser, two toy American/ flags tied together with a ribbon of Easter palm.'⁹³ Lepke's cell is small, and he is 'segregated' from the rest of the jail population. In the poem's present, Lowell has rejected Catholicism, but he too, as an inheritor of family wealth and prestige, has access to things not available to 'the common man', including a 'whole house on...Marlborough Street', a washing machine, and the free time for 'book worming'.

The most important 'sooty entanglement' between the poet and the murderer, however, is manifest in the last few lines. Though Lepke is depicted as 'flabby, bald, lobotomized,' the poet too in the present 'drift[s] in a sheepish calm' in 'an air of lost connections'. The crucial difference, of course, is that for Lepke, 'the electric chair' that is

⁹² David Kalstone, 'The Uses of History', in *Robert Lowell*, ed. by Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House, 1987), pp. 91-93.

⁹³ As Perloff points out: 'The catalogue of items in Lepke's cell... metonymically stand[s] for the debasement of the Catholic version of the American dream with its uneasy amalgam of Palm Sunday and the Fourth of July.' Marjorie Perloff, *The Poetic Art of Robert Lowell* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1973), pp. 108-109.

his destiny is ‘hanging [a different mode of execution] like an oasis’. Moreover, ‘no agonizing reappraisal/ jar[s] his concentration’ on this image of his impending execution, an ‘oasis’ in the desert of disconnection and meaninglessness that his once powerful and brutal life has become. For Lowell, on the other hand, the poem, and indeed all of *Life Studies*, is a relentless rehearsal of ‘agonizing reappraisal’.

This phrase has a politically significant history. In 1953, John Foster Dulles, President Eisenhower’s Secretary of State and an aggressive Cold Warrior, stated that if France failed to join the proposed ‘European Defence Community’, whose purpose was to prevent (West) Germany from ever re-arming by giving it a defence ‘umbrella’ from other Western European nations, this would prompt ‘an agonizing reappraisal of U.S. foreign policy’.⁹⁴ In fact, the French parliament refused to ratify the plan, and West Germany ended up joining NATO instead — of which France was also not a member. No such ‘agonizing reappraisal’ took place, least of all on Dulles’ part. In this way, Lepke is implicitly likened to Dulles, who several times had brought the U.S. close to nuclear war with the Soviet Union. The global space of American foreign policy in the 1950s, its aggressiveness and ruthlessness, thus enters Lowell’s account of the jail by the ‘back door’ of the tiny cell of a condemned murderer.⁹⁵ But Lowell’s own ‘agonizing reappraisal’ concerns his decision not to fight in World War II; the fate of Abramowitz, whom he did not protect, is a metonymy of the fate of Europe’s Jewry, which as a soldier he might have helped to oppose.

Aware of the harsh realities of the Cold War and the threat of nuclear war with the USSR, the poet is now sceptical, even deprecating, of his earlier individualist protest, aware of his weakness. He is ‘drifting in a sheepish calm’ partly induced by psychiatric medication. Despite his restored bourgeois respectability, he, too, is an outlier to society, like the figures he depicts in the poem.

Outside the confining space of the prisons he had passed through, then, Lowell was far from free. This is all the more true because he was for much of his life a prisoner of manic-depressive illness, and never knew when he was going to be captured by it again and lose himself in it, becoming a danger to himself and wildly cruel to the people whom he loved most. The overlap for Lowell between the experiences of incarceration and of forced

⁹⁴ Kevin Ruane, *The Rise and Fall of the European Defence Community: Anglo-American Relations and the Crisis of European Defence, 1950–55* (Houndmills: Macmillan, 2000), p. 82.

⁹⁵ As we have seen, by 1964 Lowell could publish a less direct allusion to American imperialism via the statues and circles in ‘July in Washington’.

hospitalisation is particularly intense in 'Visitors', a poem from his last collection *Day by Day* that describes the preparations for his being removed to a mental hospital in England, during an acute manic episode. The poem begins with the vertiginous entry 'at angles and on the run' of police officers — 'two black verticals' — who to his disturbed vision turn ambiguously into 'four ambulance drivers in blue serge,/ or the police doing double-duty.' The officers 'comb' through his and his wife's 'intimate, messy bedroom' as if they owned it. 'They do,' the poet says, resignedly, recognising their official power and his own powerlessness. No place belongs to him in his condition, and there is no place to which he belongs — except a psychiatric ward.

The poet's sense of violation and humiliation continues to deepen as they 'inspect [his] cast-off clothes' for no apparent reason, as if searching 'for clues', even though he is not being arrested. The officers treat him with condescension and 'jocose civility'. They pretend to laugh with him at his witty remarks while seeming actually to laugh *at* him. The woman police sergeant is 'bored', idly asking him about a Japanese wall-hanging while she waits for instructions. To the police and ambulance men, he is merely 'so much busywork' as they confer on the phone. 'When they regroup in my room, I know/ their eyes have never left their watches.' This is of course Lowellian hyperbole, but he is aware of being a nuisance, a chore. Strapped down on a stretcher, he 'lies secured there, but for my skipping mind'. Adding to the poet's humiliation, then, is the fact that he knows he is indeed ill, his thoughts racing in an all too familiar way (referred to clinically as 'flight of ideas').⁹⁶ This makes it impossible for him to be angry about the impersonal and even mildly contemptuous way in which he is being treated.

'Where you are going, Professor,
you won't need your Dante.' [...]
What will I need there?
Is that a handcuff rattling in a pocket? (ll. 40-3)

Again, the poet is reminded that he is, in the minds of the police overseeing his removal, the next thing to a criminal, albeit an ineffectual one. The comment that he 'won't need [his] Dante', however, is bitterly ironic; he is indeed, as in 'In the Cage', in a kind of hell, and evidently frightened ('What will I need there?') but unlike Dante in the *Inferno* lacks a guide — and now he will not even be allowed Dante's poetry to serve him as an umbilicus to the

⁹⁶ See Kay Redfield Jamison, p. 118.

outside world and his life as a poet and scholar. He ‘follows [his] own removal,/ stiffly, gratefully even, but without feeling’ and asks himself plaintively: ‘Why has my talkative/ teasing tongue stopped talking?’ (The multiple alliteration of ‘talkative teasing tongue’ followed by the closed-labial, unvoiced p’s of ‘stopped’, evokes sudden silencing.) Evidently, after so many such removals, whether by ‘men in white coats’ or police, the poet has become both numb and dumb.

Even through his mania, then, Lowell is aware of how he is seen — not as a world-famous poet but as a crazy old man to be treated with patronising indifference while he is bundled off to the mental ward. He knows, too, that he will pay a price for his ‘detachment’: ‘tomorrow will be worse than today, / heaven and hell will be the same’. As Jamison puts it: ‘Virgil’s journey winds back upon itself, paradise falls hellward.’⁹⁷ It is as if the layered circles of the *Divine Comedy*, from the highest to the lowest, are about to collapse vertically one atop the other. He will ‘wait in foreboding/ without the nourishment of drama.’ Almost more dire than the mania, then, is the ‘foreboding’ flatness induced by the antipsychotic drugs he knows he will be given. For heaven and hell to be the same is a worse hell — a kind of un-space. With the intimate space of his bedroom casually violated, he is restrained while bored responders count the minutes until he is loaded into the ambulance like so much freight. All he has is the ‘little strip of eternity’ that is his denial of the condition to which he has been reduced. These last few lines are a depiction of utter loneliness and disconnection: ‘loneliness inside me is a place’, he writes in the same year. More than two decades of recurrent hospitalisations have brought him to this point, on a trajectory that began in 1949 and that he finished his first major poem about a full decade later.⁹⁸

Lowell started drafting ‘Waking in the Blue’ in the last days of 1957 (the final version was completed in 1959) during his stay at McLean Psychiatric Hospital. In his first short hospitalisation there, Lowell’s health did not improve, as he shortly returned to the same ward with a new bipolar episode. The fear, though ‘gentler,’ expressed in this poem, may derive partly from memories of his stays in other, more terrifying institutions. Lowell’s first experience with hospitalisation was in Bloomington, where he was straitjacketed and locked

⁹⁷ Kay Redfield Jamison, *Robert Lowell*, p. 222.

⁹⁸ Lowell’s perception of his hospitalisation at Baldpate in that year was initially very different: ‘The beauty of the hospital grounds gave the lie to the pain that was housed within, but this reality was one that escaped Lowell during the early days of his stay at Baldpate. The hospital, he said with some jocularly soon after he arrived, was ‘a combination of boarding school, jail, and Yaddo.’ [...] The screams from the locked wards registered more acutely a few weeks later.’ Jamison, *Robert Lowell*, p. 69.

in a cell. In 1949, Lowell underwent multiple hospitalisations during which his revulsion towards these spaces intensified and left him psychologically exhausted. The last two hospitalisations before he wrote 'Waking in the Blue' were a particular torment. The first of these, in Cincinnati, was the severest, since he was 'electrocuted' (given ECT) three times.⁹⁹ The second hospitalisation, in Payne Whitney Psychiatric Hospital, left him with emotional turbulence when he recalled memories of his first wife, Jean Stafford, who was a patient there.¹⁰⁰ 'Waking in the Blue', then, was a poem that 'gave birth [. . .] to a whole line of hospital poems.'¹⁰¹

The poem's first lines show us an image that the poet could not actually have seen, because he would have been asleep in his room; 'the night attendant, a B.U. sophomore' waking from having fallen asleep at his desk over *The Meaning of Meaning*, a then-famous exegesis on theoretical linguistics. Lowell's reference to this title may be more than merely topical. The philosophy book's title implies a self-reflection or doubling, which the poem develops obliquely toward the last stanza. *What is the meaning of the poet's life? What is the meaning-value of his poetry, given his illness?* Because the attendant has been reading this book, Mariani describes him as reminiscent of the guard sleeping with the keys to the cells dangling seductively from his belt', with whom the poet is forced to recognise an affinity.¹⁰² The night attendant 'rouses from the mare's-nest of his drowsy head' to wake the patients in the rooms opening on the poet's 'corridor'. Interestingly, although 'mare's nest', an old idiom for 'messy situation', superficially appears to refer to the attendant's hair, we learn later that the attendants have 'crew haircuts', which are too short to be tousled. This is one of a number of contradictions that accumulate during the poem along with rapid shifts of tone.

The first of these switchback tonal shifts occurs immediately after the attendant 'catwalks down our corridor' — an ingenious pun, creating an echo of the tier catwalks Lowell knew from Danbury prison, and the first reminder that the poet is confined in what amounts to a carceral space. The poet then looks outward to an '[a]zure day'. Given its own line, this phrase, following the amiable account of the night attendant waking the patients before he goes off duty, might lead the reader to expect a positive mood in the next few lines.

⁹⁹ Colin Ambrose Clarke, *In the Ward*, p. 47.

¹⁰⁰ Quentin D. Miller, ed., *Prose and Cons: Essays on Prison Literature in the United States* (Carolina: McFarland, 2005), p. 139.

¹⁰¹ Mark Silverberg, *The New York School Poets and the Neo-Avant-Garde: Between Radical Art and Radical Chic* (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2013), p. 192.

¹⁰² Mariani, *Lost Puritan: A Life of Robert Lowell*, p. 233.

Instead, the poet gives us the opposite. His ‘blue window’ is ‘agonized’ and daylight makes it ‘bleaker’. Blue is the colour of sadness, expressed not only in the African-American musical idiom of the Blues (also heard in ‘In the Cage’) but in mainstream (white) popular song from the 1930s on. Obviously, these are projections via the pathetic fallacy of the poet’s depression and the psychic pain it brings. The actual view, however, is no more encouraging: crows ‘maunder’ — a word for which the Merriam-Webster Dictionary gives two main meanings: ‘to wander slowly and idly’ and ‘to speak indistinctly or disconnectedly’ — on the ‘petrified fairway’. This is clearly a projection of the poet’s feelings of purposelessness and idleness — and, as becomes evident later in the poem, the purposeless idleness of his fellow-patients.¹⁰³ The crows here are an instance of actual animals being pressed into service as symbols by the affective tinting of adjectives or verbs attached to them. ‘Petrified’ could have two potential meanings, when applied to the ‘fairway’ of a golf course that evidently adjoins the hospital grounds. First, it describes a previously grassy expanse that is now dry, hard-caked soil because it has not been cared for. Underlying this meaning is another that is idiomatic and metaphorical: ‘paralyzed with terror’. This meaning, applied to the ‘agonized’ view the poet sees, suggests that he is deeply fearful as well as depressed.

Taken together, these lines suggest that although the poet is confined, the exterior space that to a prisoner would represent freedom is no better — the outside world appears to him, prosopopeically, as ‘agonized,’ ‘bleak,’ ‘petrified’ and ultimately meaningless. ‘Petrified’ as a description of the exterior landscape also anticipates the description of Lowell’s fellow patients as ‘ossified’ in their illness, specifically in their inability to assume mature adulthood. The hospital already seems a place of malign, frightening stasis rather than of cure. In short, the space of the exterior, in the poet’s mind, is a reflection both of the physical space of his confinement and of his inner ‘space’.¹⁰⁴

It is no surprise, then, that the next line begins with a one-word cry of pain: ‘Absence!’ This exclamation begs the question: absence of what? Meaning, perhaps, or hope: it could be that for the poet at this moment in his life, there is no ‘meaning of meaning’. It

¹⁰³ As Goffman notes: ‘Whether there is too much work or too little, the individual who was work-oriented on the outside tends to become demoralized by the work system of the total institution.’ Erving Goffman, *Asylums: Essays on the Social Situation of Mental Patients and Other Inmates*, p. 11.

¹⁰⁴ Kathleen Spivack states that she ‘was shocked to see how damped down and depressed he [Lowell] was. The hospital itself was depressing. The setting was gray, the amounts of drugs used on patients excessive. Cal’s expressive hands lay quietly; he seemed so hopeless.’ Kathleen Spivack, *With Robert Lowell and His Circle* (Boston, MA: Northeastern University Press, 2012), p. 164.

may also be the absence of those he loves, or perhaps all of these. He continues: ‘My heart grows tense’ — a straightforward figure for anxiety. The line that follows, ‘as though a harpoon were sparring for the kill’, is more mysterious as well as frightening. The harpoon, to begin with, has no harpooner. Metonymically, in the conditional clause begun with ‘as if’, the harpoon is ‘sparring for the kill’ with no human agent guiding it. Presumably it is the poet’s subjectivity, figured by his heart, which is at risk of being killed.¹⁰⁵ Now his fear is out in the open. The boundaries between interior and exterior spaces are blurring, in a way characteristic of severe bipolar disorder as well as of other severe conditions like schizophrenia.¹⁰⁶

As if in response to his own fear, the poet notes: ‘(This is the house for the ‘mentally ill’)’. The parentheses isolate this rather banal sentence within the text as perhaps a statement of what ought to be obvious to the reader, but stated ‘just in case’. The poet also ironises the phrase ‘mentally ill’ with inverted commas, suggesting that he disdains it as a term for his condition, perhaps because to him it seems weakly euphemistic given the now-evident (to the reader) misery and terror he is experiencing. Here, the institutional space is double-framed by punctuation – a formal analogue of the patient’s experience.

The bridge to the next section of the poem is a question, much like that posed in ‘Memories of West Street and Lepke’: ‘What use is my sense of humor?’ It is as if the ironic bracketing of the previous sentence has failed to induce in the poet even a sardonic chuckle. He may try to laugh at himself, or at the other patients he is about to describe, but it does not benefit him. Nevertheless, now apparently in the shared bathroom, he ‘grins’ at the first fellow patient, ‘Stanley’:

once a Harvard all-American fullback,
(if such were possible!)
still hoarding the build of a boy in his twenties [...]
in his long tub... (ll. 13-8)

Stanley clearly regards that long-ago time in his life as its summit, from which he is striving desperately not to decline, ‘still hoarding the build/ of a boy in his twenties’ and wearing ‘all

¹⁰⁵ ‘The total institution is a social hybrid, part residential community, part formal organization; therein lies its special sociological interest. There are other reasons for being interested in these establishments, too. In our society, they are the forcing houses for changing persons; each is a natural experiment on what can be done to the self.’ Erving Goffman, *Asylums: Essays on the Social Situation of Mental Patients and Other Inmates* (New York: Doubleday Anchor, 1961), p. 12.

¹⁰⁶ Spivack tells us: ‘Lowell’s despair at his illness, his always-present fear of recurring episodes, has been well documented. There was a sense of helpless terror about them that cast a shadow.’ Spivack, p. 165.

day, all night' the 'crimson gold-cap' of his Harvard All-American status. The poem's imagery, which has from its title on emphasised 'the blue', now becomes more and more aquatic. Stanley, who has the 'muscle of a seal' is 'sunk in his sixties', 'soaking' in the bathtub. Obsessed with dieting, 'think[ing] only of his figure', he not only has a seal's muscles but is 'more cut off from words than a seal'.

'This is the way day breaks in Bowditch Hall at McLean's,' the poet tells us, finally naming the physical space he occupies. But immediately he jumps to the end of the day that is just beginning, to show us another patient, also a Harvard alumnus, otherwise Stanley's antithesis:

the hooded night lights bring out 'Bobbie,'
Porcellian '29,
a replica of Louis XVI
without the wig — (ll. 27-30)

Where Stanley is as slim as an athletic youth, 'Bobbie' is 'roly-poly' fat; where Stanley is obsessively clean, 'Bobbie' stinks; where Stanley is solemn with his 'kingly granite profile', Bobbie, playful, 'swashbuckles about... and horses at chairs'. Where Stanley is like a seal, Bobbie is compared to a sperm whale. (Both are aquatic mammals, and both are hunted with harpoons.)¹⁰⁷ If Louis and Stanley, clearly like Lowell himself from the Boston aristocracy, are 'kings', they are decadent and powerless monarchs — kings with no kingdom but the asylum and their delusions.

Lowell summarises in a modifier-packed phrase, isolated on its own line: 'These victorious figures of bravado ossified young.' They are figures of 'ossified young' because they have held onto their youth in a way that 'ossifies' and makes it a sad parody of youth. They exhibit 'bravado' meaning 'blustering swaggering conduct' and 'a pretence of bravery'. Their courage in defying aging is false, because they have not faced the inevitable reality of death and its 'harpoon' as they swim like seals or whales in the 'blue' of their confinement, an imaginary ocean whose narrow boundaries they never test. Their victory over aging is spurious and hollow. But perhaps the poet slightly envies Stanley and Bobbie their delusions and obliviousness to their own true condition.

¹⁰⁷ A further irony of this imagery — and a further reminder of decadence — is the fact that many New England fortunes in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were made in whaling and the Atlantic fishery.

Stanley and Bobbie, in their superficially opposite yet deeply linked eccentricities, have defined ‘the limits of day’. Between these limits, the crew-cut ‘Roman Catholic attendants’ display a ‘slightly too little nonsensical bachelor twinkle’ as they watch over their patients. The poet, however, expresses sympathy with them in the parenthesis that follows: ‘(There are no Mayflower screwballs/ in the Roman Catholic Church.)’ ‘Mayflower screwballs’ is a sarcastic reference back to psychotic New England aristocrats like Stanley and Bobbie, who like Lowell’s mother can trace their descent back to the Puritan Protestants on the *Mayflower* who founded the Massachusetts Bay Colony in the seventeenth century. That said, this passage is a reminder that every day ‘hours and hours go by’ under the supervisory gaze, ‘twinkling’ or otherwise, of the attendants — and that these hours feel empty to the poet.¹⁰⁸

In *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, Jacques Lacan notes that ‘we are beings who are looked at, in the spectacle of the world.’¹⁰⁹ Lowell’s agony is in part that he can be observed at any moment in the spaces of the ward and the corridors, even while he has little to do but watch his fellow patients and the attendants who watch them all. Normally, Lacan observes, ‘the world is all-seeing, but it is not exhibitionistic — it does not provoke our gaze. When it begins to provoke it, the feeling of strangeness begins too.’¹¹⁰ This feeling of strangeness overcomes the poet in the course of the poem because what surrounds him provokes his gaze. Clarke adds: ‘[I]n the ward, the gaze is necessarily provoked, as one of the main functions of the institution is to monitor its patients.’¹¹¹

The next and final section forms the crux of the poem. It begins with an attempt at jocularly. The poet, having eaten ‘a hearty New England breakfast’, is putting on weight, but ‘strut[s] in his ‘French sailor’s jersey’ as ‘cock of the walk’. In fact he is nothing of the kind. ‘Strutting’, he glimpses himself in ‘the metal shaving mirrors’ and sees ‘the shaky future grow familiar/ in the pinched, indigenous faces/ of these thoroughbred mental cases,/ twice

¹⁰⁸ Goffman comments: ‘In total institutions there is a basic split between a large managed group, conveniently called inmates, and a small supervisory staff. Inmates typically live in the institution and have restricted contact with the world outside the walls; staff often operate on an eight-hour day and are socially integrated into the outside world. [...] Staff tends to feel superior and righteous; inmates tend, in some ways at least, to feel inferior, weak, blameworthy, and guilty.’ *Asylums: Essays on the Social Situation of Mental Patients and Other Inmates*, p. 7.

¹⁰⁹ Cited in Branka Arsić, *The Passive Eye: Gaze and Subjectivity in Berkeley (via Beckett)* (Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), p. 21.

¹¹⁰ Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, edited by Jacques Alain Miller (New York: Norton, 1973), p. 75.

¹¹¹ Colin Ambrose Clarke, *In the Ward*, p. 49.

my age and half my weight.’ The shaving mirrors are metal because they are in ‘the house for the mentally ill’, who might shatter a glass mirror and use the shards to harm themselves or others. A mirror can become a weapon against others when broken, just as it can be a weapon against the self (or the imagined self) when whole. Foucault comments: ‘But the asylum...placed the mirrors in such a way that the madman [...] inevitably surprised himself, despite himself, as a madman [.]’¹¹² This is precisely what happens to the poet in ‘Waking in the Blue’. The poet realises that his likely ‘shaky’ future is to become like the other aristocratic psychotics around him, even though they are (in a characteristic Lowell hyperbole) ‘twice [his] age and half [his] weight’. The entire space of the ward and its occupants has become in a sense a mirror for the poet, which like ‘The Mirror’ in Plath’s poem of that title, is ‘not cruel, only truthful’. For Lowell as a man, however, what the mirror reflects is less his ageing (though in the poems of 1959-62 he is intensely aware of becoming middle-aged) but his powerlessness and inability to overcome his illness.

As he gazes into the unyielding, unbreakable steel mirror, the identification becomes complete: ‘We are all old-timers,/ each of us holds a locked razor.’ The safety razors are made even safer by being locked so that the blades cannot be taken out and, like fragments of a glass mirror, used to cause harm. The locked razor becomes, to the poet, a symbol of frustration and even impotence. Locked inside the carceral space of the hospital and locked into depressive, dull states by their medications, the ‘old-timers’ minds have lost their edge. Despite being decades younger than the other inmates he describes, he too is ‘old’ — a middle-aged child. In this condition, Lowell was allowed to go home, and the next section of this chapter will follow him there.

Lowell and Domesticity: Away at Home

Lowell’s domestic life was a continual series of interruptions by episodes of madness. Until he was prescribed lithium in 1967, he never managed to spend more than three years at home before he was once again committed to a psychiatric hospital, and usually this respite lasted only a year or so. In the 1970s, when he began taking the drug less regularly, he was once again subject to manic attacks. From their marriage in 1954, his chief domestic anchor was his second wife, Elizabeth Hardwick, and from her birth in 1958, his daughter Harriet, whom

¹¹² Michel Foucault, *History of Madness*, trans. by Jonathan Murphy and Jean Khalifa (New York: Routledge, 2006), p. 246.

he adored, was the other. Even at home, though, he was often lonely, especially as his marriage to Hardwick foundered under the weight of his cruelties and infidelities. In examining some of Lowell's poems about his home life, we will consider isolation and connection within the family space, loneliness at home as a mode of confinement; conjugal love and estrangement (interpsychic and interpersonal space); and how memory is encoded in domestic space.

'Home After Three Months Away' essentially picks up the story of Lowell's life after 'Waking in the Blue'. Lowell has returned to his home on 'hardly passionate Marlborough Street' after some ninety days in the McLean Hospital being treated for mania. As Kathleen Spivack observes, Lowell was always depressed when he came home from a stay at 'McLean's', and the poem is evidently a product of this depression.

Lowell does not even mention his wife in this poem about his homecoming. 'Three months! Three months!' he exclaims. In a sense, this exclamation is a companion to his cry in 'Waking in the Blue': 'Absence!' Above all, absence meant separation from his daughter Harriet. The poet shifts attention to her, but partly as a way of inquiring about his own mental health as 'Richard': 'Is Richard now himself again?' He answers his own question through his playful interaction with Harriet in the bathroom in the morning, giving her a bath while he shaves. 'Dimpled with exaltation', Harriet is 'holding her levee' — 'a reception held by a person of distinction on rising from bed', as her father's little princess. 'Nothing's gone,' he tells himself. This 'nothing' may be a doubled signifier. In its more superficial sense, it means that none of what he loved about his family life — in this case, his relationship with his daughter — has been lost during his absence in the asylum. But 'nothing' may also be a positive entity here, as it is in Wallace Stevens' 'The Snow Man' — 'the nothing that is'. The 'nothing', the 'absence' the poet felt in the mental hospital is gone, replaced by the affectionate presence of his daughter. He goes on to further self-reassurance:

Though I am forty-one,
not forty now, the time I put away
was child's play. After thirteen weeks
my child still dabs her cheeks
to start me shaving. (ll. 17-21)

Nothing has changed, the poet seems to be saying. The time spent in the asylum was, like his time with Harriet in the bathroom, 'child's play' — a deeply ironic description given his account of the infantilised 'thoroughbred mental cases' in 'Waking in the Blue' and the

heavily supervised and controlled ‘childproofed’ environment. For ‘thirteen weeks’, Lowell has indeed been treated like a child. He concludes the paragraph with a playful, nursery-rhyme-like tetrameter couplet: ‘Dearest I cannot loiter here/ in lather like a polar bear’.

Outside the window, from his third-floor study, Lowell looks down on the ‘coffin-length of soil’ that is their flower garden. He does not take care of it; that is the task of a ‘choreman’, who tends ‘seven horizontal tulips’ that have been crushed by ‘the late Spring snow’. Like Lowell, they are ‘pedigreed’, but now they are little more than ‘weed’. The triple rhyme in this passage, pedigreed/need/weed, followed by a broken pentameter typical of *Life Studies*, makes the pile-up of syllables at the end of the third line especially jolting:

Bushed by the late spring snow,
they cannot meet
another year’s snowballing enervation. (ll. 37-9)

Can the poet meet another ‘snowballing enervation’ of manic crisis followed by depressive recovery? The poem ends with two miserable lines, isolated spatially from the previous paragraph, but linked to it by rhyme:

I keep no rank nor station.
Cured, I am frizzled, stale and small. (ll. 40-1)

Alone in his gloomy third-floor eyrie, looking down on the expensive tulips that have failed to flourish and that he is not even capable of tending, the poet is forced to confront his real feelings and self-image.¹¹³ The word ‘cured’ acquires a terrible, ironic bitterness in this context. The price he pays for his sanity, it seems, is to become not only ‘stale and small’ but ‘frizzled’.¹¹⁴ Home again, in a space of ostensible freedom, the poet has become too ‘small’ to properly occupy it, too ‘stale’ to enjoy it once he is alone. He feels useless. This makes the contrast with the tender description of his morning play with his daughter all the more poignant. Lowell, ‘frizzled’ by confinement, antipsychotic drugs, and depression, cannot fully inhabit his own spacious life.

A similarly thin-skinned, painful sensibility pervades the much later ‘Shaving’ (1975). He writes, in an echo of the last lines of ‘Waking in the Blue’: ‘Shaving’s the one time I see my face.’ He no longer has the happiness of performing this task while his little girl plays in

¹¹³ Spivack, *With Robert Lowell and His Circle*, p. 89.

¹¹⁴ The word means ‘fried until crisp’ but it carries phonemic associations with ‘fizzle’ — like a firework that fails to flare — and ‘frazzled’ — a slang term for ‘exhausted’ or ‘burnt out’.

the bath: 'I see it aslant as a carpenter's problem' — but it is 'always the same face'. He goes on to complain:

Never enough hours in a day —
I lie confined and groping,
monomaniacal,
jealous of even a shadow's intrusion —
[...]
unable to follow the drift
of children, their blurting third-degree. (ll. 6-13)

The poet is psychologically isolated, yet he can see his wife at work on her own writing: 'you too, head bent,/ inking, crossing out ... frowning/ at times with a face open as a sunflower.' he concludes, tenderly and sadly: 'We are lucky to have done things as one.'

'Night Sweat' from *For the Union Dead* depicts the poet physically as well as psychically alone in his home. We know that night sweats were a feature of Lowell's episodes of mania, and probably therefore of the period immediately preceding them.¹¹⁵ The poem begins with a brief description of his 'tidied room': 'Work-table, litter, books and standing lamp, plain things, my stalled equipment, the old broom — ' 'For ten nights now' the poet has been feeling 'the creeping damp' invade — an expression more commonly used to talk about a house with inadequate drainage, a prelude to mildew and (once again) rot. (This may be an indication that he is aware of the onset of a manic episode.) Then his mood shifts: 'Sweet salt embalms me and my head is wet'. Evidently the poet feels exhilarated, as 'everything streams and tells me this is right'. Yet 'everything streams' is a good metaphor for the manic 'flight of ideas'.¹¹⁶ The poet continues, exuberantly: 'my life's fever is soaking in night sweat — / one life, one writing!' However, the exuberance swiftly fades:

But the downward glide
and bias of existing wrings us dry —
always inside me is the child who died,
always inside me is his will to die — (ll. 9-12)

¹¹⁵ From an account of Lowell's breakdown in Cincinnati in 1954: 'Lowell was transferred to a ward for more severely ill patients. He told the nursing staff and his doctor that he was Christ. His conversation was hard to follow; he spoke in 'analogies' and was, at times, 'incomprehensible'. He sparred with the nurses and doctors, chain-smoked in his room against hospital rules, spoke incessantly on the telephone, and 'needled' other patients. He was tense, coiled, and defiant. He sang at the top of his voice in the lounge. [...] He had profuse night sweats.' Kay Redfield Jamison, *Robert Lowell: Setting the River on Fire*, p. 86.

¹¹⁶ Jamison explains: 'To a point, the manic flight of ideas is such a natural part of manic excitement that patients wear it lightly. This changes. The mind moves too fast, to too many places. [...] Sanity edges into madness.' Kay Redfield Jamison, *Robert Lowell: Setting the River on Fire*, p. 201.

The sudden collapse of the poet's manic energy into the 'downward glide' toward depression takes him back to early trauma, to the 'dying' of his child-self in estrangement from his parents after the death of his beloved grandfather as recounted in *Life Studies*. Then he is startled to find that his wife has entered the room: 'Behind me! You!' And with her, dawn has come. 'Again I feel the light/ lighten my leaded eyelids, while the gray/ skulled horses whinny for the soot of night.' Part of the poet, represented by the Gothic image of the 'gray-skulled horses', wants to return to darkness, even as his vision 'lightens'. In the 'dapple of the day', his manic grandeur gone, he is no more than 'a heap of wet clothes, seamy, shivering.' Yet with his wife's presence, the room is 'washed with light'. 'Your lightness alters everything,' he tells her, and — in another macabre image — 'tears the black web from the spider's sack.'¹¹⁷ But, as Hardwick wrote and the poet knows all too well, doing this for him is exhausting. While her 'heart leaps and flutters like a hare', she is also '[p]oor turtle, tortoise' — having to wear a hard shell to survive his illness.¹¹⁸

The last sentence is a plea, almost a prayer: 'if I cannot clear/ the surface of these troubled waters here,/ absolve me, help me, Dear Heart [...]'. The flowing night sweats and racing ideas, in the perspective of daylight, are 'troubled waters' — a Biblical expression that leads into his plea for absolution, which is given in the Catholic sacrament of Confession. He knows that she 'bear[s] the world's dead weight and cycle on her back.' In this powerful image, the poet tells his wife that he understands the huge burden he and his 'cycle' have become to her, begging for forgiveness. His wife, within the domestic space they share, had become a female Atlas, holding up the world of their marriage. As both Lowell's poems and Hardwick's letters reveal, their domestic space rarely remained tranquil for long during the 1950s and 1960s. Cyclically, like volcanic eruptions, Lowell's episodes of mania would shatter it; and each time it was repaired, it contained more cracks and was more easily broken in the next cycle.

¹¹⁷ At the same time, with the 'wild spiders' of 'Fall 1961' in mind, this could also be an image of fertility: many spider species protect their eggs in a sac made of web until they are ready to hatch. The poet's wife, in 'tearing the black web', has released the newborn spiders into the light.

¹¹⁸ This contrary double simile may be a reference to Aesop's fable concerning those two animals, in which they have a race. The slow tortoise unexpectedly wins because the swift hare, overconfident, has a nap and oversleeps. If she is both hare and tortoise, she 'wins the race' to support her husband sometimes by swift leaps, at other times by methodical patience. Her presence transforms both the space of his room by 'washing' it with daylight and his own psychic space, driving away the nightmarish 'grey horse skulls' and black spider-webs so that his perceptions are cleansed.

'Man and Wife' is evidently based on events that occurred later in Lowell's marriage to Hardwick, when the relationship had further deteriorated, likely as a result of Lowell's multiple manic 'seizures' and his emotional cruelty during them, his hospitalizations, and Hardwick's exhaustion from taking care of him afterwards. As in 'For the Union Dead' and even more as in 'The Public Garden,' the poet looks back from a time of sadness and loss to an earlier exhilaration. In the famous opening lines, the couple is waking at sunrise:

Tamed by *Miltown*, we lie on Mother's bed;
the rising sun in war paint dyes us red;
in broad daylight her gilded bed-posts shine,
abandoned, almost Dionysian. (ll. 1-4)

The poet and his wife are 'tamed by Miltown' (meprobamate), the tranquiliser widely prescribed in the 1950s. It is notable that she is also taking Miltown, presumably because of the anxiety and stress Lowell's illness is causing her. They are in 'Mother's bed' — the ornate four-poster bed inherited from Lowell's mother with its 'gilded bed-posts'. Yet, though they are tamed, 'the rising sun in war paint dyes [them] red' as if with blood. Marjorie Perloff sees this as 'the diseased imagination of the poet who fears passion and vitality, an Indian savage in 'war paint' who 'dyes us red,' the pun on 'dyes' intensifying the death-in-'life existence of the couple.'¹¹⁹ From extensive reading in Lowell's mature work, though, it is hard to see the poet as one who 'fears passion and vitality'. On the evidence, he seems much more afraid of stasis, dullness, exhaustion. However, Perloff is more persuasive about the sun's 'war paint', because beneath the 'tamed', tranquilised surface of the marriage is a conflict of sorts, perhaps a Cold War — and indeed, the marriage has grown cold, has 'died', as the rest of the poem makes clear.

The gilded bed posts likewise provide a contrast to the 'tamed' couple: they are 'abandoned, almost Dionysian' — an unusual set of adjectives to apply to furniture, however ornate. Perloff comments: '[T]he 'gilded bed-posts' of line 3, which evidently have an antique floral motif, are seen as thyrsi, the phallic staffs carried by the Bacchantes in their rites honoring Dionysus.'¹²⁰ This seems a plausible reading, and at the very least is an ironic comment on the present sexlessness of the bed's occupants.

¹¹⁹ Marjorie Perloff, *The Poetic Art of Robert Lowell*, p. 90.

¹²⁰ Perloff, *The Poetic Art of Robert Lowell*, p. 90.

As in 'Waking in the Blue', another poem that begins in early morning, the focus shifts from indoors to outdoors — in fact, to the front of the house, where '[a]t last the trees are green' and 'blossoms on our magnolia ignite/ the morning with their murderous five days' white' (ll. 6-7). One could dismiss 'ignite' and 'murderous' as hyperbole, except that he exhibits throughout his poetry the same almost morbid, painful sensitivity to bright colours and loud sounds — emblems of a vitality the poet finds 'too much'. And this is clearly also the pathetic fallacy at work, with the poet expressing his own submerged painful feelings about his situation through the medium of the iconic magnolia tree, which appears in several of the poems in *Life Studies*.¹²¹

Now the focus shifts back to the couple, and the poet directly addresses his wife in an interior monologue, as he continues to do throughout the rest of the poem, tenderly and gratefully:

All night I've held your hand,
as if you had
a fourth time faced the kingdom of the mad — (ll. 8-9)

The poet is intensely aware of how much he owes his wife for 'fac[ing] the kingdom of the mad' at various mental hospitals, with their 'hackneyed speech' of psychiatric euphemism. The 'homicidal eye' she has faced down is a more problematic image, but the poet likely means 'homicidal' in the same metaphorical sense that the magnolia blossoms are 'murderous' to him — painful, soul-destroying. The 'eye' would be the intense and humiliating surveillance to which the poet was subjected as a patient. But the woman beside him has 'dragged him home alive' from this miserable confinement three times, perhaps, as Jane Hedley suggests using the power of her invective to get him released, and he loves her for it.¹²² In this moment of tenderness, the poet opens a reminiscence of their first meeting with an apostrophic endearment:

Oh my *Petite*,
clearest of all God's creatures, still all air and nerve:
you were in your twenties, and I,
one hand on glass

¹²¹ Stephen Yenser comments: 'The submerged violence rises to the surface of the poem in the description of the magnolia blossoms that 'ignite / the morning with their murderous five days' white.' A few lines later...Lowell glances back at the confinement in McLean's Hospital and the incarceration in the West Street jail, each of which testifies to both the poet's isolation from the world and the problems of living in that world.' Stephen Yenser, *Circle to Circle: The Poetry of Robert Lowell*, p. 193.

¹²² Jane Hedley: *I Made You to Find Me: The Coming of Age of the Woman Poet and the Politics of Poetic Address* (Columbia, OH: The Ohio State University Press, 2009), p. 104.

and heart in mouth [...] (ll. 11-5)

The poet recalls being smitten by Hardwick in a very different place and time, as Perloff summarises: 'The scene is diametrically opposed to that of Marlborough Street: it is the noisy, hot, alcoholic, left-wing Greenwich Village of Philip Rahv, the editor of *Partisan Review*.'¹²³

The final verse paragraph brings the poet, and with him the reader, back to Marlborough Street, the bedroom, and the sad deterioration of the marriage: 'Now twelve years later, you turn your back./ Sleepless, you hold/ your pillow to your hollows like a child' [...] 'Like a child' is ambiguous here. The wife is both behaving like a child in hugging a pillow to the hollows of her sadness and lack of fulfilment, and the pillow is also 'like a child' that she is hugging to herself, instead of hugging the poet. But she is not truly childlike: '[her] old-fashioned tirade — /loving, rapid, merciless — / breaks like the Atlantic Ocean on my head.' Even as the gap between their bodies in the bed, like the one Plath describes in her poem 'Incident', is bridged only tenuously by the poet's hand, his wife's invective brings them together in an 'Atlantic' of honest, powerful emotion. In both past and present, the poet loves his wife for her articulate, passionate speech. In the present, her 'tirade' is directed at him, and she is turned away from him, angry and alienated. But her tirade, though 'merciless', is also 'loving'. For all their difficulties, man and wife still love each other deeply. Despite the emotional and physical distance that now separates them, they share not only a bed and a home but the psychic space that is created by a marriage.

According to Stephen James, many of the details of 'The Old Flame' are taken from a short story by Lowell's first wife, Jean Stafford, to whom the poem is also addressed. Stafford's story was itself based on the disintegration of their marriage, but some of the details Lowell transferred into his poem were purely imaginary.¹²⁴ The place, however, was real enough — a house where they lived together in rural Maine. The poem begins with an invitation to memory whose intimacy suggests what seems at first to be a retrospective of a marriage: 'My old flame, my wife! Remember our lists of birds?' Immediately, though, the poet brings the reader back closer to the present:

One morning last summer, I drove
by our house in Maine. It was still
on top of its hill —

¹²³ Marjorie Perloff, *The Poetic Art of Robert Lowell*, p. 91.

¹²⁴ Stephen James, 'Revision as Redress? Robert Lowell's Manuscripts', *Essays in Criticism* (1996) XLVI (1): 28-51.

Now a red ear of Indian maize
was splashed on the door.
Old Glory with thirteen stripes
hung on a pole. The clapboard
was old-red schoolhouse red. (ll. 3-10)

Just as the poet's ex-wife is still 'my wife', so this house with its new owners — 'A new landlord! A new wife!' — is still 'our house'. Really, however, it is not theirs any more at all. The faux-traditional New England makeover of the exterior is matched by the interior décor: 'Atlantic seaboard antique shop/ pewter and plunder/shone in each room.' (A little later the poet tells us that 'Everything had been swept bare,/ furnished, garnished and aired'). This synthetic traditionalism is evidently matched by modernisation in the town as well as in the home itself: 'No running next door/ now to phone the sheriff/ for his taxi to Bath/ and the State Liquor Store!'

At this point the poem takes an abrupt turn into the macabre, as the poet tells the addressee that 'No-one saw your ghostly imaginary lover / stare through the window [...]'. The imaginary lover is a detail from Stafford's story that serves to undermine the cheery tone of the earlier lines.¹²⁵ All that, the poet implies, has, like the house, been 'swept bare'. He hails the new owners: 'Health to the new people,/ health to their flag, to their old/ restored house on the hill!' 'Restored', the old house is now 'their' house. In this regard, Massey states:

At one level, this is a healthy acceptance of reality. 'For the truth is that you can never simply 'go back', to home or to anywhere else. When you get 'there' the place will have moved on just as you yourself will have changed. And this of course is the point. For to open up 'space' to this kind of imagination means thinking time and space as mutually imbricated and thinking both of them as the product of interrelations. You can't go back in space-time.'¹²⁶

Conceiving and imagining the old house that has been deserted over time as if it is a barrack where they have buried their memories within its spatial boundaries or in Bachelard's lyrical

¹²⁵ James summarizes Stafford's story: '...a middle-aged historian convalescing from a spell in a mental institution is out of love with his young wife. Her reaction leads to a decision to abandon plans to redecorate their house and to her invention of an imaginary lover to compensate for the loneliness she feels.' Stephen James, 'Revision as Redress? Robert Lowell's Manuscripts', *Essays in Criticism*, p. 33.

¹²⁶ Doreen Massey, *For Space* (London: Sage Publications, 2004), pp. 124-125.

phrase a 'geometry of echoes'.¹²⁷ 'Everything's changed for the best!' the poet exclaims. However, the poem next takes a turn into the nostalgia anticipated in the first two lines:

how quivering and fierce we were,
there snowbound together,
simmering like wasps
in our tent of books! (ll. 32-35)

The space of the house as they inhabited it may have been untidy or under-decorated, but it was intimate and alive. It was the shelter of their imagination. For Lowell, the house as he and his then wife inhabited it is not a collection of bricks and mortar or a spiritless geometrical construction but rather, as Bachelard states, 'the house that has been experienced is not an inert box' and can 'transcend' its architecture.¹²⁸ The turn of mood in the poem, as so often in Lowell's work, occurs with an animal or insect image: the poet and his wife are wasps, 'simmering' and 'fierce'. Unlike the couples in 'Central Park', who resemble bees making sexual honey, the couple are close to the boiling point of anger, and like wasps, they can inflict multiple painful stings. The nostalgia, thereafter, does not last long, melting into sadness for the end of the marriage, as the poet apostrophises his ex-wife as '[p]oor ghost, old love' and invites her to 'speak with [her] old voice/ of flaming insight/ that kept us awake all night/ in one bed and apart.' The parallel to the similar scene depicted in 'Man and Wife' is striking. But here, the poet puts the events firmly in the past: the word 'old' occurs four times in the poem, and the 'new broom' of the new owners has swept this 'ghostly' past away in a kind of exorcism.¹²⁹ The poem concludes with the image of the snow-plough 'groaning up hill' and 'toss[ing] off the snow/ to the side of the road.' The former couple's 'snowbound' marital past has been pushed aside, and they are truly gone from the place the poet describes. Lowell, though, was not gone from Maine, especially the Maine coast, nor from his past there.

Near The Ocean: Lowell on the Shore

The Lowell family's summer home, which Robert inherited, was in the town of Castine, Maine, once a lobstermen's port but by the time he wrote about it, an up-market tourist town, where each summer, other seasonal 'regulars' like the Lowells mingled with day-trippers and

¹²⁷ Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, p. IX.

¹²⁸ Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, p. VII.

¹²⁹ Robinson states: 'The Old Flame' is an act of recovery, set on uncertain grounds. This poem revises a previous relationship to achieve a cherishing of the past against the grain of irreparable events. 'The Old Flame' is an attempt to set the past in place, reparatively ordered and with a resignation towards what cannot be changed.' Peter Robinson, *In the Circumstances: About Poems and Poets* (Oxford, 1992), pp. 95-6.

yachtsmen from neighbouring states. However, Lowell also visited other villages and areas of the shore in Maine, enjoying exploratory drives along the coast and visits to other relatives who lived there, like his aunt Harriet Winslow, who, the poet says, ‘was more to me than my mother’, as he writes in ‘Soft Wood’ (*For the Union Dead*). Lowell evidently felt ‘cleansed’ and ‘healed’ by the strong winds and ‘scouring’ waters of the Maine coast, as he says in ‘Soft Wood’. The social and physical geography of this region, then, was also a home to him — and like his urban homes in Boston and New York, also marked in memory by the grief and trauma of his life. In this section, we will consider in Lowell’s poems the shore as a liminal space between past and present; the Maine coast as a kind of lost paradise, given the economic decline and social change in coastal villages; the decay of the New England aristocracy, manifest in buildings and commerce; redemption from the past and from despair in the present, and the enduring presence of nature.

The poem ‘Water,’ whose action is set by the ocean in Maine, is an overlay or blending of two different occasions during which the poet spent time with a woman he loved but with whom he was unable to create the relationship he desired. Although Lowell’s separation from Elizabeth Hardwick occurred only weeks before he wrote this poem, Axelrod and Ruhl confirm that at least some parts originate in a weekend Lowell spent with his lifelong friend Elizabeth Bishop in Maine in 1948.¹³⁰ This specific place, then, manifests a memory of both the poet’s separation from his first wife, Jean Stafford, following the events of ‘The Old Flame’, and a weekend with a woman friend for whom he had unrequited feelings. Lowell once remarked that he had written ‘Water’ in a time of depression, probably brought on by the separation. But it seems likely that the ‘you’ of the poem is Bishop rather than his wife.¹³¹

Lowell begins by sketching the anonymous and apparently ordinary ‘Maine lobster town’ to which he gives implied significance by prefacing his description with ‘It was’ — the poem’s first two words. The remainder of the stanza, however, problematises the label he gives the town. ‘[E]ach morning boatloads of hands’ — already, instead of highly skilled

¹³⁰ Sarah Ruhl, *Dear Elizabeth: A Play in Letters from Elizabeth Bishop to Robert Lowell and Back Again* (New York: Faber and Faber & Faber, 2014), p. xii. (Lowell more than once professed romantic love to the lesbian Bishop, who turned him down gently on these occasions).

¹³¹ Phillips states that ‘memory is not the neutral recall of past events but rather the retrieval of possibilities that remain part of oneself.’ James Phillips, ‘Time and Memory in Freud and Heidegger: An Unlikely Congruence,’ (2008). URL: <<http://www.klinikum.uni-heidelberg.de/fileadmin/zpm/psychatrie/ppp2004manuskript/phillips.pdf>> [accessed 16/04/2015], p. 3.

lobstermen, the boats are loaded only with ‘hands,’ a common synecdoche of the day for unskilled manual labour and a well-known maritime term of ‘all hands on deck’ — push off from the shore. But they are bound not for the undersea banks where the crews would have lowered their lobster pots, but for ‘granite quarries/ on the islands’. The implication is that the lobstering industry is depressed and that at least some of the skilled seamen are now working as ‘hands’. Instead of being out on the water, their element, the men are confined to a hard, lifeless mass of granite.

The second stanza describes the town in grim terms as ‘dozens of bleak/ white frame houses stuck/ like oyster shells/ on a hill of rock.’ These houses, moreover, are ‘left’ empty, which sets up the comparison with oyster shells — rather than living oysters — in the third line. Yet at the same time, the fact that the houses are ‘stuck/ to a hill of rock’ — apparently bare of vegetation — prepares the reader for the image of the barnacles clinging stubbornly to pilings in the penultimate stanza.

The third stanza focuses on the view directly below the poet and his companion seated looking seaward. The painful sense of futility and fragility is further intensified by the diminutive description of the weir as ‘raw little match-stick mazes’ — and the poet drives home his emotional point with the stanza’s final line: ‘where the fish for bait were trapped.’ The ‘maze’ — a common metaphor for emotional confusion — may be ‘raw’ and as fragile as match-sticks, but nevertheless, the fish are trapped, as the poet and his ‘you’ may be in their relationship problems.

From naturalistic but emotionally loaded description the poem moves into its second part, which turns directly and conversationally to the poem’s ‘you’ with the invitation ‘Remember?’ He concludes the line with the straightforward, prosaic monosyllables of ‘we sat on a slab of rock’; but then he lets us know that the event took place long ago enough for memory to be falsified by emotional resonance: ‘...it seems the color/ of iris, rotting and turning purpler’. The poet immediately contradicts this seeming in memory with more deflationary statement: ‘but it was only the usual gray rock/ turning the usual green/ when drenched by the sea’. With these lines the poet returns us to the place and time of the poem’s descriptive present, stripping it of all the associations he has previously created.

The next stanza, however, uses naturalistic description in a way more reminiscent of Imagists like H.D. or the younger William Carlos Williams: ‘The sea drenched the rock/ at our feet all day,/ and kept tearing away/ flake after flake.’ The key to this development is in

the phrase 'tearing away' and in the repetition of the verb stem 'drench' from the previous stanza, which together convey an impression of slow, rhythmic, relentless violence. To be 'drenched' is to be soaked through, attacked by water. Of course, it is the face of the rock below the couple that is drenched, but the rock is a place-marker for the couple in memory. Given that Hardwick wrote about the emotionally devastating effects of Lowell's repeated manic episodes, it seems to serve as a metaphor for the emotional turbulence that episode by episode or 'flake after flake' destroyed the solidity of his marriage.¹³² The fact that the rock they were sitting on was 'the usual grey' being turned 'the usual green' and slowly destroyed by the repeated drenching of the waves adds to the poignancy by pointing out that the relationship's fate is very common.

The next and penultimate stanza again complicates the memory by taking the reader back to an earlier time in the poet's relationship with 'you' and a dream she presumably shared with him: 'you were a mermaid clinging to a wharf-pile,/and trying to pull/ off the barnacles with your hands.' The barnacles are an encrustation that is damaging a pile (supporting pole) of the wharf, and the enjambment at 'pull/ off' suggests the violence of the dreamed effort even as 'trying' implies its failure. Like the empty oyster-shell homes on the hill, the barnacles cling tenaciously, refusing to move. The image is an inversion of the action metaphor of the previous stanzas: erosion is replaced by encrustation. Moreover, it takes the reader into the dim, close-up space under the wharf and out of the wider daylight air of the poem's recollected scene. Despite the poem's apparent narrative realism, this passage reminds the reader how strongly the poet is projecting his psyche and emotional relationships onto the surrounding physical environment; there is no essential separation between the dreamed and the 'real' any more than there is between the open air of the cliff-side and the murky waters under the pier. The dream suggests that from the woman's point of view, the problem was less an erosion by repeated 'waves' of emotional violence than a build-up of

¹³² "Cal is badly deranged", Hardwick wrote shortly before Lowell was committed to the hospital, but "I feel at the moment something near hatred for this horrible idiot talking such insulting nonsense, but then of course he is ill and is not all that sort of moral monster when he is himself." Her awareness of the cause of his behaviour was of limited consolation. 'I am shocked and repelled by what Cal has done to me this time ...he has been of course indescribably cruel. I simply cannot face a life of this.' Quoted in Kay Redfield Jamison, p. 83.

small, hard things that collectively prevented her from emotionally connecting with the poet.¹³³

In the final stanza, the poet summarises the failure of the relationship: ‘We wished our two souls/ would return like gulls/ to the rock.’ This is a curious blending of metaphors. The gull is a bird that lives always between sea and shore, between water and rock — feeding from the one, nesting on the other. However, ‘[i]n the end,’ a phrase whose enjambed placing anticipates a summary statement or explanation: ‘the water was too cold for us’.¹³⁴ Although water both symbolically and literally means life, it was ‘too cold for *us*’, for the first person plural or joined-ness of a marriage.

Lowell’s portrayal of nature here, then, is deromanticised, both in the conventional and philosophical sense. John Crick argues that ‘everything related to human perception and purposes is seen in an unromantic light: that rainbow colours and purples decline into greys and greens, the “hill of rock” from “slab” to “flake”’ (l. 13, l. 24).¹³⁵ The mermaid, a traditionally romantic figure, is seen trying to strip barnacles from the piling of an old pier — a very unromantic occupation. Only the image of the poet’s soul and the woman’s as two gulls seems to open a romantic metaphorical space. However, the voice in the verse immediately closes off that space with ‘In the end...’ and almost literally throws cold water on his own wistfulness.

In ‘Water,’ the poet depicts a world that might invite nostalgia, but by showing the town and its people in a light as desolate as he seems to feel, he closes off that emotional opportunity. Instead he seems to extend the pathetic fallacy beyond the nonhuman world into the lives of the local people. But there is no reason to think his depiction of the town or the ‘hands’ is false or a projection. The poet is simply choosing what to notice. The desolation of the lobster town is not simply a reflection of the poet’s mood, therefore, but a larger-scale manifestation of the same ‘cold’ forces that are destroying historic Boston in ‘For the Union Dead’ — rampant commercialism and the erosion of traditional public space and community. The rock, symbolising the relationship, is the only solid place facing the chaotic sea. Yet the

¹³³ According to psychoanalysis, water or the sea represents the unconscious, and the mermaid is a symbol for unconscious or suppressed emotion. C. G Jung, *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1959), p. 18.

¹³⁴ Lowell reminded Bishop in a letter that the two of them, spending that weekend in Maine, were standing ‘waist high’ in ‘freezing water.’ Sarah Ruhl, *Dear Elizabeth*, p. xiii.

¹³⁵ John Crick, *Robert Lowell* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1974), p. 88.

poem is rather a parody of a romantic vision, as nature becomes bleak and mute rather than animate and communicative.¹³⁶

Like 'Water', 'Skunk Hour', from *Life Studies*, is set in Castine, another Maine seaside village, though superficially very different from the 'lobster town' in the former poem. According to Lowell, 'Skunk Hour' was written as a response to Bishop's 'The Armadillo' and in its form and manner is an *hommage* to Bishop and her style — though it becomes in its second half much more personal than Bishop's published work, directly describing the isolation and despair Lowell went through during a difficult period in his life. Lowell once commented that 'Skunk Hour' is 'not entirely independent, but the anchor poem in its sequence.'¹³⁷ It is in fact the last poem in *Life Studies* and gains special significance as such. The poem divides neatly into two four-stanza sections. The first four stanzas offer a description of the town, beginning with the small island facing it, mostly by way of an apparently (but not really) casual selection of its inhabitants. The second four stanzas deal with the poet's mental state and his associated actions.

In a sense, the first half of 'Skunk Hour' belongs to the tradition of the topographical 'country-house' poem that was a common genre in seventeenth-century England, like Ben Jonson's 'To Penshurst' or Andrew Marvell's 'Upon Appleton House'. These were written to celebrate the landed estate of the poet's aristocratic patron with a lyrical description of the lord's house, grounds, farmlands, and so forth. The aristocrat in this topography, however, is neither the poem's dedicatee nor the poet's patron: she is 'Nautilus Island's hermit/ heiress'. The line break between 'hermit' and 'heiress' emphasises her eccentricity and perhaps contrariness: she is an heiress, but she lives austere in a 'Spartan cottage' through the harsh Maine winters with only her sheep for company — though she does have a 'farmer' taking care of the flock. She is still a prominent person, however, a kind of queen *in absentia*: 'Her son's a bishop. Her farmer/ is first selectman in our village [...]. As Frank J. Kearful notes: 'The opening stanza ... is occupied by *her*, the 'hermit/ heiress.' Everyone and everything are hers. Her cottage, her sheep, her farmer, her son fill designated roles — pastoral, agricultural,

¹³⁶ Vereen M. Bell, *Robert Lowell, Nihilist as Hero* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983), p. 117.

¹³⁷ Quoted in Richard J. Fein, 'The Life of Life Studies' in *The Literary Review*, 23.3 (Spring 1980), p. 332.

political, religious — within the mock-feudal domain of this lady of the manor.’¹³⁸ But ‘she’s in her dotage’. However, she has a continuing impact on the landscape of the town:

Thirsting for
the hierarchic privacy
of Queen Victoria’s century,
she buys up all
the eyesores facing her shore,
and lets them fall. (ll. 7-12)

Recall, here, Colonel Shaw who ‘seems to wince at pleasure,/ and suffocate for privacy.’ It seems likely that the heiress shares these predilections; but unlike the heroic colonel, the privacy for which she ‘thirst[s]’ (rather than ‘suffocates’) is ‘hierarchic’ and nostalgic for the Victorian era.’¹³⁹ The ‘eyesores’ are presumably modern resort homes built speculatively, and the heiress buys them up and lets them fall because she does not want any vulgar ‘new rich’ looking across at her island.

The problem, though, is that the town seems to be in economic decline, and the heiress’ buying up of the eyesores is probably accelerating this decline. Critics have claimed that the heiress’ senility is symbolic of the decline of the New England aristocracy to which Lowell too belongs, and perhaps of the town itself. Kearful in particular argues that Lowell implicitly compares himself to the heiress.¹⁴⁰ Moreover, Lowell notes that the first four stanzas of ‘Skunk Hour’ are intended to fill the scene with ‘sterility which howls’ everywhere in the poem.¹⁴¹ In the past, the upper classes were perched figuratively above the ‘eyesores’ below. With post-war materialism rampant in America, those traditional caste divisions were being levelled. The poet now speaks as a townsman of Castine, someone who feels a sense of common ownership of the town and a fellowship with its inhabitants: ‘The season’s ill — / we’ve lost our summer millionaire [...]’ ‘The season’ in places like Castine that depend on tourism usually means the few months during which most businesses in the town make most

¹³⁸ Frank J. Kearful, ‘Signs of Life in Robert Lowell’s “Skunk Hour”’ in *Connotations*, 23.2 (2013/2014), 317-35, p. 319.

¹³⁹ Myron Brenton in *The Privacy Invaders* elaborates on how we are always searching for some form of privacy. That said, he remarks that in ‘Skunk Hour,’ ‘we are, most of us, not inclined to be hermits as we do not want to build so high a wall of privacy around ourselves as to be shut off from others.’ Quoted in Deborah Nelson, *Pursuing Privacy in Cold War America*, p. 48.

¹⁴⁰ Kearful, ‘Signs of Life’, p. 318.

¹⁴¹ Steven Gould Axelrod, Camille Roman, and Thomas Travisano, eds., *The New Anthology of American Poetry: Vol. III: Postmodernisms 1950-Present*. 3.1 (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2012), p. 127.

of their annual earnings.¹⁴² In Castine, the season is ‘ill’ partly because ‘our summer millionaire’ is gone — whether to death or bankruptcy is unspecified. Either way, his sailboat has been ‘auctioned off to lobstermen’. His money and that of his friends is no longer supporting the town’s faltering economy. Moreover, Runcie reminds us: ‘In the meantime the lobstermen provide a sign of life more vigorous than the hermit heiress who ‘still lives’ ... [T]hey fulfil their life-sustaining, traditional vocation of providing succulent food for the hungry.’¹⁴³ The problem for Castine is that it is no longer a fishing village, but a resort for the well-to-do, and is therefore subject to the vagaries of a seasonal guest/tourist economy.

And now autumn is here: ‘A red fox stain covers Blue Hill.’ It is a ‘stain’ at least partly because it signals to the permanent residents of Castine that the moneymaking season is over. But, as we will see, the image has a significance that is more personal, as does ‘the season’s ill’. Perloff argues that ‘Lowell tries to make his own malaise representative of the larger condition of an America in decline, a civilization run down and given to capitalist greed.’¹⁴⁴ A close reading of the poem, however, does not necessarily support this interpretation. Rather, as in ‘July in Washington’ or ‘Central Park’, Lowell sees a cold-hearted, ruthless commercial and militaristic culture flourishing and expanding, demolishing older more humane values in its path. Yet, such readings go side by side with Lefebvre’s and Traganou’s argument that ‘space is turned into a space of distance, distance a function of time, and time a function of money’.¹⁴⁵ Lowell is aware that his mental illness cripples his response to these developments and worsens his unhappiness, tied as he is to an old order that is being superseded.

For the last of the four descriptive stanzas, the tone turns more satirical, as ‘our fairy/decorator brightens his shop for fall’, painting the cork fishing-net floats in his window and his ‘cobbler’s bench and awl’ orange.¹⁴⁶ The garish repainting of these traditional craft objects to make them into display ornaments in a kind of parody of New England Fall colours

¹⁴² Runcie notes, ‘In fact the perceiving mind sees the season as ‘ill’ — and actually misses the summer millionaire with all that the reference to the L. L. Bean catalogue suggests, a jovial, expensive, neat blandness, a shallow panache that is nevertheless zestful.’ C. A. Runcie, ‘Skunk Hour’, p. 81.

¹⁴³ C. A. Runcie, ‘Skunk Hour’, p. 81.

¹⁴⁴ Marjorie Perloff, ‘The Return of Robert Lowell’ *Parnassus: Poetry in Review* 27.1–2 (2003), 1–29, p. 14.

¹⁴⁵ Cited in Miodrag Mitrasinovic, *Total Landscape, Theme Parks, Public Space* (Abingdon, OX: Ashgate, 2006), p. 24.

¹⁴⁶ According to Barry Spurr: ‘Lowell’s acute sense of colour is again put to thematic use as the inappropriateness of orange (deliberately repeated, and placed at the beginning of a line for additional emphasis) to the items it is inflicted upon indicates how the decorator’s sensibility is an assault on naturalness.’ Barry Spurr, ‘The Art of Robert Lowell’, *Sydney Studies*

(also the colours of Halloween season, which adds to the Gothic ambience in the second half of the poem) is an indication of how far the town and its culture have moved away from the directly productive activities that used to sustain it. The decorator feels that ‘there is no money in his work,/ he’d rather marry.’ A number of critics, including Runcie, have taken the decorator to be an opportunist.¹⁴⁷ Certainly, given Lowell’s later remark about ‘sterility’, the marriage of a gay man to a woman would be in that time considered ‘sterile’. The impending failure of the decorator’s business is additional evidence, rather than a symbol, of the town’s decline. But he is ‘our fairy decorator’ as the departed millionaire was ‘our summer millionaire’ — part of the community, even if scorned by some.

The decorator’s claim that ‘he’d rather marry’ ends the first half of the poem. The second half begins with a confession — one of the most potentially humiliating in *Life Studies*:

One dark night,
my Tudor Ford climbed the hill’s skull;
I watched for love-cars. Lights turned down,
they lay together, hull to hull,
where the graveyard shelves on the town...
My mind’s not right. (ll. 25-30)

Lowell said of the poem, and notably of this section: ‘This is the dark night. I hoped my readers would remember John of the Cross’s poem. My night is not gracious, but secular, puritan, and agnostical. An Existential night. Somewhere in my mind was a passage from Sartre or Camus about reaching some point of final darkness where the one free act is suicide’.¹⁴⁸ (In the same light, Lowell in ‘Shifting Colors’ states that he is ‘neurotic man’. Or as in ‘Dolphin’: ‘when I was troubled in mind’.) ‘One dark night’ indeed evokes the opening line (‘En una noche oscura’) of St. John of the Cross’s mystical poem ‘The Dark Night of the Soul’; but that poem ends with a mystical, quasi-erotic union with Christ. No such rapture awaits the ‘puritan, agnostical’ poet in Lowell’s verse.¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁷ C. A. Runcie, ‘Skunk Hour’, p. 81.

¹⁴⁸ Robert Lowell, *Collected Prose*, p. 226.

¹⁴⁹ Any argument that the poet scorns the ‘fairy decorator’ from a heteronormative perspective for his homosexuality or for his expressed wish to marry is here undercut by the poet’s (apparently fictional) self-revelation as a voyeur, a perversion doubly sterile, since it is solitary as well as intrusive. In this sense, the graveyard as a space could be categorised as both private and public.

The poet's car 'climb[s] the hill's skull' apparently by itself, suggesting a compulsion on the part of the poet.¹⁵⁰ The car is an 'old Ford', but this autonomy is reminiscent of the 'giant finned cars' that 'nose forward like fish' in 'For the Union Dead'. The image of the hill as a 'skull' prepares us for the idea that the 'dark night' is also inside the speaker's own head — as indeed, it turns out to be.¹⁵¹ (The skull in Renaissance iconography, in plays and poetry as in domestic décor, is a reminder of death's inevitability — and Lowell has told us that at the time he was contemplating suicide.) The speaker watches for 'love-cars' on the face of it a rather quaint euphemism for cars in which couples are engaged in some form of sexual activity. This street is obviously the town's 'lovers' lane', the place where young couples, lacking privacy in their homes, traditionally go to be alone together. The cars 'lay together, hull to hull' — an odd expression, making the cars visually into a row of upturned boats and thereby uniting them with the town's past as a fishing village. But 'lay together' is erotically suggestive. To 'lie together' is an old, Biblical term for intercourse, and 'lay' connects to a constellation of American slang terms for sex: one 'gets laid', someone is a 'good lay', and so forth. In a synecdoche, the cars 'lie together' for their sexually engaged occupants.

The lover's lane is a street on the hillside at the edge of the town graveyard where it 'shelves on the town'. Given that Lowell tells us obliquely in his comment that he was considering suicide, this is an appropriate if dangerous location for the speaker. The graveyard in this sense is spatially transformed into a repository of memory. He is isolated, lonely, despairing, and the activity of the lovers he glimpses through car windows only reinforces these feelings. He concludes, with the final line of the stanza at last rhyming with the first in a subliminally tense delay: 'My mind's not right.'

Troy Jollimore states that Lowell has 'engaged in [an] illicit and voyeuristic activity, spying on the 'love-cars' in which young lovers, inspired by the era's pop songs, are pursuing their furtive trysts.'¹⁵² Lowell, however, says that 'watching the lovers was not mine, but from an anecdote about Walt Whitman in his old age'.¹⁵³ (The anecdote is relayed by Logan

¹⁵⁰ As Kearful notes: this expression 'evok[es] Golgotha, from Hebrew *gulgōleth* for 'skull,' a verbal sign for the shape of the hill on which Jesus was crucified.' Kearful, p. 323.

¹⁵¹ We are further reminded of the 'grey-skull horses' that want to return to darkness in 'Night Sweat'.

¹⁵² Troy Jollimore, 'Robert Lowell's Skunk Hour: Witness the Making of a New American Poetics,' *Poetry Foundation*. URL: <<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/learning/guide/179983>> [accessed 07 July 2015].

¹⁵³ Robert Lowell, *Collected Prose*, p. 224.

Pearsall Smith, whose father was one of the Good Grey Poet's caregivers late in his life).¹⁵⁴ Nor is the speaker's interest necessarily sexual, as in 'Peeping Tom' voyeurism. Lowell describes the poem's 'dark night' as 'puritan and agnostical.' It seems more likely that the poet was engaging in a form of emotional self-torture by contemplating the freedom and pleasure of the young couples in their cars. (A somewhat similar emotion, a mingling of envy, fascination, compassion, and perhaps some revulsion, is implied as the poet contemplates the half-undressed 'lovers filling earth and sky' in 'Central Park'.) At the same time, however, the 'puritan' speaker is profoundly aware of how temporary the lovers' pleasure is, and that the grave awaits them too, as the location reminds him.

The next stanza carries us down into the speaker's misery, deeper with each line: 'A car radio bleats, 'Love, O careless Love''¹⁵⁵ The lyrics are a fairly accurate description of the poet's mood, in which he hears his 'ill-spirit sob in each blood cell', aware as he is by now that his illness has a chemical origin. 'As if my hand were at its throat' is a puzzling phrase — what is the referent of 'its'? Syntactically, it would be the 'ill-spirit', which gives a sense of self-strangulation, his hand choking the 'ill-spirit' that is sobbing inside him.

This opens the way for the next line, 'I myself am hell'. This is adapted and slightly modernised from Milton's *Paradise Lost* and a line spoken by Satan: 'Which way I fly is hell, myself am hell'.¹⁵⁶ Satan has no hope of salvation; his curse is irredeemable.¹⁵⁷ In this way, the poet expresses his utmost despair and his inability to find a solution. As Milton's Satan also says: 'The mind is its own place, and in itself/ Can make a heaven of hell, a hell of heaven.'¹⁵⁸ As in other poems we have discussed, Lowell is aware that his 'mood disorder' affects his vision of the surrounding society and landscape, but is anxiously uncertain of the extent to which the illness negatively distorts his perceptions.

The last line of the stanza expresses the poet's sense of complete isolation. We are unsure of his location in the town, because he no longer perceives its inhabitants as sharing its space with him: 'Nobody's here —' The dash at the end of this fragment, however,

¹⁵⁴ 'Almost every afternoon my father would take Walt Whitman driving in the Park; it was an unfailling interest to them to drive as close as they could behind buggies in which pairs of lovers were seated, and observe the degree of slope towards each other.' Logan Pearsall Smith, *Unforgotten Years* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1939), p. 331.

¹⁵⁵ Originally sung to a blues tempo by Bessie Smith in the 1930s, the song was revived by the black British singer Shirley Bassey in 1959.

¹⁵⁶ John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, ed. by Alastair Fowler (Edinburgh: Pearson Education, 2007), pp. 254-255.

¹⁵⁷ Richard J. Fein, *Robert Lowell* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1970), p. 59.

¹⁵⁸ John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, pp. 254-255.

suggests the breaking-off or interruption of a discourse and a mood, as if the poet is checking himself. The conclusion follows as the beginning of the next stanza:

only skunks, that search
in the moonlight for a bite to eat.
They march on their soles up Main Street: (ll. 37-9)

The poet is no longer alone. The skunks' hunger, as they 'search/ in the moonlight for a bite to eat', parallels the spiritual and perhaps sexual hunger of the poet. But unlike him, they are forthright, 'march[ing] on their soles up Main Street'. There is an obvious pun here: the skunks 'march on their soles', and the poet is being challenged to march — to advance determinedly — with his own soul. They are vivid and full of energy, with their 'moonstruck eyes' red fire' challenging the 'chalk-dry and spar spire' of the Trinitarian Church with its decaying tradition. Where the 'love-cars' were in a static line, the line of skunks is on the move, returning activity and life to the poem's atmosphere and the space of the town. This brings us to the final stanza, in which the poet, back at his house, seems to have passed through his despair as he 'stand[s] on top/ of our back steps and breathe[s] the rich air' where he has visitors: a mother skunk with her column of kittens 'swills the garbage pail.'

The skunk and her children do not care that what they are eating is considered 'garbage'. Unashamed, she 'swills' it and 'jabs her wedge-head' in some sour cream. She 'drops her ostrich tail' because she feels no threat from the poet and therefore does not need to keep her scent glands exposed for spraying in self-defence. The town may be in decline, but again, the skunks do not care. Nor do they care about the poet's depression or the burdens of his family history and his dying caste. They are living in the present. Runcie comments: "Unassisted" "quixotic" and "barbarously absurd," as Lowell says, their mere creatureliness is victorious. The reader experiences this meaning of the skunks because the poem's perceiving mind does [.]¹⁵⁹ This seems an accurate reading as compared to some others that as Runcie notes, oversymbolise the human and animal denizens of the town.¹⁶⁰ The skunks manifest a different relationship to both place — the town — and space — the privacy of Lowell's inherited summer home there. At the conclusion of 'Skunk Hour' the poet feels, at least momentarily, prepared to face his world and, like the skunks, 'will not scare' (l.45).

¹⁵⁹ Runcie, 'Skunk Hour', p. 83.

¹⁶⁰ Runcie, 'Skunk Hour', p. 78.

For Lowell, (unlike Plath to whom we shall turn shortly), natural or outdoor space is always *inhabited*, permeated with human presence. In this sense it is an extension of the public spaces he also writes about — nature modified in accordance with social, political, and economic imperatives. Flowers are planted in beds, the seashore is fronted with houses, fresh water is found in fountains and artificial lakes, and rivers flow between industrial installations or government buildings. To some extent, Sexton writes similarly of the outdoors and especially of the seashore. In Lowell's poems, however, natural space is also infused with *history*, both collective and individual. As a poet, he faces always toward the human, even as he describes the nonhuman.

Conclusion: 'Nowhere was Anywhere'

To Robert Lowell, whose *Life Studies* defined 'Confessional poetry' as a genre, space and place are central concerns. This was so for several reasons. First and most obviously, as Confessional writing brought autobiography back into American poetry, the specificity of place returned along with it. Second, the Confessional poets were aware of the powerful influence of place and space on their emotions. Third, because of its focus on subjectivity, confessional writing also brought the pathetic fallacy back into mainstream American poetry. But this heightened subjectivity, rather than masking the reality they confronted, often strengthened it, allowing them deeper perceptions of the spaces around them and the social relations that constituted those spaces, whether domestic, institutional, or public.

Lowell as a poet was also able to penetrate the screen of appearances that Guy Debord describes as 'the spectacle' in large part because of his intense historical awareness. Moreover, his manic-depressive illness, while regularly rendering him psychotic, also gave him a driving mental energy and an ability to think and associate in unconventional but illuminating ways. In addition, he was possessed of 'stone discipline', not only in the effort to control and contain his mental instability but also in his sense of morality, inherited from his Puritan New England tradition. Both his recurrent illness and his moral commitment had given him personal experience of imprisonment and humiliation, so that far more than most white, upper-middle-class writers, he had a real sense of the constrained, stressful, often fearful and despairing lives of the marginalised. His perceptions of public space are therefore highly contextualised, layered with awareness of history and of social relationships of power,

greed, and injustice. As Lefebvre would say, he read the spaces around him in depth.¹⁶¹ Alongside the notoriety brought him by his episodes of madness and his honesty in depicting them ‘confessionally’ in his poetry, it was this deep and fine-tuned awareness of what Lefebvre would call the production and reproduction of social space that made him a great *public* poet.¹⁶²

Throughout *Life Studies* and other mature work by Lowell, there is a similar intersection of autobiography with history and social commentary, though this takes a variety of forms. In Lowell’s work, psychic pain is often expressed via the pathetic fallacy: his ‘blue window’ in the asylum is ‘agonized’, the crows ‘maunder’, the magnolia blossoms outside his window are ‘murderous’, the bedposts are ‘abandoned, almost Dionysian’, the sun puts on ‘war-paint’ — even as asylum inmates are described in animal terms. More generally, when Lowell figures humans — including himself — as animals, it is usually to underscore their weakness, vulnerability, or courage in suffering, like the ‘wild spiders’ in ‘Fall 1961’, the hare-tortoise wife in ‘Night Sweat’, or Colonel Shaw as a wren-greyhound. By contrast, when describing actual animals, Lowell usually shows them as autonomous beings successfully pursuing their lives. In both types of animal imagery, Lowell underlines our continuing connectedness to the animal world.

The pathetic fallacy is combined with a sharp reminiscent eye for details like clothing as well as of both exterior and interior space, including architecture, paint colour, furniture, decor, and so forth. He pays similarly close attention to landscape and external surroundings. The boundaries between inner and outer worlds become not merely permeable but fluid again for Lowell as he enters or leaves one of his manic episodes, as in ‘Central Park’ or ‘Night Sweat’. However, as soon as he turns his attention to specific individual living beings, human or animal, detail typically becomes realistic. In this way, the poet’s psychic states and his immediate environment reciprocally illuminate each other.

Invariably, however, these ‘studies’ of humans (and occasionally, actual animals, as in ‘The Public Garden’ and ‘Skunk Hour’) have a larger poetic purpose. In the confinement

¹⁶¹ ‘To what extent may a space be read or decoded? A satisfactory answer to this question is certainly not just around the corner. As I noted earlier, without as yet adducing supporting arguments or proof, the notions of message, code, information and so on cannot help us trace the genesis of a space; the fact remains, however, that an already produced space can be decoded, can be *read*.’ Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, p. 17.

¹⁶² Catherine Emerson also contends that ‘spaces [real and imaginative] can be created, *produced*’ (italics in the original), p. 91.

poems, the inmates partly define the space they occupy, as figures define ‘negative space’ in painting. They also serve as combinations of likeness to and contrast with the poet himself. Typically, these other human characters are isolates, not engaged in social interaction. As such they create a curiously vacuous, alienated space within the tightly controlled confines of the institution. (By contrast, actual animals, like the skunks in ‘Skunk Hour’, are often shown in social or family groupings, fully occupying the spaces they inhabit with no apparent thought to past or future.)

Such alienation becomes if anything more painful in domestic spaces, where there should be intimacy, or where intimacy is precluded by depression and despair. In large part this is because until the late 1960s, Lowell’s cyclical illness never allowed him a sense of security in his home life and relationships for more than a short time. The family bathroom at the Marlborough St. house, for example, is a site of tender playfulness between the poet and his daughter, but as soon as he leaves it and goes to his study, his feelings of being ‘frizzled, stale, and small’ take over. Likewise, ‘Mother’s bed’ was once a place of pleasure for the poet and his wife, but sharing it now just underlines the emotional distance that has grown between them, despite the fact that they still love each other. Another device that Lowell uses to express pain and loss — one borrowed from the Romantics — is to contrast present sadness or estrangement with past happiness or fulfilment in the same space — or a completely dissimilar space. But he will also use the pain of the past to call present contentment into question, as in ‘Memories of West Street and Lepke’ or ‘The Old Flame’. In large part, Lowell’s is a poetry of spatial and temporal juxtaposition.¹⁶³ More generally, Lowell’s mature poetry tends to represent spaces of all kinds not merely as settings for events but in a close dialectical relationship with the poet’s subjective states at the specific time the poem addresses. Perhaps the simplest way to say this is that events in Lowell’s poems, whether external, intrapsychic, or both, always happen *somewhere*. And as a rule, they also happen *somewhen*, in a moment defined by history as much as by autobiography. Space for Lowell, though in a different sense than for Einstein, is always *space-time*.

¹⁶³ Lowell’s response evokes Tuan’s statement that ‘whenever a person (young or old) feels that the world is changing too rapidly, his characteristic response is to evoke an idealized and stable past’. Yi-Fu Tuan, p. 187.

Chapter Two

‘A Living Doll, Everywhere You Look’: Space in the Poetry of Sylvia Plath

Introduction

An examination of space in the work of Sylvia Plath immediately encounters the problem that the spaces in her poetry, particularly her later poetry, often blur the distinctions between public and private, indoors and outdoors, psychic and physical. In both her landscapes and her interiors, global politics and then-recent history fuse with expressions of intense personal emotion; motifs belonging to the clinical environment of the hospital appear in her depictions of domestic space and vice versa. At the same time, a number of themes recur almost compulsively in the poetry across domestic, institutional, and natural spaces, evolving on the same trajectory as Plath’s life and death.

Many of these themes are defined by versions of the Gothic. Traditional Gothic motifs are present from early on — doubles and haunted mirrors, dismemberment, broken dolls, the ‘dead bell’ and corpses, veiled presences, faceless watchers, entrapment, uncanny interiors, rot and decay, and a bleak or sinister natural world. The Gothic is also signalled by the increasingly frequent recurrence of certain monosyllables associated with fear and pain, like ‘shriek’, ‘blank’, ‘hook’, and ‘bald’. Also increasingly pervasive in Plath’s poetry is what Kathleen Nichols calls ‘Cold War Gothic’, an iconography inspired by the threat of nuclear annihilation, ever-present in the late 1950s and early 1960s, as well as by the Holocaust.¹ Plath’s later poetic world is haunted less by familial spirits than by the ghosts of mass-murdered Jews and by the future ghosts of mass nuclear annihilation. This fear is also expressed by the repeated motif of ‘nothing’ and ‘absence.’ This is linked, as in the poetry of Lowell and Sexton from the period, to a strong feeling of being watched or under surveillance, which in Plath’s case also often connects to bodily shame. This feeling had its social origins in the Cold War America in which Plath came of age. As discussed in the Introduction, surveillance (by government agencies, local police, and neighbours) was pervasive in the late 1940s and early 1950s because of the ‘Red Scare’, and expressing opinions or positions critical of American government or society was regarded by many as unpatriotic and even

¹ Kathleen Nichols, ‘The Cold War Gothic Poetry of Sylvia Plath’ in *A Companion to American Gothic*, ed. by Charles L. Crow (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 2014), pp. 328-340.

subversive. Plath's pacifism, a position she maintained throughout her adult life, was undoubtedly such a position.

Accompanying this profound anxiety is a theme also found in Sexton's asylum poems — the representation of people as nonhuman creatures, signifying both confinement and dehumanisation. Unlike in Sexton's work, however, these human-as-animal (zoöomorphic) metaphors pervade Plath's depictions of domestic, hospital, and outdoor space; in several cases, as in 'Poem for a Birthday', the poet also figures herself as various animals.

Closely related to this animal imagery is Plath's extensive use of pathetic fallacy, which, like the Gothic imagery, increases as her poetry develops. Nonhuman entities that become animated in the sense of being given souls include not only traditional personifications like the moon (recurrent to the point of being a motif of its own), the wind, and the sea, but also trees and plants, animals and birds, and domestic objects.² The inverse of this use of anthropomorphism, in which non-human entities express human thoughts and emotions, is prosopopeia. Plath's female speakers and personae are repeatedly described as dolls, puppets, stones, and other objects, often broken or dismembered.³ The more Plath, or her speaker, feels able to express her deepening anger and depression, the more the world she describes manifests these emotions in a way that could be characterised as Expressionist. Plath's spaces are always *animated* in the sense of being occupied by a soul or spirit (often a negative or even frightening one) even when they do not seem inhabited in the ordinary sense.

At the same time, for reasons we will explore, her own subjectivity becomes progressively more vulnerable as the boundaries between it and her surroundings weaken. In Plath's poetry, then, spaces are not perceived as static backdrops but as imbued with temporality, memories, and emotion. Her personae can no more be dissociated emotionally from the spaces they inhabit than the central figure in Edvard Munch's *The Scream* can be separated from the distorted landscape around it.

Also profoundly relevant to this dynamic conception of space is an understanding of the body within and as a space in its own right. Setha Low notes: 'The space occupied by the body, and the perception and experience of that space, contracts and expands in relationship

² As Jo Gill observes: 'This displacement of the human on to the natural is often a feature of Plath's work, offering a way of achieving both distance from, and some kind of grand or mythical context for, what might otherwise seem too close and immediate'. Jo Gill, *The Cambridge Introduction to Sylvia Plath*, p. 55.

³ Anderson comments: 'Gender adds another unsettling twist to the relationship between the fictive or the figurative and the real, the violence written into the oppositions of discourses poses, at the most extreme, the problematic relationship of the subject— any subject — to its culturally positioned object, to the female or feminine body' Linda Anderson, *Women and Autobiography in the Twentieth Century: Remembered Futures* (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf and Prentice Hall, 1997), p. 113.

to a person's emotions and state of mind, sense of self, social relations, and cultural predispositions'⁴ These corporeally centred cartographies are a prominent feature in the landscapes of Plath's poetics. Hence Plath's highly figurative descriptions of spaces and places, which often combine realistic description with hallucinatory imagery, are not *merely* Expressionistic; she is representing them in such a way as to deepen and develop their narrative content.

Although her later poetry addresses her subjective experience with passionate honesty, Plath, who was determined to be a professional writer from her early teenage years on — her first publication was at age eight — viewed all her experience as literary raw material. As a teenager she wrote and continually sent stories to potential publishers. As a result, she began carefully studying the magazines, mostly women-oriented periodicals like the *Ladies' Home Journal*, in which she wanted her stories to appear, and tailoring them accordingly. This approach carried over into her poetry. She selected carefully the work she submitted according to apparent editorial preferences and was ambitious in seeking recognition such as prizes and awards. She never viewed her work, as Sexton did, as an adjunct to therapy or as something like Wordsworth's 'spontaneous overflow of powerful emotion'; rather, she understood it as a craft in which she laboured constantly to improve. This has led some critics, notably Tracy Brain, to argue that the 'Confessional' label is misapplied to Plath, particularly as many of her poems use personae, both human and nonhuman, and as she frankly admitted that she fictionalised or blended elements of her experience for poetic effect.⁵ Moreover, Plath's approach to traumatic or intimate material is typically, as she put it, 'sidelong'. Unlike Sexton, she does not write directly about then taboo topics like masturbation, extramarital sex, adultery, sexual happiness or unhappiness, and so forth. This does not mean that she devalued such writing. On the contrary, she was inspired by it.⁶ Brain and similar critics may pay

⁴ Setha M. Low, 'Embodied Spaces: Anthropological Theories of Body, Space, and Culture,' *Space & Culture*, 6.1, February 2003, p. 10. It is worth noting that a similar perception of space can be found in Lefebvre who states that space 'is never merely a passive surface, a leaky container of visceral fluids, a collection of orifices, limbs, feelings, organs, and so on,' p. 170.

⁵ Tracy Brain, *The Other Sylvia Plath* (New York: Longman, 2001), p. 184.

⁶ Plath says in an interview: 'I've been very excited by what I feel is the new breakthrough that came with, say, Robert Lowell's *Life Studies*, this intense breakthrough into very serious, very personal, emotional experience which I feel has been partly taboo . . . These peculiar, private and taboo subjects, I feel, have been explored in recent American poetry. I think particularly the poetess Ann Saxton [sic], who writes about her experiences as a mother, as a mother who has had a nervous breakdown, is an extremely emotional and feeling young woman and her poems are wonderfully craftsman-like poems and yet they have a kind of emotional and psychological depth which I think is something perhaps quite new, quite exciting'. Peter Orr, (ed.), *The Poet Speaks: Interviews with Contemporary Poets* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1966), pp. 167-8.

insufficient attention to the radicalism of Plath's exposure of the kinds of personal feelings and perceptions about which women had previously remained silent.

What Plath did not approve of was a reading or attempted imitation of this kind of poetry — including her own — that *limited* it to the autobiographical. She said, in the same interview: 'Personal experience is very important, but certainly it shouldn't be shut-box and mirror-looking, narcissistic experience. I believe it should be relevant and relevant to the larger things, the bigger things such as Hiroshima and Dachau and so on'.⁷ Ironically, after the publication of *Ariel* in 1965, Plath was posthumously reproached by several well-known critics, including Harold Bloom and Marjorie Perloff, for using Holocaust imagery in what they read as 'personal' poems like 'Daddy' and 'Lady Lazarus'. Remarks of this kind were challenged by critics such as Alicia Ostriker, who argued that Plath's poems should be read politically — that, for instance, 'Daddy' is not a hysterical caricature of her German father and his relationship to her, but a furious protest against patriarchy, its (now well-established) connection to fascism, and the guilty masochism to which women were conditioned from girlhood.⁸ Ostriker's comment is pertinent here since it lines Plath's disconnection from the 'larger things'. If one argues that this 'cut' means the separation of the domestic space from the 'outer' world, this then would be an entirely *invalid* interpretation since Plath fuses these two spaces together. Alvarez states that 'it is hard to live in an age of psychoanalysis and feel oneself *wholly detached* [italics mine] from the dominant public savagery'.⁹

It could be argued, then, that what is 'confessional' in Plath's work is less subject-matter than *affect*. Where Sexton or Lowell often write about their episodes of mania or depression as if partly from the outside, Plath, particularly in the very late poetry from 1962-3, inhabits her own emotional extremity directly through highly figurative language even as she exaggerates or fictionalises details drawn from her life. Plath's increasing and eventually absolute rejection of what the critic Al Alvarez, a personal friend, called the 'gentility principle' dominating establishment English and American verse in the late 1950s led Alvarez to hail her as an avatar of a poetic renaissance in the introduction to his 1962 Penguin anthology *The New Poetry*.¹⁰ Of course, a parallel reading of Plath's biography is an important aspect of critical interpretation. What is crucial is to read the poems as fictions that refer to a much wider context than the narrowly autobiographical.

⁷ Peter Orr, (ed.), *The Poet Speaks: Interviews with Contemporary Poets*, p. 179.

⁸ Correspondence with Alicia Ostriker, 02/09/2015.

⁹ A. Alvarez, ed., *The New Poetry* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1962), p. iii.

¹⁰ A. Alvarez, ed., *The New Poetry*, p. ii.

Spaces are also defined in cultural geography partly by what Erving Goffman terms ‘the presentation of self in everyday life’ and the network of relations into which each such presentation fits and which all together constitute that social space as it is lived.¹¹ Feminist theorists like Judith Butler have challenged Goffman’s notion of such presentation being a set of masks that conceal an authentic self; rather, the self *is* activity and also performed in some fundamental sense.¹² Plath performed multiple selves during her adult life, as Kathleen Spivack notes: ‘She tried desperately to present herself as perfect and desirable according to the standards of her time: the perfect student, daughter, pin-up and bathing beauty, wife, mother, writer’.¹³ Her relationship to the spaces she moved through thus depended on which of these selves she was performing at the time. We encounter a disturbing and provocative *theatricalisation of space* in Plath’s poetry — a Gothic version of Shakespeare’s ‘all the world’s a stage’, with darkness, empty auditoriums, skulls, body and doll parts strewn around, vicious vegetation and hostile animals, and sinister strip-teases in front of a ‘peanut-crunching crowd’.¹⁴

Plath’s portrayals of the domestic, private, therapeutic and outdoor spaces will be explored in detail in this chapter through close readings of key poems which take respectively us to the home, the suburbs, hospitals, towns, and open countryside.

Walls, Mirrors, and Dolls: Escaping into the Domestic Zone

Much of Plath’s poetry, like Sexton’s, concerns domestic space and the mostly familial relationships that define — or in Lefebvre’s phrase, ‘produce’ — that space. Overarching themes followed through the poems analysed below will be the classic Gothic trope of doubling and the modern one of surveillance, together with the fragmentation of the subjective female body induced by commercial culture and also by Plath’s own sense of ‘dismemberment’ by mental illness and physical injury.¹⁵ Underlying these themes will be

¹¹ Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1978), p. 1.

¹² Zembylas speaks of ‘the circulation of emotions through individuals and collective bodies, shaping social relationships and challenging the taken-for-granted boundaries of the self; and, the strong links between emotion and space/place, that is, the emotionally dynamic spatiality of belonging and subjectivity.’ Michalos Zembylas, ‘Investigating the Emotional Geographies of Exclusion at a Multicultural School.’ *Emotion, Space and Security* 4 (2011), 151–159, cited in Setha Low, *Spatializing Culture*, p. 150.

¹³ Spivack, *With Robert Lowell and His Circle*, p. 39.

¹⁴ William Shakespeare and Rex Gibson, *As You Like It* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), p. 140.

¹⁵ ‘The speaker is increasingly constructed through processes of doubling and estrangement which exploit the daemonic potential of rhetorical masks, and which implicate the reader, through structures of direct address, in the drama of *dédoublement*’. Christina Britzolakis, ‘Gothic Subjectivity’, p. 138.

the tension between Plath's effort to perform the culturally prescribed femininity of the time within the domestic space and her simultaneous growing resentment of and revolt against those terms in her poetry and in her life as a writer. This section and the following one will explore the interwoven relationships expressed in Plath's poetry between the following elements and their metaphoric and symbolic representations in and as space: psychic splitting and Gothic doubling (mirrors, face-lift, plaster) as they redefine external and somatic spaces; further fragmentation and objectification of body image partly from these causes and also from advertising images targeted at women (dolls, puppets, dismemberment) which is set as a research question on how subjectivity is rooted in the body, how does Plath figure her body in various types of space, and why are images of dolls, dummies, and mannequins recurrent in her work); surveillance and suburban conformism (panopticism, domesticity as prison); and Plath's divided and conflictual identity (wife/mother vs. writer) as embodied in her speakers' performance of femininity and in the troubled gendering of domestic space. The main poems examined will be 'Tale of a Tub', 'Eavesdropper,' 'The Other', 'Mirror', 'The Applicant', 'Morning Song', 'Event', 'Lesbos', 'The Detective', 'Soliloquy of the Solipsist' and 'The Munich Mannequins'.

Barry Curtis writes: 'Houses inscribe themselves within their dwellers, they socialise and structure the relations within families, and provide spaces for expression and self-realisation in a complex interactive relationship'.¹⁶ However, in Plath's poetry, these relations usually fail to create a familial space, and therefore the conventionally assumed status of the domestic is absent. Plath's alienation from the domestic space, therefore, partly derives from the fact that for her the house is not a refuge from the harsh political, social, and cultural conditions of the world. (In 'The Snowman on the Moor', the domestic space is saturated with politics, hence, the speaker runs away to the openness of nature: 'Warned her to keep/Indoors with politic goodwill, not haste/Into a landscape' (10-12)). The boundaries between these spaces — particularly the private and the public — are dissolved. As noted in the Introduction, the modern American kitchen had itself become an instrument of propaganda, in the 'Kitchen Debate' that took place at the U.S. exposition in Moscow. Happy housewives with their new appliances from General Electric (which also made components for missiles and military aircraft) had been drafted as ideological combatants. There have been heated critical debates about Sylvia Plath's attitude toward the rejuvenated cult of

¹⁶ Barry Curtis, *Dark Places: The Haunted House in Film* (London: Reaktion Books, 2008), p. 34.

domesticity and its associated gender system in the postwar period. One group of critics includes Marsha Bryant, who hails Plath's critical engagement with commercial 'housewife' culture in the form of women's magazines.¹⁷ Leah Souffrant, following Eavan Boland, argues that becoming a mother empowered Plath poetically.¹⁸ Cristina Nehring claims that Plath's enjoyment of domesticity was real rather than a façade, as was the 'darker self' manifested in her later poetry.¹⁹ The other cohort of critics, including Gilbert, Dobbs, Kendall, and Perloff, proposes that Plath's domestic life had a negative effect on her literary career and that it was one of the main factors contributing to her death. Diane Middlebrook straddles these two critical camps as she views domesticity and Plath's writings not as opposing factors, but rather as two mutually beneficial unities.²⁰

The evidence of Plath's letters and journals indicates that this tension in her desires persisted until very late in her life. While a student at Smith, Plath often portrayed domesticity and housekeeping: 'I am afraid of getting older. I am afraid of getting married. Spare me from cooking three meals a day — spare me from the relentless cage of routine and rote'.²¹ Such revelation is evident in 'Mary Song' when she fuses the image of the 'relentless cage' with the body's consumption. Yet soon after she arrived in Cambridge, she wrote: 'I don't know how I can bear to go back to the States unless I am married [...] I really think I would do anything to stay here'.²² Once she became a mother, she also wrote: 'I am very sentimental about the family thing [...] I think having babies really is the happiest experience of my life'.²³ But the tension persisted, not just as conflicting demands on her time and energy but as conflicting desires and aspirations.²⁴ In the waning days of her marriage, she

¹⁷ Marsha Bryant, *Women's Poetry and Popular Culture* (New York: Macmillan Palgrave, 2011), p. 19.

¹⁸ Souffrant cites Boland: 'In her essay "The Other Sylvia Plath" in the 2003 edited volume *The Grand Permission, New Writings on Poetics and Motherhood*, poet Boland argues that it is precisely in her poetry of motherhood that Sylvia Plath's poetry opens to a radical reinvestigation of poetics. Here, Boland identifies Plath's poems as in lively discourse with the tradition of the nature poem, inviting nature to include the maternal body through an unrecognized surrealist gesture' (p. 72). Leah Souffrant, "'She said plain, burned things': A Feminist Poetics of the Unsayable in Twentieth Century Literary & Visual Culture' (2014) (Doctoral thesis) in *CUNY Academic Works*, 6/3/14 http://academicworks.cuny.edu/gc_etds/287/.

¹⁹ 'Plath didn't curse or cower in her daily life; she coped. She got up in the morning and told herself she was happy; otherwise she could not have accomplished all the child care, household duties, moves, mailings, meetings with editors, typing for Ted, horseback riding, knitting, German study, beekeeping, and writing in several genres that we know she did'. Cristina Nehring, 'Domesticated Goddess,' *Atlantic Monthly*, April 2004.

²⁰ Diane Middlebrook, *Her Husband: Hughes and Plath, A Marriage*. (New York: Viking Press, 2003), p. 90.

²¹ Jeannine Dobbs, 'Viciousness in the Kitchen': Sylvia Plath's Domestic Poetry', *Modern Language Studies*, 7 (2), 1977, p 12.

²² Jeannine Dobbs, 'Viciousness in the Kitchen', pp. 11-25.

²³ Sylvia Plath, *Letters Home* (London: Faber & Faber, 2011), p. 189.

²⁴ In her journal, Plath writes: 'I was getting worried about becoming too happily stodgily practical: instead of studying Locke, for instance, or writing ... I go make an apple pie, or study the *Joy of Cooking*, reading it like a

felt relieved of this anxiety: 'I am fascinated by the polarities of muse-poet and mother-housewife. When I was happy domestically I felt a gag in my throat'.²⁵ Later, after the end of her marriage, she claimed to be glad to be done with these 'polarities'. She wrote to her mother that she was writing 'like mad — have managed a poem a day before breakfast. All book poems. Terrific stuff, as if domesticity had choked me'.²⁶ In fact, some (not all) of Plath's poems about the experience of motherhood are among the happiest she wrote. At the same time, however, she rejected the idea that a woman should be devoted only to the home and children and was determined to achieve excellence as a poet. In other words, the same relentless drive to achieve motivated both desires, which inevitably led to conflict. This acute tension, with which she had to struggle in her everyday life, is related to the persistent images of doubling and splitting of the self that recur throughout Plath's mature poetry. Plath's subjectivity can be viewed, then, as a battleground, in which a kind of Cold War in miniature between wife/mother and writer/poet played out as continual conflict, not only in her psyche but in her day-to-day performance of self. Kathleen Lant, in her essay 'The Big Strip Tease', argues that the central contradiction in Plath's poetic work is the attempt to escape the restrictive conventions and imposed silences of 'women's poetry' up to that point by appropriating a masculine poetic tradition unsuited to convey women's experience because rooted in the experience of the male body rather than the female one. While the end of Plath's marriage, as we have seen, liberated her as a poet, it did not altogether resolve this conflict, which can also be understood as a desire to possess masculine power while authentically expressing a female subjectivity.²⁷

Although her actual domestic life in England was more conflicted and tense than in the United States, the threat of nuclear destruction still haunts her poetry written there. In the late 'fifties and early 'sixties, 'the nuclear threat was felt particularly acutely, in part because of Britain's relative proximity to Soviet bases in Eastern Europe'.²⁸ And, while the Red Scare in Britain was nowhere near as intense as the one in the U.S., the sense of being watched was also omnipresent. The poems with domestic settings written while she was in the UK often mingle worry about surveillance and entrapment with complex anxiety about domesticity, as

rare novel. Whoa, I said to myself. You will escape into domesticity & stifle yourself by falling headfirst into a bowl of cookie batter'. Sylvia Plath, *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath: 1950-1962*, ed. by Karen Kukil (New York: Anchor Books, 2007), p. 210.

²⁵ Alfred Alvarez, *Risky Business: People, Pastimes, Poker and Books* (London: Bloomsbury, 2007), p. 223.

²⁶ Sylvia Plath, *Letters Home: Correspondence 1950-1963*, p. 466.

²⁷ Kathleen Lant, 'The Big Strip Tease: Female Bodies and Male Power in the Poetry of Sylvia Plath', p. 648.

²⁸ Jo Gill, *The Cambridge Introduction to Sylvia Plath*, p. 22.

in 'The Other' and 'Eavesdropper'. In other words, the fear she experiences within her domestic domain fuses with fears experienced in the outside world, so that they permeate her life as both housewife and poet. In some of these poems, notably 'Lesbos', the anxiety turns to rage as the speaker abandons the performance of femininity while at the same time, as we will see, asserting her motherhood.²⁹

A 1956 poem, 'Tale of a Tub', written during the same month in which Plath met Ted Hughes, is rich with themes and tonalities that will persist in Plath's later work: surveillance, doubling, horror, the vexed and unstable relationship between imagination and reality, and death. Even in the bathroom, the most private and enclosed space in the house, the poet is unable to escape a harrowing perception of the public eye. Plath traces for twentieth-century women the everyday horrors of domestic spaces, like the kitchen and (as here and also in 'A Birthday Present') the bathroom, rather than of haunted castles and graveyards of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Gothic literature. Fred Botting meticulously diagnoses this atmosphere, stating that 'the gothicisation of the most banal and apparently innocuous social spaces remains tied to the circulation of anxiety and fear in a consumer society so that even the acceptable and mundane enclaves of middle-class life, the suburbs, resort to Gothic patterns'.³⁰

The poem begins in a tone of aggressive realism: '[T]he photographic chamber of the eye/ records bare painted walls, while an electric light/ flays the chromium nerves of plumbing raw' (*CP*, ll. 1-3). Yet on closer examination, the implied claim to 'photographic' realism is immediately undermined by the violently metaphorical third line, in which the light 'flays' the 'nerves' of the plumbing — an Expressionistic pathetic fallacy we associate with Plath's later work.

These first three lines set up the central tension in the poem, which is between bathtub and bathroom as a space for childhood daydreaming (or fears) and the 'adult' need to abandon fantasy and face 'bare' reality. This tension also evokes the biographical fact that Plath's happy childhood was shattered close to her ninth birthday when her father died, and

²⁹ 'In this sense, gender is in no way a stable identity of locus of agency from which various acts proceed; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time--an identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts. Further, gender is instituted through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self'. Judith Butler, 'Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory', 40.4 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997) (519-531), p. 519.

³⁰ Fred Botting, *Limits of Horror: Technology, Bodies, Gothic* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2008), p. 56.

her mother was compelled to move the family to a ‘white frame house’ of the kind then being erected by the hundreds of thousands as developers created huge swathes of new suburbs.³¹ The metaphorical camera here is an expression of the personal and social anxieties Plath inhabited. She views the bathroom not as a private sanctuary, but as an open place in which the poem’s speaker is exposed to the world:

... caught
naked in the merely actual room,
the stranger in the lavatory mirror
puts on a public grin, repeats our name
but scrupulously reflects the usual terror.³² (CP, ll. 4-8)

Here and throughout the poem, the speaker refers to herself in either third person singular (‘the stranger’) or first person plural (‘our name’), never in the first person singular characteristic of most of Plath’s later poetry. In this way she insistently generalises the experience she describes to some unspecified collectivity — most likely women, since the speaker is female. This raises the question: ‘caught naked’ by whom? Presumably by the speaker herself. This would imply a kind of self-surveillance which Foucault similarly refers to as self-policing: ‘Control is thus achieved through self-surveillance as the fear of being caught breaking the rules keeps them in line with expectations’.³³ She has to perform even in the ostensibly private space of her own home, and within its most private space of all, the bathroom. Immersion in the ‘merely actual’, then, has a panoptic effect: the ‘stranger’ reflection, in the privacy of the bathroom, adjusts its facial expression as if being watched in public.³⁴ What the ‘lavatory mirror’ reflects is ‘the usual terror’. As in the poem ‘Mirror’ discussed below, it does so ‘scrupulously’, implying that the ‘usual terror’ is an objective fact, presumably manifest in the ‘stranger’s’ appearance in the mirror that requires self-conscious putting on of the ‘public grin’. As the mirror says: ‘I am silver and exact. I have no preconceptions’, Plath writes in ‘Mirror’.

³¹ The move also took the eight years old Sylvia away from the sea and the shore, a loss that haunted her and that also helps explain the childhood fantasies of the ocean described in this poem. Plath’s mother once described the new suburban house as ‘being in a modest section of the town, with low rates’. Susan Bassnett, *Women Writers: Sylvia Plath* (London: Macmillan, 1987), p. 9.

³² The use of the British word ‘lavatory’ strengthens this connection. But the rather generic bathroom, with its ‘bare painted walls’, could also be based on the one in her Wellesley home — especially since much of the poem addresses the fantasies of childhood.

³³ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, p. 89.

³⁴ ‘He who is subjected to a field of visibility, and who knows it, assumes responsibility for the constraints of power; he makes them play spontaneously upon himself; he inscribes in himself the power relation in which he simultaneously plays both roles; he becomes the principle of his own subjection’. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, pp. 201-2.

Again, however, the realist conceit undermines itself, as the washbowl ‘maintains’ its simple utility and the towel ‘disclaims’ that there are troll faces in its folds; daydreaming has been replaced by an equally imaginary personification of objects via pathetic fallacy. And the window, ‘blind with steam’, does not reveal the darkness outside that ‘shrouds our prospects in ambiguous shadow’ (*CP*, l. 16). This last image introduces a stronger note of anxiety into the childhood imaginary the speaker seems to be overcoming. Taken together, these two stanzas give the feeling that the speaker can be seen, but cannot see out — a panoptical situation. The bathroom seems to take another shape – a theatre of shadow-show performance.

This apparent demystification continues in the next stanza, in which the tub no longer breeds ‘omens’ such as a frightening ‘crab and octopus’ held at bay only by childhood ritual. The ‘authentic sea’ will pare down ‘fantastic flesh to honest bone’. Entering the tub, and seeing her ‘limbs/ waver, faintly green’ the speaker asks:

... can our dreams
ever blur the intransigent lines which draw
the shape that shuts us in? absolute fact
intrudes even when the revolted eye
is closed; the tub exists behind our back;
its glittering surfaces are blank and true. (*CP*, ll. 27-32)

The tub is no longer the fantasy transport to the lost seashore that it was for her as a young girl. Now the meaning of ‘the usual terror’ in the first stanza becomes clearer: ‘Yet always the ridiculous nude flanks urge/ the fabrication of some cloth to cover/ such starkness [...] each day demands we create our whole world over/ disguising the constant horror in a coat/ of many-colored fictions [...]’ (*CP*, ll. 33-8). The speaker also seems to be alienated from her own naked body, describing it as ‘ridiculous’, without dignity, in the doubling gaze of the mirror. The ‘true’ and ‘revolting’ form of her body, like the tub itself, persists even when her eyes are closed. Besides her own body, the other source of terror is the actual ‘constant horror’ of the world — the world of the Holocaust and Hiroshima — which is far more frightening than the fantastical fears of childhood. And this need encompasses not only ‘each day’ but the entirety of our experience: ‘we mask our past/ in the green of Eden, pretend future's shining fruit/ can sprout from the navel of this present waste’.

In the final stanza, the speaker seems to make an initial effort to confine herself to the ‘mere actual’, but quickly loses the battle to marine metaphors, in which the confined space of the bathtub becomes an entire ocean in her imagination:

In this particular tub, two knees jut up

like icebergs, while minute brown hairs rise
on arms and legs in a fringe of kelp; green soap
navigates the tidal slosh of seas [...] (CP, ll. 41-4)

The speaker's body here, within the space of the tub, becomes a topography of separate, half-submerged parts. The 'particulars' of observation are both subsumed into and made more vivid by this figurative language. The speaker concludes defiantly, having demonstrated the necessity of imagination in addressing reality through the very language of the poem: '... in faith/ we shall board our imagined ship and wildly sail/ among sacred islands of the mad till death/ shatters the fabulous stars and makes us real' (CP, ll. 45-8). In her life, Plath traversed 'islands of the mad' ('sacred' because imaginative) during her time in a mental hospital as well as her own illness, and she came to view death as a terrible 'perfection' ('The Munich Mannequins' and 'Edge') — an ultimate reality, a kind of paradigmatic un-space or even utopia (literally *no-place*), unspeakable because unimaginable. The 'bare' bathroom and the 'blank' tub cannot be reduced to what the eye's 'photographic chamber' shows. Plath understood that space is an imaginative and social construction; even the analogy to photography underlines not the biological process of sight but rather the mechanical construction of the visual world.³⁵

The feeling of being perpetually under surveillance, of being the subject of an unfriendly, alien gaze, is crucial to Plath's writing across multiple types of space and throughout the mature phase of her tragically short-lived career.³⁶ In a 1962 poem, 'Eavesdropper', the speaker expresses disgust at her neighbour, whose offer to have her brother trim the speaker's hedges because they 'darken [her] house' is a pretext for spying on the speaker and her family. The space between the two houses thus becomes a contested and hostile territory as the speaker's privacy, the integrity of her own domestic space, is breached. But the speaker also observes her observer:

Do not think I don't notice your curtain —
Midnight, four o'clock,
Lit (you are reading),
Tarting with the drafts that pass [...] (CP, ll. 28-31)

³⁵ Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, pp. 32-4.

³⁶ Mulvey also highlights the susceptibility of windows to surveillance and the help they offer the voyeur, arguing that suburbanites are victims of voyeurism, the other face of surveillance: 'the suburban life is to-be-looked-at-ness'. Laura Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,' *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader* (2003): pp. 44-53 (48).

The other woman's curtain, animated as a 'little whore tongue' as an extension of her personality, is trying to 'beckon' the speaker's overheard words in through her window, including '[t]he zoo yowl, the mad soft/ Mirror talk you love to catch me at' (*CP*, ll. 35-6). The speaker has evidently caught her neighbour in the act of snooping: 'How you jumped when I jumped on *you!*'

The speaker widens the poem's space to the surrounding landscape, which to her has become a 'desert' in which the dairy farmers and their cattle have metonymically fused into hybrid 'cow people' on their way home from pasture. They are also going home to 'the big blue eye', which we might expect to be a metaphor for the sky; but it is only 'like' the sky, as well as 'like God'. Like any surveillance device, it watches the people who watch it, who are referred to as 'ciphers'. The word 'cipher' can refer to a person without worth or influence, a nobody, but 'cipher' can also mean a code for encryption or an encoded message, which in this context is highly suggestive.³⁷ (The 'eye' may also allude to the omnipresent gaze of Big Brother in Orwell's *1984*.) These associations combine to create a menaced ambience of paranoid anxiety that goes well beyond simple resentment toward a nosy neighbour. The last stanza is mostly a list of everything the neighbour with her '[e]yes like mice' tries to see inside the speaker's private space:

Levering letter flaps,
Scrutinizing the fly
Of the man's pants
Dead on the chair back,
Opening the fat smiles, the eyes
Of two babies
Just to make sure — (*CP*, ll. 55-61)

Throughout this catalogue the speaker's furious contempt mounts. Notably, one of the three apostrophic epithets with which the speaker ends is 'Sister-bitch!' The neighbour, as contemptible as she may be, is somehow another of the speaker's doubles, a shadow, perhaps, of her shadow-self. With the 'trundling', oblivious cow people on one side and the shifty rodent eavesdropper on the other, the speaker (together with her family) is the only real human being in the scene.

In 'The Other', the doubling becomes so intense that it is almost impossible to know who is speaking or where in the domestic space the events take place. Initially, the voice

³⁷ Coming of age in the 1950s, Plath would have been intensely aware of the vital role of ciphers in the communications between Soviet spies and their 'controls'.

seems to be that of a jealous wife speaking to her husband: 'You come in late, wiping your lips' (CP, l. 1). What may be an answer follows: 'What did I leave untouched on the doorstep — ' (CP, l. 2). The first voice also seems to be the one who sardonically remarks: 'The police love you, you confess everything' (CP, l. 7). Another female voice apparently answers, in equally sarcastic tones: 'Bright hair, shoe-black, old plastic,/ Is my life so intriguing?' (CP, ll. 8-9) What seems to be the first voice commands:

Open your handbag. What is that bad smell?
It is your knitting, busily

Hooking itself to itself,
It is your sticky candies. (CP, ll. 13-16)

She continues: 'I have your head on my wall./ Navel cords, blue-red and lucent,/ Shriek from my belly like arrows, and these I ride' (CP, ll. 17-19). This statement of both obsessive hatred and intimate, umbilical connection seems to be spoken by one woman to the other. The motif of sexual jealousy continues as the speaker alludes to 'fornications' that circle a sterile 'womb of marble' and to 'sulfurous adulteries' that 'grieve in a dream'. The crucial lines follow: 'Cold glass, how you insert yourself/ Between myself and myself' (CP, ll. 26-7). Perhaps the two women, as in 'Mirror', are one and the same; or perhaps one doubled woman, '[s]earching [its] reaches for what she really is', confronts her rival who 'confesses everything'. The speakers are apparently watching each other in a mutual surveillance, a 'wilderness of mirrors' in T.S. Eliot's phrase, in a kind of shattered domestic space.³⁸

The themes of doubling and surveillance recur throughout Plath's domestic poetry. This is no surprise. In 1954 Plath completed her undergraduate Honours thesis, entitled 'The Magic Mirror; A Study of the Double in Two of Dostoevsky's Novels'. Besides Dostoyevsky, the study focuses on E. T. A. Hoffmann, Oscar Wilde, Robert Louis Stevenson, and Edgar Allan Poe, and psychoanalytic and anthropological writings by Otto Rank, Freud, Frazer, and Jung. However, the issue of doubling goes deeper than literary or mythical preoccupations.³⁹

³⁸ Or the film noir classic *Lady from Shanghai* (1947) by Orson Welles (see the Hall of Mirrors finale).

³⁹ Sarah Bruton cites Jacqueline Rose: 'This sense of the split female self, caught between desire for and incarceration by the male gaze, is a typical gothic trope; Jacqueline Rose argues that the whole of Plath's writing problematises such ambiguities, inherent in women's sexually and socially-constructed roles — mother, wife, lover, whore, creative artist showing each to be a version of self, each a performance.' Sarah Bruton, 'Bedlam and Broomsticks: Representations of the Witch in Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Women's Writing,' (Doctoral thesis, University of Cardiff, 2006), p. 161.

Doubling appears in Plath's domestic space perhaps most straightforwardly in 'Mirror', which is an instance of prosopopoeia. In the poem, the speaker is a large dressing-table or wall mirror.

I am silver and exact. I have no preconceptions.
Whatever I see I swallow immediately
Just as it is, unmisted by love or dislike.
I am not cruel, only truthful — (CP, ll. 1-3)

The mirror, then, claims objectivity and emotional neutrality. But it does not simply reflect what it sees — it 'swallows' it. In 'swallowing' and 'meditating on' the opposite wall, the mirror has doubled the space of the room. In the mirror-space, people gazing into the mirror in passing and the night-time shadows are mere 'flickers' interrupting the mirror's contemplation of the unmoving, unchanging wall. This sense of the transience of beings seen in the mirror-space is reinforced in the second stanza, in which the mirror becomes a 'lake' gazed into by a woman '[s]earching my reaches for what she really is'. (Note the word 'reaches', which suggests the depth of the doubled space created by reflection). This metaphor immediately evokes the myth of Narcissus, but the poem inverts this story: unhappy with what she sees, the woman looks at herself in the gentle light of 'those liars, the candles or the moon'. The mirror, though, 'faithfully' reflects her as she is and is 'rewarded' with her 'agitation' and tears. 'I am important to her', it says in a self-satisfied tone. 'Each morning it is her face that replaces the darkness'. The mirror continues: 'In me she has drowned a young girl, and in me an old woman/ Rises toward her day after day, like a terrible fish',⁴⁰ (CP, ll. 17-8).

What is 'terrible' about the image of the old woman is in the mind of the viewer because of her fears, which are strongly gendered, as is the symbolism of mirrors themselves. The mirror is a symbol of femininity in Western culture from as far back as ancient Greece; the astrological symbol for the planet Venus is a glyph of a hand mirror. It is no accident that the person compulsively examining her reflection every morning is a woman.⁴¹ At the time Plath was writing in the 1950s and early 1960s, life expectancy was increasing due to

⁴⁰ The mirror space is reimagined as an aquarium and the speaker as a 'terrible fish'. This simile anticipates the aquatic imagery that pervades the poems about hospital space (see below).

⁴¹ Today, the range of women's intellectual and emotional reactions to viewing their mirrored images has become a subject of extensive research. Based on her observation of the responses of female characters in Gothic fiction, Claire Kahane has been spearheading research 'tracing the reactions of these characters to the mirror reflections'. Claire Kahane and Madelon Sprengnether, eds., *The (M)other Tongue: Essays in Feminist Psychoanalytic Interpretation* (Cornell University Press, 1985), p. 347.

improved living standards in the post-war boom and a raft of medical advances. Meanwhile, as more and more old people died in hospital in intensive care rather than at home, death was expelled from the domestic space. Greater longevity thus had the effect of making people more afraid of death. Michael Kearl writes: ‘Cultural thanatophobia, excessive fear of death, has become thoroughly interwoven with cultural gerontophobia, fear of growing old, demonstrated by the multibillion-dollar cosmetic surgery industry to obscure the aging process’.⁴² Plath, who had spent much of her young adult years writing for women’s magazines, would have been well aware of these developments, and of how women’s anxieties about their appearance, and especially about signs of aging, were driving their consumption of cosmetics, skin and hair care, ‘figure control’ underwear, and fashion.⁴³ This was another way in which the former privacy of the home — and of the body itself — was being invaded: by anxiety-fuelled advertising.⁴⁴

Plath’s poetry powerfully expresses both the kinds of anxieties shared by many women of her class and time who were being culturally compelled into the very limited role assigned to them, and her own particular fears and traumas.⁴⁵ This anxiety about femaleness and reproduction haunts her late poems in multiple forms: ‘barren’ landscape, an ivory lifeless body, a dead white womb, deformed babies. Plath here makes no distinction between the woman reflected in the mirror and any domestically contained woman — ‘searching the mirror for some resemblance of individual reflection’.⁴⁶ The mirror, much like the walled-in containment of the home, is a self-monitoring space of anxious reflection and surveillance.

Plath’s struggle with the performance of femininity, her commercially reinforced anxieties about her appearance, and her mixed feelings about being biologically female led her, as they did to Anne Sexton, to images of woman as doll or puppet. We will encounter more such images in the next section, but most relevantly to the gendering of domestic space and the objectification of ‘body-space’, this imagery reaches a kind of paroxysm in ‘The Applicant’. The poem takes the form of an interview by an agency of a male candidate for marriage; his answers can be inferred from the speaker’s. He is asked whether he is ‘our sort

⁴² Michael Kearl, “Aging, the Elderly, and Death” in *Encyclopedia of Death and the Human Experience*, eds. by Clifton D. Bryant and Dennis L. Peck (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2009), p. 25.

⁴³ For the well-to-do, there was also cosmetic surgery, a theme Plath explores in ‘Face Lift’, discussed below.

⁴⁴ We will see some of the consequences of this reinforced anxiety in the ‘acid’ rivalry of the two women in ‘Lesbos’.

⁴⁵ Plath was recurrently concerned about aging as a causing a decline in her creativity as well as the loss of her looks. Jeannine Dobbs, ‘Viciousness in the Kitchen,’ p. 47.

⁴⁶ Elizabeth Jean Spies, ‘Advertising Stigmata: The Evolution of Advertising in American Poetic Culture’, (University of California, Riverside, Unpublished Doctoral Thesis), p. 48.

of a person' and whether he has 'A glass eye, false teeth or a crutch,/ A brace or a hook,/ Rubber breasts or a rubber crotch,/ Stitches to show something's missing?'⁴⁷ (*CP*, ll. 3-6). Evidently the applicant must be physically whole, without prosthetic parts or amputations — yet the series of questions implies wounding, dismemberment, and fragmentation in the body of the man as well.⁴⁸ When he apparently says no, he is brusquely told: 'Stop crying./ Open your hand. [...] Here is a hand/ to fill it' (*CP*, ll. 8-11). The hand [is] 'willing/ To bring teacups and roll away headaches/And do whatever you tell it' (*CP*, ll. 11-3). The prospective wife on offer is metonymised — or dismembered — to a hand, the body part that as a synecdoche most perfectly manifests wifely femininity — cooking, serving, soothing.⁴⁹ It is also 'guaranteed/ To thumb shut your eyes at the end' (*CP*, ll. 15-6). After the husband dies, the wife will 'dissolve' in tears and be recycled by the manufacturer.⁵⁰ The male applicant is revealed as naked and is offered a suit: 'Black and stiff, but not a bad fit. [...] It is waterproof, shatterproof, proof/ Against fire and bombs through the roof./ Believe me, they'll bury you in it' (*CP*, ll. 21-5). The suit is masculinity, which the applicant must also 'marry' in order to be offered the wife-robot, who is first of all a remedy for the fact that the applicant's 'head is empty'. Now 'she' is finally invited 'out of the closet' (addressed as 'sweetie') and offered for the applicant's inspection — 'Naked as paper to start/ But in twenty-five years she'll be silver,/ In fifty, gold' (*CP*, ll. 30-2).⁵¹ Paper to be drawn on by her husband, she is an appreciating asset:

A living doll, everywhere you look.
It can sew, it can cook,
It can talk, talk, talk. It works, there is nothing wrong with it.
You have a hole, it's a poultice.
You have an eye, it's an image. [...]

⁴⁷ Because of 'rubber breasts' and the dismembered-doll imagery frequent in Plath's later poetry, some commentators misread this series of questions as being directed to a woman. But the 'applicant' is unquestionably male. However, his masculinity is not yet confirmed by the femininity of the wife-robot to whom he will be introduced. I am postulating that it is intended to imply that the male applicant is gender-incomplete until joined by the wife-robot, whose presence masculinises him. But it may also reflect Plath's own ambivalence about her gender as female.

⁴⁸ The strangely androgynous list of prosthetic parts has led some critics to assume it refers to the wife-robot introduced later in the poem; but it is addressed to the prospective husband.

⁴⁹ Once again, the virtual dismemberment of the wife-robot being offered to the applicant invokes the fragmentation of the female body in 'beauty' advertising.

⁵⁰ Peel notes that the wife-robot's body is 'appropriated, mutilated, subjected, ignored and then destroyed'. Robin Peel, *Writing Back: Sylvia Plath and Cold War Politics* (Cranbury, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2002), p. 245.

⁵¹ It is worth noting that the reference to 'paper,' 'silver,' and 'gold' are all associated with wedding anniversary gifts and the last two can be taken as a reference to Jubilee anniversary.

Will you marry it, marry it, marry it.⁵² (*CP*, ll. 33-8)

(Notice the pronoun shift back to 'it' immediately following the word 'doll' and the fact that the final question is not really a question — it is a command.) Despite being a doll, the wife-robot is fluidly adaptable to the needs of the applicant-husband in his stiff, everything-proof suit of masculinity.⁵³ The crucial space in this poem is the space formed by the bodies of the applicant-husband and doll-wife together. By 'marrying', they begin the creation of the domestic space in which they will perform their respective genders. Plath's point is that this system, not patriarchal power alone, defines the domestic space.

Plath also addresses the concrete reality of the gendered division of labour within the home, and the mixture of estrangement and obligation that motherhood can often induce. In 'Morning Song', in which the speaker is at first part of a 'we' with the father: 'Our voices echo, magnifying your arrival. [...] We stand round blankly as walls' (*CP*, ll. 4-6). Within the couple, the speaker seems to lose a sense of agency and connection to the child:

I'm no more your mother
Than the cloud that distills a mirror to reflect its own slow
Effacement at the wind's hand.⁵⁴ (*CP*, ll. 7-9)

This is a complex figure. By dropping rain, the cloud 'distills' the pool of water that reflects its 'slow effacement'; the child will now witness, like the speaker in 'Mirror', the gradual ageing and decay of his mother. Nevertheless, the speaker lies awake listening to the baby's breathing like a 'far sea': 'One cry, and I stumble from bed, cow-heavy and floral/ In my Victorian nightgown'. The speaker, now a singular 'I', is summoned back into her role as caregiver and thus also into the reality of her maternal body, 'cow-heavy' with her own milk

⁵² The young wife-as-doll metaphor can be set in an analogy to the beautiful, flawless, submissive wives in the 1972 Ira Levin novel *The Stepford Wives*. What appear to be contented wives in the upscale Connecticut suburb of Stepford are in fact android robots — animated dolls — which have been substituted by their husbands for their real and 'imperfect' wives. It seems plausible that Ira Levin may have read the later poetry of Sylvia Plath — by this time a cultural legend, a decade after her own suicide — which is likewise littered with images of mannequins and doll parts. Ira Levin, *The Stepford Wives* (New York: Perennial, 2002).

⁵³ In 1951, a decade before the composition of this poem, Marshall McLuhan had published his groundbreaking study of mass commercial culture or 'industrial folklore', *The Mechanical Bride*. Many of the examples he discusses in the book concern what Butler and other feminist theorists call the reproduction of gender. The title essay begins with three headlines: 1. 'Noticed any very spare parts lately?' 2. 'Have you got what it takes to hook a date? See us for the highest bid on your old model. 3. "The walk," "the legs," "the body," "the hips," "the look," "the lips." Did she fall off a wall? Call all the king's horses and men'. The advertising image of the 'modern girl' is figured as machine parts, a car to be traded in, and a shattered Humpty Dumpty. The language is so similar to that of 'The Applicant' (and to that of 'The Stones', discussed in the next section) that it seems quite likely Plath had read the book.

⁵⁴ The desire to be 'effaced' from motherhood recurs in 'Tulips', discussed below.

and implicitly desexualised, while her husband sleeps on. The couple's 'we' is broken down by the traditional gender roles in heterosexual marriage.

The speaker's implied fears in 'Morning Song' are realised in 'Event', a poem from May 1962, at about the time Hughes began his affair with Assia Wevill. Each stanza of the poem moves between different spaces: the moonlight (and the cliff), the owl outside the window, and inward to the crib and then back outside to the starry night sky. Although the fifth stanza does not give an accurate spatial pinpoint, the speaker 'walk[s] in a ring', perhaps in her yard. The sixth stanza ends up inside a rotten apple. The poem begins:

How the elements solidify!—
The moonlight, that chalk cliff
In whose rift we lie
Back to back. (CP, ll. 1-4)

The moonlight has 'solidified' into a cliff, and the couple are lying in its hardened 'rift' or gap, back to back; it divides the space of the bed. The exterior has penetrated the interior. Beside the bed is their infant son who 'revolves and sighs' asleep in his cot. But what ought to be an idyllic family scene has ceased to be one. The baby, 'demanding', begins to cry; even 'his little face is carved in pained, red wood'. 'One touch, it burns and sickens,' the speaker says, referring to some brushing contact with her husband. The verbs 'burn' and 'sicken' recall the effects of exposure to radiation, as in accounts of the aftermath of the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The husband's body has become radioactive, toxic. Meanwhile, in her own mind, the speaker 'walk[s] in a ring' of repetitive thoughts and memories, 'a groove of old faults' — the speaker has become a sort of gramophone, playing the same record over and over. 'Love cannot come here,' she summarises, implying her own complicity with its exclusion by way of her obsessive replaying of the 'old faults'.

The 'rift' in domestic communion has created '[a] black gap', in which a wrenching apart of shared psychic space causes the speaker to respond with revulsion to any physical contact with her husband: a wide interior distance is manifest as a small exterior one, an inch or two in the marriage bed. But the 'black gap' is now also between the speaker and her baby: 'On the opposite lip/ A small white soul is waving, a small white maggot' (CP, ll. 18-9). The speaker is experiencing estrangement and revulsion from her own infant child — and even from her own body: 'My limbs have left me'. 'Who has dismembered us?' she cries, returning to the recurrent trope of broken dolls or puppets. Emotional alienation has sliced, like a blade, deeper and deeper into the 'members' of the familial space until it has separated

the speaker not only from her husband and her child, but from her own sense of physical integrity. She concludes on a note of ambiguous hope: ‘The dark is melting. We touch like cripples’. Although dawn has come and the speaker and her husband are touching each other with an attempt at tenderness, the interpersonal (and intrapersonal) ‘dismemberment’ diagrammed in the poem has not been undone; the domestic space is fissured.⁵⁵

Images of splitting and doubling in Plath’s poetry are not always developed from apparent solitude or from fractured relationships with family members. In ‘Lesbos’⁵⁶ the Other is another woman, apparently older than the speaker, a former film and stage actress, here aggressively performing her own gender role as unsatisfied wife; the speaker’s own husband is tellingly absent.⁵⁷ They are in the other woman’s kitchen, which is somehow fake, a set for a melodrama of women’s misery:

It is all Hollywood, windowless,
The fluorescent light wincing on and off like a terrible migraine,
Coy paper strips for doors —
Stage curtains, a widow's frizz. (CP, ll. 3-6)

This description exemplifies Alison Blunt’s point about how early cultural geographers failed to see the home from a woman’s viewpoint in a male-dominated and hierarchical society.⁵⁸ The poem begins, famously: ‘Viciousness in the kitchen!/ The potatoes hiss’(CP, ll. 1-2). The onomatopoeia of the repeated ‘s’, ‘sh’, and ‘ch’ sounds creates a metaphoric association with the catlike ‘hissing’ of women half-whispering angrily to each other. The viciousness is primarily between the women, triggered in the rage and frustration they feel toward their lives.⁵⁹ Much of the poem’s first part consists of what the other woman says to the speaker, in

⁵⁵ Like Lowell in ‘Man and Wife’, Plath here ‘speaks of the woe that is in marriage’.

⁵⁶ Lesbos is the Greek island where the poet Sappho, who was born there, led an educational community of young women in the 6th century BCE.

⁵⁷ Recently published documents reveal that the couple in the poem is closely based on Marvin and Kathy Kane, whom Plath knew both professionally and personally, and that the visit described in the poem took place only days after Hughes had left Plath and traveled to Spain with Assia Wevill without saying where he was going. According to David Trinidad, Plath was resentful of Kathy Kane because she complained endlessly about her marriage while Plath was the one who had been abandoned. This is one instance where biography is directly relevant; only a few details have been fictionalised. David Trinidad, “‘Viciousness in the Kitchen’: The Backstory of Sylvia Plath’s ‘Lesbos’” in *Blackbird: An Online Journal of Literature and the Arts*, 14.1, 2, Fall 2015.

⁵⁸ ‘Crucially, humanistic geographers also claimed that part of what made people human was their intense and sensual attachment to place. The home was celebrated as a site of authentic meaning, value and experience, imbued with nostalgic memories and the love of a particular place [...]. But, as Gillian Rose (1993) argues, humanistic geographers failed to analyse gendered geographies of home, shaped by different and unequal relations of power, and as a place that might be dangerous, violent, alienating and unhappy rather than loving and secure’. Alison Blunt et al., *Cultural Geography in Practice* (London: Hodder, 2003), p. 73.

⁵⁹ The cartoonish and gothic animation of domestic commodities helps the reader to fictionalise the kitchen space as a jungle, which recalls the ‘escape-proof cage’ (p. 115) in *The Bell Jar*.

reported speech, in an anaphoric litany of violent negativity: ‘You say you can’t stand her... You say I should drown the kittens... You say I should drown my girl’. The speaker echoes what is evidently the addressee’s scorn toward her child, in a way that makes their voices hard to distinguish at times:

And my child — look at her, face down on the floor,
Little unstrung puppet, kicking to disappear —
Why she is schizophrenic,
Her face red and white, a panic [...] ⁶⁰ (CP, ll. 8-11)

The speaker’s reply gives another reason for the child’s behaviour: ‘You have stuck her kittens outside your window/ In a sort of cement well/ Where they crap and puke and cry and she can’t hear’. The blunt monosyllables ‘crap’ and ‘puke’ are a radical break with poetic decorum for Plath and for women poets in general — vomit and excrement are the abject materials of everyday life for the mothers of babies and young children (and their pets). Together with the sounds of children crying and yelling, they figure prominently in the sensorium of the maternal domestic space.

The next verse paragraph begins with more furious monosyllables (‘stink’, ‘fat’, ‘crap’ ‘doped’, ‘thick’, ‘pill’) like a series of door slams, defining the kitchen, the supposed heart of the domestic space, as a place of dirt, pollution, exhaustion and mutual female enmity, in whose ‘smog’ they ‘float’ like living corpses. The addressee’s ‘impotent husband’ wants to escape this ‘hell’, but the speaker tries to keep him there as ‘[a]n old pole for the lightning./ The acid baths, the skyfuls off of you’ (CP, ll. 46-7). The ‘lightning’ of the women’s mutual hostility in the confinement of the kitchen and motherhood discharges through the speaker, who experiences the other woman’s continual vituperative rage as a ‘skyful’ of acid rain.⁶¹ The speaker is in a kind of clench of anger, indicated by the recurrent ‘k’ sounds of ‘neck, ‘thick’, ‘speak’, ‘pack’:

Now I am silent, hate
Up to my neck,
Thick, thick.
I do not speak.
I am packing the hard potatoes like good clothes,
I am packing the babies,

⁶⁰ This is an early occurrence of the use of puppet imagery to describe a mentally ill person, which will recur in the poems about hospital space, discussed below.

⁶¹ Britzolakis notes: ‘This electricity is inseparable from the marketing (and self-marketing) of women as images, which pits them against each other as “rivals”, but also perversely eroticises the hatred between them. The poem’s landscape is the detritus of a female subjectivity that wants *to be exchanged*, to be a Hollywood starlet, a mermaid, or a *femme fatale* [...]’ Christina Britzolakis, ‘Gothic Subjectivity’, p. 137.

I am packing the sick cats. (CP, ll. 64-70)

The speaker clearly perceives the trap in which the other woman is caught: 'I see your cute decor/ Close on you like the fist of a baby'. She has experienced a more extreme version of her own predicament as a wife and mother and is repelled. The other woman's situation, despite the 'cute decor', is a nightmare inversion of the suburban ideal to which Plath as a teenager in the late 1940s and early 1950s had been culturally conditioned to aspire: the home claustrophobic, the husband weak, the child scorned.

In 'The Detective', alienation from the fractured domestic space has become complete: a woman has apparently disappeared from a house, whose location resembles that of Plath's and Hughes' house in Devon. The scene is beyond mere surveillance; a crime has been committed, and there is a mystery to be solved. The speaker is a detective who asks questions and makes observations: 'What was she doing when it blew in/ Over the seven hills, the red furrow, the blue mountain?' (CP, ll. 1-2). The landscape is stylised as in a child's drawing but swiftly becomes horrific: 'In that valley the train shrieks echo like souls on hooks./ / That is the valley of death, though the cows thrive' (CP, ll. 5-6). 'Shrieks' and 'hooks' are words that recur again and again in Plath's late poetry as emblematic expressions of emotional pain. As in 'Eavesdropper', the placid, oblivious dairy cows are contrasted with the dark and bitter scene in the foreground; yet the whole immediate landscape is a 'valley of death'⁶². The mood of revulsion becomes more acute: 'In her garden the lies were shaking out their moist silks/ And the eyes of the killer moving sluglike and sidelong,/ Unable to face the fingers, those egotists' (CP, ll. 7-9). The 'killer' is clearly a deceiver as well. The description returns to the interior, the crime scene, where '[t]he fingers were tamping a woman into a wall,/ A body into a pipe, and the smoke rising' (CP, ll. 10-11). The woman has been incorporated into the body of the house or 'tamped' like tobacco into a pipe, becoming a mere accessory or convenience to the male 'killer'. The 'years' of the marriage have been burnt, tellingly, in the kitchen, where the man's 'deceits' are displayed in memory 'like family photographs'.

The house is apparently empty, with its 'smell of polish' and 'plush carpets' in the 'red room' '[w]here the wireless talks to itself like an elderly relative'. But 'No one is dead./ There is no body in the house at all'. (Plath here is punning on 'nobody'). However, even

⁶² This phrase alludes to two very well-known sources: Psalm 23 ('Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for Thou art with me') and Alfred, Lord Tennyson's 'The Charge of the Light Brigade', then taught to all British schoolchildren ('Into the valley of death rode the six hundred'). The connotations are of isolation and futility — there is no 'Lord' to protect the vanished woman, and the Brigade in the poem rides directly into enemy fire to be pointlessly slaughtered.

though there is ‘no body’, this is still a crime scene. The detective asks again what weapon was used, in a grisly escalation from traditional weapons into technologies of death by torture:

Did it come like an arrow, did it come like a knife?
Which of the poisons is it?
Which of the nerve-curlers, the convulsors? Did it electrify?⁶³ (CP, ll. 21-3)

But again the speaker contradicts himself: ‘This is a case without a body./ The body does not come into it at all’. With this statement, the poem leaves behind its apparent realism and moves into dreamlike grotesque, highlighted by the speaker’s matter-of-fact, pseudo-forensic diction.⁶⁴ He continues:

It is a case of vaporization.
The mouth first, its absence reported
In the second year. It had been insatiable
And in punishment was hung out like brown fruit
To wrinkle and dry. (CP, ll. 26-30)

The woman’s ‘vaporizing’ body, like the murderous man’s, is reduced to metonymic fragments: ‘The breasts next./ These were harder, two white stones./ The milk came yellow, then blue and sweet as water’. We know that Plath was profoundly conflicted about her femaleness (as in ‘The Applicant’), which she identified with femininity as a social and cultural fact. Lant cites Plath from her journals:

Being born a woman is my awful tragedy. From the moment I was conceived I was doomed to sprout breasts and ovaries rather than penis and scrotum; to have my whole circle of action, thought and feeling rigidly circumscribed by my inescapable femininity.⁶⁵

Yet at the same time, Plath was committed to her marriage and to motherhood — to a modified performance of the female role. As we will see in ‘The Munich Mannequins’, she valorised female fertility in particular and had a horror of femininity detached from the biological capacities of womanhood, also expressed in ‘Lesbos’. These commitments must be set against the imagery of the fragmented body in ‘The Applicant’ and her resentment of having ‘sprouted’ breasts and ovaries. For Plath, the domestic space was the site of an unstable reconciliation between these two emotions, so long as the husband maintained the system from his side. The domestic poems written after Plath’s discovery of Hughes’

⁶³ These images recall Plath’s devastating first bout of ECT following her breakdown after her stay in New York, which led to her first officially documented suicide attempt.

⁶⁴ ‘The world of the Gothic appears as a dream, with physical artifacts as well as living beings that are reflections of the self.’ Elizabeth MacAndrew, *The Gothic Tradition in Fiction* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979), p. 151.

⁶⁵ Plath, quoted in Lant, ‘The Big Strip Tease’, p. 631.

infidelity document the decay and dissolution of this reconciliation, with profound consequences not only for her psychological state but also, as we will see, for her poetry.

The woman, then, has been silenced, her desires punished, her bodily components fragmented, the 'insatiable' 'wrinkled' 'brown fruit' that dries out also suggests a vagina or a uterus; it is not just the wife's speech but her sexuality, which for Plath is inextricably linked to her fertility, which has been penalised. This helps to explain why 'there were two children, / But their bones showed, and the moon smiled'. This sinister image evokes the cold and even hostile moon-mother of the late poetry; it anticipates the dead children lying with their dead mother in Plath's last poem, 'Edge'.

In the final stanza, the vaporisation, the death without a body, spreads to 'the whole estate'. This image recalls the complete obliteration within the epicentre of the nuclear blast at Hiroshima. In the age of the Bomb, nothing is secure; an entire place, like a marriage, can simply cease to exist. The detective remarks: 'We walk on air, Watson'. He continues: 'There is only the moon, embalmed in phosphorus./ There is only a crow in a tree. Make notes' (*CP*, ll. 39-40). These final images, seemingly all that remains of the world, once again reduce it to a bleakly Gothic monochrome.⁶⁶ The emptying of the domestic space, followed by its dissolution, is a figure for this brutal killing of a relationship, which has caused the former self of the wife to dry up and 'vaporize'. By destroying the marital relationship, he prevents her from 'doing' her body within the terms of the system of gender.⁶⁷

Subjectivity is constituted in and through the body; and the body, which is gendered, is 'done', in space as well as time — a space within a space. The woman's inability to maintain a stable performance of her gendered body, the site within which her subjectivity is constituted from moment to moment, causes the 'vaporization' of the subjectively perceived space around it. Because her children are part of this performance, they too appear as dead-alive ('their bones showed') in the light of the moon, traditionally a symbol of female fertility because of the menstrual cycle, which in Plath's late poetry turns into its opposite. This sterility-moon, together with a crow, itself a symbol of death because known as a carrion-eater, are all that remains.

⁶⁶ This is the core image of 'Yew', written a year earlier: see 'The Far Fields Melt My Heart' section, below.

⁶⁷ 'The body is not a self-identical or merely lactic materiality; it is a materiality that bears meaning, if nothing else, and the manner of this bearing is fundamentally dramatic. By dramatic I mean only that the body is not merely matter but a continual and incessant materializing of possibilities. One is not simply a body, but, in some very key sense, one *does* one's body and, indeed, one does one's body differently from one's contemporaries and from one's embodied predecessors and successors as well.' Judith Butler, 'Writing on the Body', p. 403.

The pleasingly decorated home in 'The Detective', exposed to the panoptic gaze of the investigator and the voyeur alike, reminds us that Plath was a child of the New England suburbs. As such, she shared the popular and scholarly criticism of the newer suburbs' assembly-line conformism of architecture and behaviour that emerged in the mid-1950s. Plath envisioned the suburban domestic scene from the exterior in a seemingly playful poem from 1956, 'Soliloquy of the Solipsist'. The speaker claims to be creating the world he perceives, moment to moment, so that it ceases to exist when he turns his attention away from it: 'The midnight street/ Spins itself from under my feet;/ When my eyes shut/ These dreaming houses all snuff out [...].' He continues:

I
Make houses shrink
And trees diminish
By going far; my look's leash
Dangles the puppet-people
Who, unaware how they dwindle,
Laugh, kiss, get drunk,
Nor guess that if I choose to blink
They die. (CP, ll. 11-18)

This is an early instance of the people-as-puppets imagery we have seen in other poems and will explore in further detail below. It comments on the insecurity and paranoia of life during the Cold War — insecurity and paranoia that, together with the artificiality and sameness of the suburban housing development and the narrow, rigid social roles demanded of its inhabitants, lends an anxious air of unreality to existence. These inhabitants are under the constant surveillance of this all-seeing eye; their houses become puppet theaters whose performers can be destroyed in a 'blink', as the chilling last line points out. The solipsist, believing himself to be the only reality, has become a megalomaniacal god. In the last stanza he condescendingly tells his girlfriend or wife: 'I/ Know you appear/ Vivid at my side,/ Denying you sprang out of my head [...]' but 'All your beauty, all your wit, is a gift, my dear,/ From me'. To him, she is merely another of his puppets. Besides being a comment on the anxieties of 1950s suburban life, then, the poem is also a sly critique of male narcissism and power, which Plath evidently associated with the ever-unstable nuclear stalemate between the United States and the Soviet Union. It also implies that for the wife, domesticity is constituted through the male gaze. In later poems like 'The Applicant' and 'The Jailer', this concept develops into the insight that, for Plath at least, the domestic space is constructed and maintained through the reciprocal performance of gender, in which the male is the dominant but secretly vulnerable partner — a spectacle.

‘Owl’ from 1959 describes another midnight walk in an unspecified small town in America: ‘Clocks belled twelve. Main Street showed otherwise/ Than its suburb of woods: nimbus-/ Lit, but unpeopled, held its windows/ Of wedding pastries,/ Diamond rings, potted roses, fox-skins/ Ruddy on the wax mannequins/ In a glassed tableau of affluence’. This motif of ‘affluent’ store windows at night and feminine objects on display is further developed in ‘The Munich Mannequins’. The 1963 poem begins with a famous line: ‘Perfection is terrible, it cannot have children’. The speaker goes on to expand on this thought, walking the streets of Munich on a winter night:

Cold as snow breath, it tamps the womb
Where the yew trees blow like hydras,
The tree of life and the tree of life
Unloosing their moons, month after month, to no purpose.
The blood flood is the flood of love,
The absolute sacrifice.⁶⁸ (CP, ll. 2-7)

‘Perfection’ is cold and sterile, like the cityscape the poet describes. ‘The tree of life’ in women’s bodies, the ovaries and uterus, release an ovum each month, but the women do not conceive — yet ‘the [menstrual] blood flood is the flood of love’, a sacrifice to husband and children — or perhaps to writing. The speaker then shifts her attention to the mannequins in the shop windows, which, ‘in their sulfur loveliness, in their smiles/ [...] lean tonight/ Naked and bald in their furs,/ Orange lollies on silver sticks’. The mannequins, undressed, represent this kind of barren perfection, beautiful according to a standard that has little to do with actual living women; the city where the speaker sees them is described as a ‘morgue’. The speaker calls them ‘[in]ntolerable, without mind’.⁶⁹ The mannequins are sterile not only biologically, but intellectually and creatively. It is worth remembering that ‘mannequin’ originally meant a human (initially male, then female) whose job was to model clothes for prospective buyers in fashion houses.⁷⁰ As the display window became widespread starting in the mid-nineteenth century, some of this function was taken on by elegantly sculpted dummies, and the term ‘mannequin’ was applied to them.⁷¹

⁶⁸ The yew tree is also, as will be explored later in discussion of ‘The Moon and the Yew Tree’, a traditional symbol of mourning.

⁶⁹ Bassnett argues: ‘The blood flow and the creative flow are sometimes synonymous but elsewhere that flow of blood is a reminder of non-productivity, in the sense that it is a sign that conception has not taken place. Reading the last poems, it seems to me that there is a suggestion that, despite the existence of [Plath’s] children, poetry has *become* her menstruation [...]’. Susan Bassnett, p. 75.

⁷⁰ Caroline Evans, ‘The Ontology of the Fashion Model’, in *AA Files* 63, p. 60.

⁷¹ As Walter Benjamin noted in the *Arcades Project*, this led to a situation in which living women of fashion did their best to imitate life-sized dolls. ‘These images are exclusively feminine, including the little girl’s toy doll,

The salience of this image to the speaker becomes apparent when she exclaims: ‘O the domesticity of these windows,/ The baby lace, the green-leaved confectionery’. The shop windows, with their feminine dummies that can do nothing but smile and look good in ‘furs’ and other clothing, have become a figure for the suburban home with the perfect wife on display, where telephones are ‘digesting/Voicelessness’. To be voiceless like the snow is Plath’s nightmare in this poem; this is the femininity she has striven to perform in the domestic space and that she fears will objectify and silence her.⁷²

‘This is the city of spare parts’: The Body in Hospital Space

Sylvia Plath, in her short life, did not spend nearly as much time in hospitals, either general or psychiatric, as did either Robert Lowell or Anne Sexton. Her first hospitalisation, which lasted close to six months, was for suicidal depression after her return from New York in the summer following her third year in college. Prior to this stay, on the recommendation of her doctor, she had been given ECT without anaesthesia or a muscle relaxant — a severely traumatic experience that is thought to have motivated her subsequent suicide attempt. In any case, as we will see, the experience is repeatedly referenced in her poetry. After failed treatment attempts, she received a second, more properly administered round of ECT at McLean Psychiatric Hospital — during a stay of half a year — which apparently brought about a recovery. After that, she was never again in a mental hospital or ward. However, she did experience multiple physical health problems, including recurrent sinus infections and, following the miscarriage of her second pregnancy, acute appendicitis, which required surgery at St. Pancras Hospital in London. She also spent time in maternity wards when giving birth to her two children. Again, it is important to emphasise that Plath viewed these experiences as raw material from which to construct poetic fictions:

I wonder if, shut in a room, I could write for a year. I panic: no experience! Yet what couldn’t I dredge up from my mind? Hospitals & mad women. Shock treatment & insulin trances. [...]! make up forgotten details. Faces and violence. Bites and wry words. Try these.⁷³

the fashion mannequin — whole and partitioned into breasts and legs, and the mechanized feminized automaton or “woman-machine.” Of these, images of the fashion mannequin figure most prominently. She is the uncanny assemblage of woman-corpse, woman-machine, woman-commodity, and woman-thing’. Dianne Chisholm, ‘Benjamin’s Gender, Sex, and Eros’ in *A Companion to the Works of Walter Benjamin* ed. by Rolf J. Goebel (New York: Camden House, 2004) (246-72), p. 266.

⁷² However, in ‘Tulips’, discussed below, this cold, motionless silence is the condition the speaker welcomes as an escape from her performance of self as wife and mother in the domestic space.

⁷³ Sylvia Plath, *Unabridged Journals*, p. 316.

The theoretical optic used to examine Plath's poems derived from these experiences will be chiefly feminist work on gender and the female body in the context again of cultural geography and perceptions of space. This will include the structures of metaphor in the poems and Plath's extensive use of animal imagery to describe other patients, hospital staff, and the speaker. The poems to be examined include 'Poem for a Birthday', 'Face Lift', 'The Surgeon at 2 a.m.', 'In Plaster', and 'Tulips'. These poems, like those written about the domestic sphere and nature and the outdoors, show a continual evolution of style and approach.

'Poem for a Birthday', a longer work in seven parts, addresses illness, hospital confinement, treatment, and recovery as a series of extended metaphors, each of which creates a figurative space complicated by shifts, apparent digressions, and self-interruptions. Jacqueline Rose notes perceptively that the poem 'is constantly running ahead of itself, as if meaning was not anticipated but arises [. . .] through the course of the writing itself'.⁷⁴ I will argue that Rose's observation is critical to an understanding of the poem. Plath introduced the poem as follows when she read it on BBC radio:

[T]he speaker has utterly lost her sense of identity and relationship to the world. She imagines herself, quite graphically, undergoing the process of rebirth, like a statue that has been scattered and ground down, only to be resurrected and pieced together centuries later. Her nightmare vision of waking in a modern hospital gradually softens, as she recovers, and accepts the frightening, yet new, ties of love which will heal her and return her, whole again, to the world.⁷⁵

The poem does indeed address madness, death, and rebirth as Plath asserts and as its title implies (though as I will argue, the 'rebirth' is profoundly problematic). These themes are linked through a variety of Gothic motifs deployed across its series of spaces, each of which is a metaphor conditioned by the speaker's psychological state. However, in its subtexts, the poem also addresses issues of gender, advertising, and surveillance — and, centrally, another issue that will become evident as we proceed. For the moment we should remind ourselves that the spaces that surround the speaker are all *textual* spaces, whose geography is an affective map comprised of a metaphoric system.⁷⁶

⁷⁴ Jacqueline Rose, *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), pp. 49-50.

⁷⁵ Quoted in Linda Wagner-Martin, *Sylvia Plath: A Literary Life* (New York: Palgrave, 2003), pp. 93-4.

⁷⁶ Some critics, like Colin Clarke, argue that the poem is an extended metaphor for Plath's own confinement and treatment in following her suicide attempt and gradually converging on the memory of that attempt in the final section. While these events may form an armature for the poem's structure and contribute some of its imagery, to reduce the poem to a kind of autobiographical striptease is to flatten its multiple layers of meaning — to

In this regard, two words, related by sound and association, echo through the first three sections and the final two: *mouth* and *mother*. These words form a bridge to Plath's later poetry, where they recur obsessively. This recurrence further complicates the reading of the poem as a rebirth narrative and reminds us that in Plath's mature poetry, images of the father as a monstrous god-figure, resented yet adored, alternate with images of a cold, sterile mother, usually figured as the moon. Another word also recurs again and again in the series: *stone*. In Plath's poetry, stone has two overlapping associations: hardness, deadness, and inertness, as in petrification; and defense or protection.

In the first section, 'Who,' the speaker initially seems to be in a garden shed in autumn, full of mouldy plants and decay:

I am at home here among the dead heads.
Let me sit in a flowerpot,
The spiders won't notice.
My heart is a stopped geranium. (CP, ll. 6-9)

'I am all mouth', she says, after telling us that 'the fruit's in, eaten or rotten.' (It is notable that there is no uneaten and unrotten fruit in the space; everything is decaying.) It quickly becomes apparent that, at one level of the metaphoric system at least, the speaker is actually in a mental hospital, where '[m]oldering heads console me [...] Inmates who don't hibernate [...] These halls are full of women who think they are birds'. This last line refers directly back to Miss Drake. However: 'This is a dull school'. The speaker is inert, 'a root, a stone, an owl pellet,/ Without dreams of any sort'.

The speaker next addresses her mother: 'you are the one mouth/ I would be a tongue to.' Apparently, she wishes to speak for her mother. But immediately, she adds: 'Mother of otherness/ Eat me.' This image loops back to the 'eaten' fruit earlier. It is as if the speaker has two mothers: the one she wishes to speak for, and another that she is asking to devour her, to swallow her back into the womb, so that she can be born again as 'other'. This splitting may in part reflect Plath's often-noted deeply ambivalent feelings about her own mother, which was also resentment both of femininity and of her own biological femaleness.⁷⁷ However, she

collapse its complex textual spaces into allegory. Plath was very clear that she was ruthless in borrowing from her own life experience to create poetic fictions. To that extent at least, her BBC introduction to the poem should be taken literally.

⁷⁷ Lant cites Plath's own journal concerning this resentment: 'Plath yearns to "step outside for a few moments before going to bed; it was so snug and stale-aired in the house," but when she tries to open the door, she cannot get outside; she feels trapped: "[...] I felt suddenly breathless, stifled. I was trapped, with the tantalizing little square of night above me, and the warm, feminine atmosphere of the house enveloping me in its thick, feathery

applies two additional epithets to this mother-figure: 'Wastebasket gaper, shadow of doorway.' Both wastebasket and doorway are *openings*, 'mouths'.⁷⁸ The image of the wastebasket, together with the desire to speak for the 'mother', also suggests that *writing*, and writing for and as a woman, is an important aspect of the poem's meaning — and, as Jacqueline Rose notes, of its very development. If Lant is correct about Plath's relationship to masculine poetic tradition, the 'dead heads' and 'mouldering heads' the speaker encounters may also be the authors (and authorities) of that tradition, among whom she is 'at home' but 'inert'.

Throughout the poem, the speaker's size fluctuates, as does the size of the surrounding space. In this and succeeding sections, the speaker is repeatedly self-described as tiny, diminished (and perhaps infantile): 'I said: I must remember this, being small'. Now the thorny, coiling blackberry stems have become wires that 'light [her] up' so that '[f] or weeks I can remember nothing at all'. *She must remember, but she cannot*. This is clearly an allusion to the electroshock Plath received following her breakdown and the resulting loss of memory, a common side-effect of ECT.⁷⁹

In the second section, 'Dark House', the speaker has constructed the space around her, though it is still large: 'This is a dark house, very big./ I made it myself,/ Cell by cell from a quiet corner,/Chewing at the gray paper,/ Oozing the glue drops [...]'. The big dark house, with its hauntings and secrets, is a well-used Gothic motif, going back at least as far as Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* and common in horror and suspense films from the 1930s on.

What follows, though, suggests a paper wasp building a nest, which they often do in 'quiet corners', under house eaves, for instance. And making a house of paper is also a metaphor for writing, which includes the process of 'chewing' the work of other writers, and the language itself.

Curiously, the speaker also says:

I am round as an owl,

smothering embrace." ('*Journals*' 12) Very early in her life and later, as she developed as a writer, Plath associated this suffocating femininity strongly with failure as an artist.' Kathleen Lant, 'The Big Strip Tease', p. 661.

⁷⁸ By Plath's own account and the accounts of those who knew her, she revised her writing compulsively, throwing draft after draft into the 'wastebasket'; and she was also aware that her mother's intense ambition for her, internalized, was part of what drove her to do this.

⁷⁹ Plath's reference to the 'coiling ...stems' transfers it into a spatial reminder of her hospital experience, even if it is an imagined space at this point. The speaker evidently feels diminished in her confinement, so that the surrounding space is huge, overwhelming.

I see by my own light.
Any day I may litter puppies
Or mother a horse. My belly moves'. (CP ll. 10-13)

This together with 'I made it myself/ cell by cell' and the last line, 'Here's a cuddly mother,' has led some critics, like Bassnett, to conclude that the speaker is pregnant.⁸⁰ Others, like Clarke, suggest that the speaker is becoming her own mother — or her own child.⁸¹ Clarke's is a superficially persuasive reading given how Plath introduced the poem on the radio. But it does not take into account the earlier apostrophes to the two mothers, who are apparently *not* the speaker. Moreover, she does not appear to be pregnant with a 'new self', but with some other creature or creatures altogether. She is pregnant with the poem itself, with a female act of creation, which will birth not self but 'otherness'.

Next, the speaker observes: 'I must make more maps'. This, again, is a figure for writing, for 'mapping' a textual space. She is trying to understand the psychic and somatic space she now occupies, with its 'marrowy tunnels' and 'turnipy chambers'. At one level, the space is simultaneously her own body and the darkened ward. At another level, it is the emergent poem. In the last line of the section, the speaker discovers a 'cuddly mother' — a phrase that conjures very different associations than the previous two mothers. Feminine 'cuddliness' is part of what Plath rejected about her own mother, an emotion that reaches a paroxysm in the late poem 'Medusa': 'Off, off, eely tentacle!'

In the third section, 'Maenad', the speaker becomes one of the drunken female worshippers of Dionysus, who, in a frenzy of divine possession, literally tore apart any man they met. The maenads cast off all family ties, and the speaker does also, rejecting her father and mother: 'The mother of mouths didn't love me./ The old man shrank to a doll'. This is on one level an assertion of autonomous female power. The father-imago, the 'old man', has shrunk from the gigantic statue of 'The Colossus' or the sea-god of 'Full Fathom Five' to a doll — no larger than the female dolls that populate Plath's domestic poetry. But this is also an admission. The mother-imago, the 'mother of mouths', a fusion of the mother whose voice the speaker wishes to be and the 'mother of otherness', has rejected her. However, she is 'too big to go backward'. Now 'a red tongue is among us'. Perhaps the speaker is acquiring the

⁸⁰ Susan Bassnett, *Sylvia Plath: An Introduction to the Poetry* (New York: Palgrave, 2005), p. 38. This is certainly a plausible reading, though she was not pregnant during her stay at McLean, she was when she wrote the poem. Plath here, as she often did, was blending experiences from different times and places. However, after this section there is no further mention of a child, which complicates this reading. Is she pregnant in another way entirely?

⁸¹ Colin Clarke, *In the Ward*, p. 230.

power of speech (writing) independently of the mother-mouth. This reading is confirmed by the next two lines: 'Mother, keep out of my barnyard,' she warns, 'I am becoming another'.⁸² This last phrase, an echo of 'mother of otherness', may mean that having become 'big' in that otherness, that alterity of speech, she no longer needs her mother.

At the level of the hospital narrative, the speaker is now also aware of the presence of other patients, asleep around her in the ward ('the moon's vat', which may also be an allusion to the synchrony of menstruation that develops among women who live together). She addresses a 'lady' who may be a goddess, or perhaps merely a nurse. She is metamorphosed and wishes to claim a new identity, separate and apart from her parents:

Lady, who are these others in the moon's vat —
Sleepdrunk, their limbs at odds? [..]
Tell me my name. (CP, ll. 22-4)

In the fifth section, 'Flute Notes from a Reedy Pond', the pace is slower and the metaphorical structure is self-consistent. Moreover, 'I', who has become 'another' has also joined a 'we'. The space of the ward has become the bottom of a lily pond at the approach of winter, where 'all things sink/ Into a soft caul of forgetfulness':

Now coldness comes sifting down, layer after layer,
To our bower at the lily root. (CP, ll. 1-2)

'There is little shelter' from this impersonal coldness and from panoptic surveillance. The speaker now focuses on the aquatic insects in the pond, at various stages of metamorphosis, at one level figures for her fellow inmates at various stages of their mental disease processes and recoveries: 'Caddis worms drowse in their silk cases,/ The lamp-headed nymphs are nodding to sleep like statues./ Puppets, loosed from the strings of the puppet-master,/ Wear masks of horn to bed'.⁸³ But who is the puppet-master? Male psychiatric authority? Masculine discourse? In any case, like the speaker in 'Tulips', the larva-women are achieving an ambiguous freedom in stasis. Notably, there are no mothers in this section, only daughters. The space of the section is doubled: feminine below, masculine above.

⁸² This Gothic doubling is an echo of Rimbaud's famous declaration '*Je est un autre*' — '*I is another*'. Indeed, Rimbaud's expression might serve as a leitmotif for much of Plath's mature poetry. However, it also suggests the modern Gothic theme of mutation, of becoming a new and alien being, common in Cold War-era science-fiction horror films like *Invasion of the Body-Snatchers* or *The Fly*.

⁸³ This image anticipates the doll imagery that appears in the poem's last section and recurs in her later work. Compare also with 'House', 'Self, 1958' and other poems by Anne Sexton in which the same metaphor is used.

Plath's descriptions of these insects are precise and only minimally figurative, which further suggests the speaker's own recovery, including a recovery of discursive coherence. The Gothic note is more subtle. For example, the 'puppets' are larvae encasing themselves in 'horn' in order to pupate.⁸⁴ 'This is not death, it is something safer', she says: presumably, hibernation.⁸⁵ However, the dream of insect adulthood, of becoming an imago (that is, leaving the institution or achieving an autonomous poetic discourse) is also forgotten in this cold sleep:

The wingy myths won't tug at us any more:
The molts are tongueless that sang from above the water
Of golgotha at the tip of a reed [...] (CP, ll. 16-8)

This is a reminder that in winter, the former occupants of the 'molts', the pupa shells, which have hatched 'at the tip of a reed', actually die, though they are in the afterlife of the larvae, 'above the water'. Despite the increased clarity of the imagery, then, this section depicts a regression, or at any rate a pause. The 'molts' that 'sang from above the water' of the crucifixion are silent. The Christ-like insect 'god' is 'flimsy as a baby's finger' — a newborn. Most important, this 'wingy myth' and the 'god' who 'unhusks' are *masculine*. They are figures of the masculine poetic tradition that the speaker is trying to escape; but equally, 'molting' the larval feminine state seems to be the only way out of stasis. Hence the image of resurrection, drawn from the narrative of the Gospels, may not apply to the larvae and chrysalids at the bottom of the pond.

The sixth section, 'Witch Burning', shifts to a public, open space, the marketplace, where 'they are piling the dry sticks' — another familiar Gothic trope. The fleeting image of resurrection has vanished, and in its place is another Christian ritual — one historically conducted by masculine patriarchal authority, the Church, specifically to punish women who did not conform or were suspected of forbidden knowledge or uncontrolled sexuality. The speaker is frightened: 'A thicket of shadows is a poor coat'. She continues:

... I inhabit
The wax image of myself, a doll's body.
Sickness begins here: I am a dartboard for witches. (CP, ll. 2-4)

⁸⁴ This precision is unsurprising given Plath's fascination with nature and the sharp descriptive accuracy of her earlier work. The steadiness of focus it implies, forming a largely naturalistic extended metaphor, also suggests returning sanity.

⁸⁵ The 'mouldering heads' in the first section, however, 'do not hibernate'. They are ever-present.

A sign of the sickness is the splitting and doubling, whereby the speaker now occupies a wax doll's body in her own likeness. At the same time, she has become a 'dartboard for witches', an image that taken together with the wax doll-self, suggests a voodoo effigy into which pins are stuck to cause pain.⁸⁶ Then 'In the month of red leaves I climb to a bed of fire'. The speaker tries to evade punishment by becoming 'little' and 'inert' again, as in the first section, only even smaller:

If I am a little one, I can do no harm.
If I don't move about, I'll knock nothing over. So I said,
Sitting under a potlid, tiny and inert as a rice grain.
They are turning the burners up, ring after ring. (CP, ll. 11-4)

But of course, this strategy has not worked. The marketplace, where a woman is to be burned alive, has become a kitchen, where the speaker is no longer the woman cooking but is instead the cooked — part of the food. Now a grain of rice, 'inert' again as in the opening section, she hides under the 'potlid', but will be boiled anyway. Underlying this metaphor is a frightening image of house-to-house search and burning like the 'eliminations' conducted by the Nazis in the ghettos of Eastern Europe. A strategy of inoffensiveness will not save her, any more than it saved the Jews whose terrible fate becomes a major theme in Plath's subsequent poetry. This pervasive imagery of Nazism and the Holocaust is, as Nichols notes, the other aspect of Plath's new Gothic — a horror so extreme that it almost trivialises the ghosts and murders of the older tradition.⁸⁷ Setha Low states that '[t]hese "bodyscapes," the various representations of bodies at multiple scales from bodies as landscapes, bodies moving through space or individual body differences, tend to idealize societal norms'.⁸⁸

Indeed, the speaker now apparently accepts what will happen to her: 'We are full of starch, my small white fellows. We grow./ It hurts at first. The red tongues will teach the truth'.⁸⁹ These lines describe witch-burning in the terms posited by the medieval and early-modern Church: the fire burns away the witch's sin and brings her back to the light of faith — yet at the same time the speaker is still a starchy grain of rice about to be boiled. This seems a surrender to violent masculine institutional power, which, given Plath's actual

⁸⁶ This is the second poem of Plath's in which the speaker refers to herself as a doll. The first is the directly autobiographical 'Electra on Azalea Path', where she writes: 'Small as a doll in my dress of innocence/ I lay dreaming your epic, image by image'. In subsequent poems, dolls and doll-related images, such as detached (and re-attachable) body parts, appear repeatedly.

⁸⁷ Kathleen Nichols, 'The Cold War Gothic Poetry of Sylvia Plath', p. 329.

⁸⁸ Setha Low, *Spatializing Culture*, p. 98.

⁸⁹ Note the echo of the 'red tongue...among us' in the 'Maenad' section.

political resentment toward such power, profoundly ironises the ending (or introduces the disturbing possibility of masochistic fantasy):

I'll fly through the candle's mouth like a singeless moth.⁹⁰
Give me back my shape. I am ready to construe the days
I coupled with dust in the shadow of a stone.
My ankles brighten. Brightness ascends my thighs.
I am lost, I am lost, in the robes of all this light'.

Basnett views this positively: '[I]nstead of the torment of flames writhing round a human body, the poet is filled with light and brightness [...]', reminding the reader of the phoenix-like rise of the speaker in "Lady Lazarus".⁹¹ But if the narrative of renewal were consistent, surely the speaker would not be 'lost'. The 'light' from the flames rising to consume the speaker is a profoundly masculine metaphor. And as the speaker says, 'It is easy to blame the dark: the mouth of a door,/ The cellar's belly'. Christian iconography is saturated with the opposition light/dark, and the dark here is imaged in *openings*, symbolically vaginal or womblike. These recall the 'wastebasket gaper, shadow of a door' as epithets applied to the 'mother of otherness' in the first section. The speaker, then, does not really believe that 'the red tongues will teach the truth'.⁹² But neither is she able to speak her own truth. The 'light' of masculine or patriarchal discourse that now 'robes' her also robs her. In the final section, 'The Stones', the space of the ward has become a gigantic workshop, 'the city where men are mended' and where the speaker 'lie[s] on a great anvil'. The speaker is now completely exposed to the panoptic gaze, as the sky, a 'flat blue...circle' has flown off 'like the hat of a doll'.⁹³ The rhyme 'men/mended' aside, a poet as gender-conscious as Plath knows exactly what she is saying by using the word 'men'. This 'city' was not created for women's benefit. The speaker tells us that when she 'fell out of the light' — presumably the light that consumed her in the previous section — she 'entered/ The stomach of indifference, the wordless cupboard.'

⁹⁰ The mouth the speaker imagines she will pass through is no longer that of the mother, but symbolically, that of the father. She will be 'singeless', she believes. She begs to be given back her 'shape' increasingly desperate, she offers to confess how she 'coupled with dust in the shadow of a stone' — a sterile, pointless coupling. But neither the fantasy of immunity nor the offer of confession succeeds. The fire rises around her. In the final section, she will be 'reborn' as a stone or assemblage of stones.

⁹¹ Susan Basnett, *Sylvia Plath: An Introduction to the Poetry*, p. 38.

⁹² Again, the imagery recalls Plath's account of receiving electroshock in *The Bell Jar*: 'There was a brief silence, like an indrawn breath. Then something bent down and took hold of me and shook me like the end of the world. Whee-ee-ee-ee-ee, it shrilled, through an air crackling with blue light, and with each flash a great jolt drubbed me till I thought my bones would break and the sap fly out of me like a split plant'. p. 45.

⁹³ 'Our society is one not of spectacle, but of surveillance; [...] it is rather that the individual is carefully fabricated in it, according to a whole technique of forces and bodies'. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, p. 217.

The mother of pestles diminished me.
I became a still pebble.
The stones of the belly were peaceable,

The head-stone quiet, jostled by nothing.

This also recalls the imagery of the opening section; she is almost back where she started, thanks to the last mother-figure to appear in the poem, 'the mother of pestles' who has 'diminished' her, presumably by grinding her down to smoothness. This mother-imago seems to be wholly in the service of male power — the very common type of mother that trains her daughters into her culture's version of submissive femininity. The speaker, having been 'enlightened' by patriarchal fire and then 'diminished' by the maternal feminine, has been petrified. She is once again inert, her belly-stones 'peaceable', her 'head-stone quiet'.⁹⁴ This last, a play on words, suggests that the speaker is already dead; her own petrified head is her grave marker. However, '...the mouth-hole piped out,/ Importunate cricket/ In a quarry of silences'. The speaker still has a 'mouth-hole', presumably the one given her by the 'mother of mouths', but is merely a 'cricket' chirping. Heard by 'the people of the city', the mouth-hole helps them hunt down other stones, 'taciturn and separate'. If these other stones are also women, the speaker has become complicit in oppression. In a chilling image, she says: 'Drunk as a foetus/ I suck at the paps of darkness.'⁹⁵ Her 'rebirth' is short-circuited: as an unborn 'foetus' she is already nursing, a contradiction in terms; and her food is darkness, not light — an image that refers back to 'Maenad' in which she asks 'Dog head, devourer' to 'feed [her] the berries of darkness'.⁹⁶ This latter passage completely negates optimistic readings like Basnett's. But it also complicates, though not wholly invalidates, darker but still oversimplified readings like Clarke's. Following on my readings of earlier sections, I am arguing that this section too is at one level about what Lant views as the central contradiction in Plath's poetic work: the attempt to escape the restrictive conventions and imposed silences of 'women's poetry' up to that point by appropriating a masculine poetic tradition unsuited to

⁹⁴ That the speaker's 'head-stone', though 'quiet', is 'jostled by nothing' is also a sinister anticipation of the way in which 'nothings' — absences, blanks — cause increasing psychic disturbance in Plath's work until she commits suicide, completing the image.

⁹⁵ Clarke reads this whole section as 'a stark version of her own suicide attempt, discovery, and return to consciousness in the hospital'. While again, this narrative may constitute part of the section's undergirding, it by no means exhausts its meaning. If it did, the 'mouth-hole' would not be 'crying the locations' of other stones. And in any case, Plath was unconscious and silent when she was found, not 'piping' like a cricket. Plath was already too powerful and complex a poet to allow one-dimensional allegorical mappings of this kind.

⁹⁶ These epithets may be a reference to Anubis, the jackal-headed god of the dead in Egyptian mythology.

convey women's experience.⁹⁷ If that is so, then this section, following on the nightmare of the previous one, is a narrative not of rebirth but of at least partial defeat.

Found, the speaker begins to be 'mended' in a way that again evokes science fiction: 'The food tubes embrace me. Sponges kiss my lichens away'. Next, '[t]he jewelmaster', another male authority figure, 'drives his chisel to pry/ Open one stone eye'. She is still made of stone, overgrown with lichens. If this is an image of enlightenment, once again it resembles torture. In this 'after-hell', 'daylight lays its sameness on the wall' — a glimpse of the actual ward unmediated by metaphor. We are shown a panorama of the 'city':

The grafters are cheerful,

Heating the pincers, hoisting the delicate hammers.
A current agitates the wires
Volt upon volt. Catgut stitches my fissures.

A workman walks by carrying a pink torso.
The storerooms are full of hearts.

This is the city of spare parts. (CP, ll. 27-33)

'Here they can doctor heads, or any limb,' the speaker tells us: a functional definition of the hospital space. It is as if Frankenstein's laboratory has become an entire town. At this point it should be remembered that the 'creature' (as he is initially referred to in Mary Shelley's 1818 novel) is *created* by an unspecified method, devised by the eponymous protagonist Victor Frankenstein, of giving life to painstakingly assembled 'spare parts' — that is, body parts from corpses. In James Whale's more widely known 1932 film, the creature is given life by electricity. The imagery of this section combines elements of both narratives. The speaker is pincered, hammered, electrocuted (again) and her 'fissures' are stitched.⁹⁸

If we read this entire poem as a meta-narrative, created in the process of composition, of an effort to create a poetic subjectivity based in female experience and the female body, we can understand the speaker not as 'the poet' but *as this nascent subjectivity itself*. Every phase in the evolution of the speaker, in tandem with her surrounding environment, is a record of one such effort. This puts the final section in a radically different perspective. Having undergone an attempt at purgation and found herself silenced instead of empowered, the speaker/subject is now being patched back together from the 'corpses' or bodies of work

⁹⁷ Kathleen Lant, 'The Big Strip Tease: Female Bodies and Male Power in the Poetry of Sylvia Plath', p. 648.

⁹⁸ The 'stitching' recalls 'The Applicant', in which the prospective husband is asked whether he has 'stitches to show something's missing'.

(from the Latin *corpus*, body) of previous poets, almost all of whom were male. She retains or rediscovers her ‘mouth-hole’ but her speech is a weak ‘piping’. Unable to do without the tradition because women’s poetry to that point seems feeble and sentimental, the poet ends up with a speaker, a textual subjectivity, that is a Frankensteinian construct rather than an authentic projection into textuality of a strong, autonomous female body-mind.⁹⁹ Indeed, the entire poem is such a patchwork assemblage. The speaker, with whom the poet is now again fused, concludes ironically: ‘My mendings itch. There is nothing to do./ I shall be good as new’.

This fragmentation and reassembly of the body (‘as good as new’ but not actually new) is a profound reading of the psychology of modern middle-class femininity as well as of the problem for a female poet who wants to escape its cage. *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* entry on ‘Feminist Perspectives on Objectification’ cites Sandra Bartky:

Bartky believes that women in patriarchal societies also undergo a kind of fragmentation “by being too closely identified with [their body]... [their] entire being is identified with the body, a thing which... has been regarded as less inherently human than the mind or personality” [...] A woman's person, then, is fragmented. Bartky believes that through this fragmentation a woman is objectified, since her body is separated from her person and is thought as representing the woman.¹⁰⁰

This fragmentation accompanies the duality, figured as doubling, we have already seen in the domestic poetry, whereby the speaker is estranged from her own body image and thereby from herself.¹⁰¹ The theme of the objectification of the body by medical procedures becomes central to Plath’s poetic exploration of the hospital space. In making this so, Plath also updates the Gothic mode. (As we began to discuss earlier, Plath continues to modernise the Gothic in her later poems about the natural world.)

In ‘Face Lift’, the speaker is at first a friend of the woman who has undergone the procedure and ‘bring[s] me good news from the clinic,/ Whipping off your silk scarf, exhibiting the tight white/ Mummy-cloths, smiling: I'm all right’. But mummy-cloths wrap

⁹⁹ ‘The irony of Plath's situation is that while her own figures for creativity are drawn from masculine models, her use of such figures is deeply compromised — for both her and her readers — by the reality of her own femaleness, by her body which is a woman's body.’ Kathleen Lant. ‘The Big Strip Tease’, pp. 630-631

¹⁰⁰ Sandra-Lee Bartky, *Femininity and Domination: Studies in the Phenomenology of Oppression* (New York: Routledge, 1990), p. 130.

¹⁰¹ The poem, in fact, is a hallucinatory montage of spaces, gradually becoming more definite--though no more realistic. The spaces include a garden shed (that is also the overgrown garden and a ‘dull school’); a ‘dark house’ that is simultaneously a wasp’s nest and the speaker’s own body; a barnyard or garden; the bottom of a pond at the onset of winter; a town square like that of Salem being prepared for a witch-burning, that is at the same time a pot set to boil and a ghetto where Jews are being hunted down; and finally, a city-workshop in which dismembered and damaged human dolls are repaired.

preserved corpses — an image that harks back to the final section of ‘Poem for a Birthday’. By a semantic sleight of hand, the speaker becomes the patient. Grotesquely, she is ‘[t]apped like a cask, the years draining into my pillow’. She continues:

Skin doesn't have roots, it peels away easy as paper.
When I grin, the stitches tauten. I grow backward. I'm twenty.

The speaker reminisces about her life at that age. However, from simply becoming younger, the speaker now becomes a ‘new’ person altogether, in a Gothic doubling as perverse as any in Plath’s work:

Now she's done for, the dewlapped lady
I watched settle, line by line, in my mirror —
Old sock-face, sagged on a darning egg.
They've trapped her in some laboratory jar.
Let her die there, or wither incessantly for the next fifty years,
Nodding and rocking and fingering her thin hair. (CP, ll. 25-30)

The birth motif is distorted in the final lines: ‘Mother to myself, I wake swaddled in gauze’.¹⁰² The speaker curses the woman she was before the surgery, ‘old sock face’, who like the woman in ‘Mirror’ she saw in reflection ‘rising toward her like a terrible fish’ into a lingering old age. The delusional cruelty of this is breathtaking. Of course, the speaker has not turned her whole body’s clock backwards; she is *not* twenty again. Neither is she ‘[her] own mother’, because the actual ‘mother’, her pre-operative self from whom she has become psychically split, is the ‘dewlapped lady’ the speaker believes she has left behind to wither in a jar — not her falsely ‘new’ self. Although her face is temporarily rejuvenated, she will once again become the old woman ‘withering incessantly’; this is how she will in fact become her own mother. It is herself she is condemning, in a dramatic instance of female self-hatred.¹⁰³ The poem is actually a savage exercise in social commentary, a point oddly not noted by other critics. In consumer culture, young women are conditioned to scorn older ones as a way of managing the fears, constantly reinforced by advertising, that they themselves are aging —

¹⁰² Clarke writes of this passage: ‘[i]n a process developed but never realized in “Poem for a Birthday,” the speaker becomes new, at once mother and child. Yet her claim for self-creation is false, as the process, rather than a true rebirth, is a remaking at the hands of others’, pp. 241-2. This last observation is accurate, but hardly the point; the operation is a choice the woman has made. The bodily self-loathing that motivated this choice, and the hideous delusion that follows it, are the poem’s emotional crux.

¹⁰³ Lant argues: ‘To peel off unwanted layers involves not just peeling off clothing or falseness; the very self — because of its unworthiness — must be sloughed off as well: “Skin doesn't have roots, it peels away easy as paper”.’ ‘The Big Strip Tease’, p. 639.

which of course, inevitably, they are.¹⁰⁴ Mercè Cuenca notes: ‘The demand for physical ‘perfection’ which resulted from constructing women as, primarily, objects of male desire was mirrored in popular magazines, such as *Ladies’ Home Journal*, which endorsed women’s seeking medical aid to model themselves into “ideal” sexual mates’.¹⁰⁵ This poem is, then, a companion piece to ‘Mirror’, discussed in the previous section, and to ‘Poem for a Birthday’ with its failed effort at self-renewal.¹⁰⁶ As in the latter poem, the speaker ends up ‘as good as new’, which is not really new at all.¹⁰⁷ In writing the poem, however, Plath closes in on one of the issues that makes it difficult for her to constitute a female textual subjectivity that is both autonomous and strong: intense bodily shame.

The objectification and fragmentation of bodies is also underlined in ‘The Surgeon at 2 a. m.’. Here the speaker is the surgeon (who, given the year, 1961, we can assume is male), not the patient. He begins by proudly establishing the essential qualities of the space he occupies: ‘The white light is artificial, and hygienic as heaven./ The microbes cannot survive it’ and ‘[t]he scalded sheet is a snowfield, frozen and peaceful’.¹⁰⁸ The patient under it, however, is hardly human to the surgeon — a soulless object. (In Plath, bodies are often de-animated and inanimate objects come alive with strange energies; see below on ‘Tulips’):

As usual there is no face. A lump of Chinese white
With seven holes thumbed in. The soul is another light. [...] (*CP*, ll. 7-9)

Here a masculine character inverts Plath’s iconography of faceless ‘blanks’ that menace the feminine speaker; to him, the suffering patient is the ‘blank’ with features crudely ‘thumbed in’. The surgeon views the opened body as a ‘garden’ where ‘[s]tetches and colors assail me./ This is the lung-tree./ [...] The heart is a red-bell-bloom, in distress’. This opened

¹⁰⁴ ‘Because of the harmful “ideal” put forth by the Western media and accepted in large by American patriarchal society there are drastic increases in plastic surgery, a steady (not decreasing) number of sexual assaults, and an overwhelming occurrence of eating disorders. Yet, when a woman gazes at an airbrushed beauty wishing for the model’s thighs or slender hips she fails to register that the image she sees before her is not real. Our understanding of the images we see seldom takes into consideration the “beauty” we see are [sic] fabrications’. Stephanie Nicholl Berberick, ‘The Objectification of Women in Mass Media: Female Self-Image in Misogynist Culture’ in *The New York Sociologist*, 5.1, 2010, pp. 1-17 (2).

¹⁰⁵ Mercè Cuenca, ‘Inscrutable Intelligence’: The Case against Plastic Surgery in the Works of Jean Stafford and Sylvia Plath’, p. 182.

¹⁰⁶ Gill comments: ‘The mirror in the final stanza [...] does rather more than simply reflect the scene. It becomes a kind of repository which, in Axelrod’s words, ‘confirms the death of an aged, meretricious identity and the birth of a new one. The disruption of the conventional order such that the speaker becomes ‘mother to myself’ imbues this whole process with an inalienable sense of uncanny horror’. Jo Gill, *Cambridge Introduction*, p. 45.

¹⁰⁷ This doubling and casting-off is also a variation on the theme of Oscar Wilde’s Gothic-decadent novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, in which the moral and physical decay and degeneracy of the protagonist is manifested in a portrait painting of him hidden in an attic, while he retains his youth and beauty.

¹⁰⁸ This anticipates the imagery of the ward in ‘Tulips’.

interior, which then changes from a garden to a ‘wilderness’, becomes the central space of the poem. Next, the surgeon becomes a kind of plumber, thereby taming the wilderness and turning it into a villa:

The blood is a sunset. I admire it.
[...] So magical! A hot spring
I must seal off and let fill
The intricate, blue piping under this pale marble’. (CP, ll. 21-4)

The surgeon, in Plath’s sardonically satirical account, follows this chain of spatial association: ‘How I admire the Romans — / Aqueducts, the Baths of Caracalla, the eagle nose!’ Not surprisingly, he has delusions of grandeur:

The body is a Roman thing.
It has shut its mouth on the stone pill of repose.

It is a statue the orderlies are wheeling off.
I have perfected it.¹⁰⁹ (CP, ll. 30-2)

The dehumanisation and objectification of the ‘perfected’ patient deepens as the surgeon describes leftover dismembered body parts and tissues as if they were souvenirs or groceries: ‘I am left with an arm or a leg,/ A set of teeth, or stones/ To rattle in a bottle and take home,/ And tissue in slices — a pathological salami./ Tonight the parts are entombed in an icebox’.¹¹⁰ The surgeon is now implicitly a cannibal, intensifying the poem’s Gothic atmosphere with a violation of fundamental taboo. The surgeon takes a stroll through the post-operative ward, the poem’s final space, ‘walk[ing] among sleepers in gauze sarcophagi’ (a word that at once recalls the surgeon’s ‘Roman’ fantasia and suggests that the patients are already dead). He glances at the person on whom he has just operated: ‘Tomorrow the patient will have a clean, pink plastic limb. [...]/ The angels of morphia have borne him up./ He floats an inch from the ceiling [...]’.¹¹¹ For the surgeon, evidently, as with the light in the operating theatre, artificial is superior to natural. We are seeing the ‘city of spare parts’ described in ‘The Stones’ from the point of view of its ‘workmen’. The surgeon concludes, smugly, but with a Gothic overtone of menace:

The red night lights are flat moons. They are dull with blood.
I am the sun, in my white coat,

¹⁰⁹ This image of the ‘perfected’ human body as a Roman sculpture recurs chillingly in ‘Edge’, but has a precursor in ‘The Colossus’, in which the speaker is conducting maintenance and repairs on the father-imago.

¹¹⁰ In the world of ‘The Stones’, they would be recycled as spare parts. The doctor is seen as a butcher and the table of the operating room is changed into a slaughterhouse.

¹¹¹ The ‘pink plastic limb’ again recalls the ‘city of spare parts’, where ‘[a] workman walks by carrying a pink torso’.

Gray faces, shuttered by drugs, follow me like flowers. (*CP*, ll. 48-50)

The space of the poem has shifted from the sterile whiteness of the operating room, by way of the inside of the patient's body, to this ward with its blood-red lights and drugged sleepers. This imagery of 'moons...dull with blood' immediately genders the ward as feminine. The surgeon's self-description as 'the sun' (a masculine symbol) as well as his false belief that the patients' faces are following him 'like flowers' reinforces this gendering. This once again identifies the symbolic body as female rather than male — but also as passive and powerless. The male surgeon, on the other hand, like the speaker in 'The Solipsist', exaggerates his own power over these feminised, objectified bodies into a delusion of grandeur.

The speaker of 'In Plaster', written while Plath was recovering from an appendectomy, is under no such delusions.¹¹² The doubling is immediate; in fact, it is the main subject of the poem. The space here is the most intimate possible — that immediately surrounding the speaker's body. The speaker is in a whole-body cast, and has been for some time:

I shall never get out of this! There are two of me now:
This new absolutely white person and the old yellow one,
And the white person is certainly the superior one.
She doesn't need food, she is one of the real saints. (*CP*, ll. 1-4)

The tone is colloquial, matter-of-fact, which makes the fantasia of the cast as a 'new white person' surrounding the 'old yellow' speaker all the more potent. The speaker proceeds to narrate the story of her relationship with the cast, which, in a dramatic instance of anthropomorphism, becomes a doppelganger. 'At the beginning I hated her, she had no personality — / She lay in bed with me like a dead body/ And I was scared, because she was shaped just the way I was/ / Only much whiter and unbreakable and with no complaints'. In Gothic fiction it is not uncommon for the double to be a version of the protagonist who is either evil or superior — or both, as in Stevenson's *Doctor Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. In this

¹¹² Plath in fact had the same negative attitude toward her physical appearance as did many if not most of her peers. The most important difference is that unlike them, she saw the 'masculine' act of writing and building a literary career as a defense. 'Nose podgy as a leaking sausage: big pores full of pus and dirt, red blotches, the peculiar brown mole on my under-chin which I would like to have excised. Memory of that girl's face in the med school movie, with a little black beauty wart: this wart is malignant: she will be dead in a week. Hair untrained, merely brown and childishly put up: don't know what else to do with it. No bone structure. Body needs a wash, skin the worst: it is this climate: chapping cold, desiccating hot: I need to be tan, all-over brown, and then my skin clears and I am all right. I need to write a novel, a book of poems, a *Ladies' Home* story, and I will be poreless and radiant'. Sylvia Plath, *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath: 1950-1962*, ed. by Karen Kukil (New York: Anchor Books, 2007), pp. 287-288.

regard, Otto Rank notes that the 'relation of the self to the self' is a 'universal human problem'.¹¹³

The cast-double, however, is a more complex creature. Their relationship evolves: 'Then I realized what she wanted was for me to love her:/ She began to warm up, and I saw her advantages'. The speaker is reassured, even arrogant:

Without me, she wouldn't exist, so of course she was grateful.
I gave her a soul, I bloomed out of her as a rose
Blooms out of a vase of not very valuable porcelain,
And it was I who attracted everybody's attention,
Not her whiteness and beauty, as I had at first supposed. (CP, ll. 15-9)

The cast-double becomes subservient to the woman she encases: 'You could almost tell at once she had a slave mentality'.¹¹⁴ And 'She humored my weakness like the best of nurses,/ Holding my bones in place so they would mend properly'. However, the relationship deteriorates. 'She let in the drafts and became more and more absent-minded./ And my skin itched and flaked away in soft pieces/ Simply because she looked after me so badly'.

The space of the speaker's body is claustrophobically bounded by the body-simulacrum that is the cast. But there is also a developing power struggle between speaker and cast, body and shell. The speaker continues:

Then I saw what the trouble was: she thought she was immortal.
She wanted to leave me, she thought she was superior [...]

As in other Gothic fictions of the doubled self, the conflict between the two as to who will possess the 'real' singular identity turns nightmarish: 'Then she could cover my mouth and eyes, cover me entirely,/ And wear my painted face the way a mummy-case/ Wears the face of a pharaoh, though it's made of mud and water'.¹¹⁵ Only when the speaker is dead can the cast-double acquire a face, a simulacrum of the speaker's.¹¹⁶ The speaker becomes ever more dependent on the cast-double even as they become less and less alike:

¹¹³ Otto Rank, *The Double: A Psychoanalytic Study* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1971), p. xiv.

¹¹⁴ This is highly ironic, since 'whiteness' in the United States remains a marker of distinction from black people who are the descendants of slaves, and who at the time this poem was written were fighting for full civil rights across the American South; the colour system of domination and exclusion is inverted here. It is no surprise that the cast's whiteness is initially and unthinkingly described by the speaker as a sign of superiority, for so it was even in the New England culture in which Plath grew up.

¹¹⁵ This recalls the 'mummy-cloths' in which the surgically rejuvenated face of the patient is wrapped in 'Face Lift'.

¹¹⁶ This is an inversion of the central trope of Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*: the 'real' living person decays while her external image is perfected, a process concluding when the living person dies.

I wasn't in any position to get rid of her.
She'd supported me for so long I was quite limp — [...]
Living with her was like living with my own coffin:
Yet I still depended on her, though I did it regretfully. (CP, ll. 43-46)

The speaker's confinement within the cast is becoming a living death. She fantasises about escaping the relationship: 'Now I see it must be one or the other of us./ She may be a saint, and I may be ugly and hairy,/ But she'll soon find out that that doesn't matter a bit'. The speaker believes that 'one day [she] will manage without her', but she must 'collect her strength' in order to break free.

This poem, an extended symbolic narrative, has inspired multiple interpretations. Axelrod argues that the poem charts 'the speaker's growing sense of conflict between alternative identities or body senses — pure and dirty — that vie to possess her'.¹¹⁷ Feminist critics like Alicia Ostriker and Ann Stevenson see the poem as representing a struggle between an authentic female self and a culturally imposed feminine role — an 'artificial exterior' as Stevenson puts it.¹¹⁸ Linda Wagner-Martin views it as a breakthrough for Plath in which she really begins to write about female experience.¹¹⁹ Wagner-Martin's reading has the merit of addressing the issue of Plath's writerly identity, but as Lant notes, it ignores the tone of self-disgust with which the speaker describes her body.¹²⁰ Sandra Gilbert, paraphrased by Lant, 'explains this by saying that the inner, ugly self represents the unacceptable, angry, aggressive female self which Plath had to liberate.' Lant then responds to Gilbert's 'triumphant' reading by asking 'why the female writer can so easily debase and vilify that self which represents her most cherished beliefs and goals.'¹²¹ Alternatively, as Gill suggests, the poem addresses the stylistic transition Plath was engaged in at the time of writing, or more generally 'as an allegory of the creative process, and specifically of the experience of outgrowing one poetic style and finding another.'¹²² This is persuasive, but I would like to respond, echoing Lant, that more was at stake for Plath than a change in style.

What none of these readings emphasises, though, is the fact that the speaker's body within the cast is *deteriorating*, and the cast with her. In the first stanza, she describes herself as the 'old yellow' self and the cast as the 'new white' one. By the fifth stanza, even as their

¹¹⁷ Jo Gill, *Cambridge Introduction*, p. 150.

¹¹⁸ Anne Stevenson, *Bitter Fame: A Life of Sylvia Plath* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1989) p. 212.

¹¹⁹ Linda Wagner-Martin, *Sylvia Plath: A Biography* (London: Sphere, 1990), p. 184.

¹²⁰ Kathleen Lant, 'The Big Strip Tease', p. 641.

¹²¹ Kathleen Lant, 'The Big Strip Tease', p. 641.

¹²² Gill, *Cambridge Introduction*, p. 46.

‘relationship grew more intense’, the cast ‘let in the drafts and became more absent-minded’, which represents both the speaker’s muscular wasting from lack of exercise and the cast starting to develop cracks. The speaker’s skin is also itching and flaking, a typical experience of being in a cast, which the speaker attributes to the cast ‘look[ing] after [her] so badly’. In the next stanza, the speaker describes herself (from what she imagines as the cast’s viewpoint) as a ‘half-corpse’. She has become ‘quite limp’ and has ‘forgotten how to walk or sit’. In the last stanza, she describes herself as ‘ugly and hairy’. But it is precisely her encasement in the cast that has made her this way: she cannot shave her legs or armpits, her skin is patchy and flaky, her muscles are flaccid and weak, and so forth. There is nothing essential about these qualities. They are a product of her entrapped dependence, which is simply that the cast, as she says, has been ‘[h]olding my bones in place so they would mend properly.’ On the other hand, as she also notes, the cast owes existence to her; she ‘gave her a soul’.

Hence another reading of the cast-double is possible, based on Judith Butler’s analysis of the embodied performance of gender. Plath’s biographers and numerous critics have commented on the fact that Plath was a heavily ‘masked’ person through most of her life, intent on performing the particular role that would meet the expectations of those around her. From this viewpoint, the cast-double, constraining yet supporting, is the speaker’s performance of various aspects of early-1960s femininity, constituting an idealised or ‘stylized’ self as ‘beauty’, ‘nurse,’ ‘saint’ and so on (including ‘wife’). This performance was nonetheless protective of her emotional processes. However, within it, she evidently felt that her body — as a dynamic process of signification, the site of her subjectivity — was growing weaker as she aged.¹²³ What, in this reading, would the mending of her bones within the cast symbolise? Perhaps, simply, autonomy — the ability to live outside the armour of masks Plath had inhabited since adolescence, however ‘ugly’ she might at first seem to herself. Also in this reading, then, the speaker’s ‘death’ would be her complete subsumption into the performance of domestic femininity (accompanied perhaps by persisting in the generally demure and emotionally distanced manner of her mid-period poetry) and the abandonment of

¹²³ ‘In this sense, gender is in no way a stable identity of locus of agency from which various acts proceed; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time — an identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts. Further, gender is instituted through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self’. Butler, p. 404.

her ‘ugly and hairy’ autonomous subjectivity. Like Sexton’s doll-wife in ‘Self, 1958’, she would be ‘placed’ in kitchen or bedroom to perform her domestic duties.¹²⁴

In ‘Tulips’, the speaker wishes to withdraw completely not only from performing gender, but from performing a self. She is in hospital convalescing from surgery. She begins by complaining that the tulips she has been sent ‘are too excitable, it is winter here’; that is, the whiteness and stillness of winter have been reproduced inside the convalescent ward:

Look how white everything is, how quiet, how snowed-in.
I am learning peacefulness, lying by myself quietly. (*CP*, ll. 2-4)

‘Snowed-in,’ the speaker cannot leave. But she is content where she is: ‘I am nobody; I have nothing to do with explosions’. Like the pebble-woman in ‘The Stones’, she has turned over her body to technicians — nurses, anaesthetists, surgeons — like a machine that needs repair along with her identity. She is a broken doll in a hospital for dolls, anonymous. The tulips, amid this white stillness, are ‘explosions’ from which the speaker feels disconnected. This first stanza states the themes that Plath then develops in a series of cyclical returns over the rest of the poem — for some critics like Tim Kendall, excessively so.¹²⁵

In the second stanza, the speaker, with her head ‘propped ... between the pillow and the sheet-cuff’ is metonymised to an eye ‘between two lids that will not shut’ passively watching the routine activity in the ward. Despite the fact that she has recently undergone surgery, she seems to have no body. She has become a camera, surveilling the space in which she is herself surveilled. Although she cannot stop watching, she is not disturbed by what she sees: The nurses pass and pass, they are no trouble,/ They pass the way gulls pass inland in their white caps [..]’ The syntax blurs the distinction between the nurses and the gulls by placing ‘in their white caps’ closer to ‘gulls’ than to ‘nurses’ — while ‘white caps’ in conjunction with ‘gulls’ suggests waves in a winter sea.¹²⁶ The nurses too are without distinct identities, ‘one just the same as another,/ So it is impossible to tell how many there are’. This adds to the sense of displacement. The nurses are further depersonalised in the next stanza, as is the speaker:

¹²⁴ Once again, this reading does not exhaust the meaning of ‘In Plaster’, which is overdetermined. The narrative is symbolic rather than allegorical. One might argue that allegorising readings are one of the great temptations in the study of Plath’s poetry.

¹²⁵ ‘Some of the similes, when they finally arrive, have been so long expected that they appear redundant and repetitive’. Tim Kendall, ‘From the Bottom of the Pool: Sylvia Plath’s Last Poems’ in *Bloom’s Modern Critical Views: Sylvia Plath*, p. 156.

¹²⁶ Once again, as in ‘Lesbos’ and other poems examined so far, Plath has brought the outdoors, including the ocean, indoors, in a metaphoric thread that continues through much of the poem.

My body is a pebble to them, they tend it as water
Tends to the pebbles it must run over, smoothing them gently.¹²⁷
They bring me numbness in their bright needles, they bring me sleep. (CP, ll. 15-7)

The body the speaker now admits to having shares none of the characteristics of an actual human body healing from an operation; it is a smooth, solid, mineral thing, with no openings and no interiority. It has been given ‘numbness’ by anaesthetic injections, but even so, the speaker is refusing to ‘do’ it at all, and thereby attempting to avoid subjectivity as a dynamic and self-reflective process.

The speaker next reveals that it is not just the bright red of the tulips that disturbs her; it is any connection with her life outside the ward. ‘Now I have lost myself I am sick of baggage,’ she says — not only ‘[m]y patent leather overnight case like a black pillbox’ but also her closest relationships, ‘[m]y husband and child smiling out of the family photo;/ Their smiles catch onto my skin, little smiling hooks’. To someone who has ‘lost [her]self’, who has become ‘nobody’, these smile-hooks, manifestations of affection, are painful irritations as they try to pull her back to a life she has ‘let slip’, ‘a thirty-year-old cargo boat/ Stubbornly hanging on to my name and address’. She continues the marine metaphor:

They have swabbed me clear of my loving associations. [...]
I watched my teaset, my bureaus of linen, my books
Sink out of sight, and the water went over my head. (CP, ll. 24-7)

She becomes part of the freight ‘they’ have thrown overboard, drowning along with her relationships. In another metaphoric drift, with what Catholic holy orders call ‘the world’ left behind, the ward becomes a convent: ‘I am a nun now, I have never been so pure’. Although the speaker is attempting to suspend any sort of self-performance, this nonetheless renders the ward once again into a markedly gendered space, one that requires no effort from her. The nurses and the other patients are all female, intensifying the sense of her wilful isolation. With her identity, her relationships, and her possessions left behind, she has achieved emptiness — or almost. She protests petulantly: ‘I didn’t want any flowers, I only wanted/ To lie with my hands turned up and be utterly empty.’¹²⁸

¹²⁷ This image is identical to the self-description in ‘The Stones’, so that ‘Tulips’ can hence be understood as a more realistic account of a similar experience.

¹²⁸ The ‘hands turned up’ recall the hand gestures of Christian saints and also images of the Buddha, for whom becoming empty of personal attachments was the goal of spiritual practice. However, for a Buddhist, achieving this state is preparation for ‘mindfulness’ and compassionate action in the world. The speaker’s hands are turned up in order to be empty of *responsibility*, whether for herself or others, and to avoid picking up a pen and a

How free it is, you have no idea how free —
The peacefulness is so big it dazes you [...] (CP, ll. 31-2)

In the speaker's mind, what she has surrendered in order to achieve this freedom — husband, child, possessions, identity — is reduced to 'nothing'. The freedom, however, is entirely negative: it consists of not being, not feeling, not having, not doing — and not writing. The entire setting is like a blank white page that the speaker contemplates without feeling a need to make a mark on it. For Plath at least, this would be a self-abandonment as profound as that of letting go of her relationships and belongings.

The speaker next complains that the tulips hurt her because they are 'too red'. She elaborates: 'Even through the gift paper I could hear them breathe/ Lightly, through their white swaddlings, like an awful baby'. The tulips resemble a monstrous version of her own child, whose 'hook' pulls at her. In the metaphoric system Plath has established, the speaker's family and the incision from her surgery 'correspond' as in medieval analogy. The tulips both 'seem to float' and to 'weigh [her] down' like lead sinkers even as they upset her 'with their sudden tongues and their color'. Here Plath has inverted the extended metaphor from the earlier stanzas; having sunk beneath the surface of the ward's 'peacefulness', the speaker now seems to fear drowning, indicating a psychic shift.

In the following stanza the speaker descends into something like paranoia; the tulips together with the sun have her under their panoptic glare:

The tulips turn to me, and the window behind me
Where once a day the light slowly widens and slowly thins,
And I see myself, flat, ridiculous, a cut-paper shadow
Between the eye of the sun and the eyes of the tulips,
And I have no face, I have wanted to efface myself. (CP, ll. 36-40)

The speaker had not been seeing herself, only whatever passed in front of her. This absence of self-awareness along with ceasing to perform her identity was the source of her peacefulness and sense of freedom. Now, seeing herself through these (imaginary) eyes, the 'peaceful' persona, like the shame-possessed speaker in 'Tale of a Tub', seems 'ridiculous', two-dimensional and without substance. It lacks even the solidity of the pebble to which she earlier compared herself. She has become faceless, like the patients as they appear to the title character in 'The Surgeon at 2 am.' because she 'wanted to efface [her] self'. Like the

notebook (though in fact Plath did take notes on the staff and the other patients later in her stay in the ward). Once again, the poem is a fiction, in this case addressing a desire and guilt about that desire.

speaker in 'Poem for a Birthday' she has become an object, even as inanimate things — the tulips, the sun — take on eerie, menacing subjectivity and gaze at her. The calm of the air 'coming and going, breath by breath' she was experiencing has been destroyed, and she is feeling anxious and ashamed as well as suffocated. 'The tulips 'concentrate [her] attention, that was happy/ Playing and resting without committing itself.' With a focus on Other, dialectically, comes a focus on Self. The speaker must become three-dimensional once more. The quiet, cold, white openness of the ward has become warm, noisy and demanding — that is, alive. By way of the tulips, the hospital space has begun to take on characteristics of the domestic space, and the stasis the speaker sought is broken. She must begin to think of herself as a person again, with emotions and commitments. The poem's moving last two lines convey her restored self-awareness, or, in Butler's terms, a renewed performance of self as wife and mother. With this self-awareness, however, also returns her unhappiness and the knowledge that the desire she has been experiencing to be 'effaced' is a sign of sickness, as she tastes her own tears in a final return of the pelagic metaphor from earlier:

The water I taste is warm and salt, like the sea,
And comes from a country far away as health. (CP, ll. 62-3)

Plath's subject position in describing hospital spaces evolved from ironic observer, to sympathetically imaginative observer, to wholly immersed patient. As an initially severely ill psychiatric patient, the speaker of 'Poem for a Birthday' uses language in a way meant to evoke psychosis, with rapid and disjunctive shifts of image and even grammatical person that suggest mania, and metaphoric descriptions of the hospital space at different phases of the 'repair' process. The image of her body as a representational space serves as metaphor for social and cultural conceptualisation: 'an empty container without consciousness or intention'.¹²⁹

In addition to the therapeutic narrative, the poem spatialises a central conflict for Plath — that she as a female poet is trying to break free of feminine constraints using masculine models of poetic discourse, with the result that her narrative of the speaker's supposed 'rebirth' after mental illness is subverted by the masculine violence with which she is first destroyed by fire like a wax doll and then rebuilt using 'spare parts'. The choice the speaker faces is remaining an inert 'pebble' with a weak, powerless 'mouth-hole' or accepting being reassembled in this way. The textual subjectivity thus constituted at the end of the poem is a

¹²⁹ Setha Low, *Spatializing Culture: The Ethnography of Space and Place*, p. 98.

bricolage of elements from the tradition, dismembered and reassembled. Later, she explores hospital space and within it body-space in a semi-realistic (though not naturalistic) way, conveying mood and attitude through more subtle use of metaphor. In this way she is able to convey the mental lives of the poem's speakers. Her speakers in 'Face Lift' and 'In Plaster' in particular struggle with the normative performance of gender within this highly constrained space. In a less obvious way, so does the speaker in 'Tulips'. In fact, 'Tulips' is the only one of Plath's poems that to some extent resembles the 'asylum poems' of Lowell and Sexton, even though the hospitalisation is for surgery and not a psychotic break. This wide variety of approach and style, though she wrote far fewer poems that involve this specific location, is in keeping with her achievements with respect to the domestic setting and also the spaces of nature, with which much of her late poetry is concerned. As noted earlier, Plath in most of her hospital poems brings 'nature' indoors in one way or another. The same is true, however, of many of the domestic poems: the sea in the bath in 'Tale of a Tub' and the mirror as a lake in which images rise like 'terrible fish'; the moonlight erecting a cliff between husband and wife in 'Event'; the speaker as a passing cloud in 'Morning Song'. That landscape in Plath's poems is permeated by her subjectivity — the interior becoming one with the exterior — is therefore entirely consistent with the Expressionist poetics she has developed.

'The Far Fields Melt My Heart': Plath in Nature

In this section, we will investigate Plath's poetic relationship with natural spaces and the ways in which she used them to exteriorise her affective states. Her poetic method in writing about these spaces can be divided roughly into two: the pathetic fallacy (also known as anthropomorphism) in which the speaker's surroundings manifest her emotions; and prosopopoeia, whereby the speaker is the external creature or object itself. The increasing permeation of her later poetry by anxiety and depression caused by both personal and socio-political factors is again manifest in Gothic tropes and imagery. As part of the framework for analysis I will be critically applying the work of two recent feminist critics of Plath, Kathleen Nichols and Christina Britzolakis. Both emphasise aspects of a postmodern Gothic in Plath's work: Nichols examines the impact of the Holocaust and the threat of nuclear war and its impact on Plath's descriptions of landscape, replacing what she calls 'Cold War Gothic' for traditional Gothic. Britzolakis addresses the complexity of Plath's version of the subjective lyric, whereby 'the poetic 'I' is almost always articulated as incomplete, lacking, or

victimised, and the natural world as either reified, deprived of vitality, or actively hostile'.¹³⁰

She further asserts:

To invoke, through anthropomorphism, a 'correspondence' between the inwardness of the subject and the outside world, is to risk the loss of that very autonomy and centrality of poetic voice which invocation claims. Objects external to the self can then appropriate the subjectivity that ought to pertain to poetic voice, leading to an emptying out of lyric voice, a loss of inwardness, and a subjection of the 'I' to the non-human.¹³¹

I will argue, however, that there is an underlying reason for this weakness of the poetic subject and the related reification or hostility of the surrounding world out of doors; and that it is not the entirety of these surroundings the poet describes that has these qualities but specific aspects of them. With respect to Nichols, I will argue that Plath does not reject the Gothic tradition so much as modernise it and in several cases use it as a foundation. I want to make use of both of these theoretical constructs to elucidate Plath's descriptions of landscape as a type of space, while showing the ways in which they are incomplete or excessively totalising.

As discussed above, the insights of feminist cultural geographers like Doreen Massey have helped to remove the traditional stigma, implied by the term 'fallacy', from these kinds of exteriorisation. On the one hand, Plath as a poet feels a 'separation' from her natural environment and continually tries to diminish or end that separation in her work by the use of various forms of the pathetic fallacy; but on the other, she is threatened and anxious when the separation begins to dissolve. At the same time, contemporary anthropology confirms the intimate link between body and landscape. As Setha Low notes:

Many anthropologists use metaphor analysis to interpret the ways the human body is linked to myths and cosmology and describe how spatial and temporal processes are encoded with body symbolism [...] Other studies explore the body as isomorphic with the landscape, where the landscape provides a metaphor that is an expressive, evocative device transmitting memory, morality, and emotion [...].¹³²

¹³⁰ Christina Britzolakis, 'Gothic Subjectivity', p. 115.

¹³¹ Christina Britzolakis, 'Gothic Subjectivity', p. 117.

¹³² Setha Low, *Spatializing Culture: The Ethnography of Space and Place*, p. 12. Low further states: 'Anthropologists also have noted the importance of movement in the creation of place, conceptualizing space as movement rather than a container [...]. Melanesian ethnographers work in a cultural context that accentuates the importance of spatial orientation: in greetings, the passage of time, the definition of events, and the identification of people with land and/or the landscape'.

Although this is a literary and not an anthropological study, I will analyse the systems of metaphor in Plath's landscape poems in terms of this risky, fissured 'isomorphism' of the speaker's or protagonist's body-mind, considered as practice, with its natural and human surroundings. The arc of the section is broadly that of Plath's imaginative life, with a focus on the transitional poems, showing how she develops, deploys, and exhausts rhetorical strategies in her accounts of her relationship to the natural environment. Unlike the previous two sections, this one is divided into subsections by topic.

The poems to be examined in this section as a whole are 'Dream with Clam-Diggers', 'Full Fathom Five', 'Blackberrying' (the seashore and subjective responses to it); 'Hardcastle Crags', 'Wuthering Heights' (the Yorkshire moor landscape); and 'The Moon and the Yew Tree', 'Elm', 'Winter Trees', and 'Sheep in Fog' (haunted landscape and the void).

Plath spent her childhood in a town close to the Atlantic Ocean. 'My childhood landscape was not land, but the end of the land — the cold, salt running hills of the Atlantic'.¹³³ Echoing Whitman in 'Out of the Cradle, Endlessly Rocking,' she describes herself as a 'sea-child' and misses the youthful time she spent by the ocean. Plath stated that 'the association of the sea is a central metaphor for my childhood [...] changed from the ubiquitous grit of sorrow and dull routine'.¹³⁴ Plath's childhood memories are always evoked by the seascape: 'our identity lies in an unconscious life symbolized by water'.¹³⁵ It is a space where she can recall the image of her father and her childhood spent walking and playing by the seashore. In these earlier shore poems, there is little use of the pathetic fallacy, possibly because her subjective relationship to this landscape was formed in childhood and is ontologically stable. Her yearning for the past, particularly the first nine years of her life, is tenderly expressed in 'Ocean 1212-W' when she compares moving from the seashore to inland after her father's death to sealing herself and her memories like a ship in a bottle — 'beautiful, inaccessible, obsolete, a fine white flying myth'.¹³⁶ Accordingly, Plath's exploration of the seascape (almost always the seashore) fluctuates between the sweet past and the harsh and increasingly anxious present — which includes her fears of violence and death.

¹³³ Sylvia Plath, Leonie Cohn, and June Tobin, 'Ocean 1212-W', BBC Home Service, 1963. p. 79.

¹³⁴ Sylvia Plath, *Unbridged Journals of Sylvia Plath* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1983), p. 222.

¹³⁵ Robert Langbaum, *The Mysteries of Identity: A Theme in Modern Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 63.

¹³⁶ Sylvia Plath, Leonie Cohn, and June Tobin, 'Ocean 1212-W', *British Broadcasting Corporation Home Service*, 1963. p. 74.

Perhaps the most abrupt conjunction between the two is 'Dream with Clam-Diggers' from 1956. The poem describes a dream in which the protagonist has 'come/ Back to her early sea-town home/ Scathed, stained after tedious pilgrimages'. She finds the world of her childhood intact: 'No change met her [...] The whole scene flared welcome to this roamer'. She has also evidently travelled back in time. The protagonist watches her child-self playing with other children on an imaginary 'schooner', actually a green rock (likely the one described in 'Green Rock, Winthrop Bay', discussed below) as '[h]igh against heaven, gulls went wheeling soundless' until the children are called in to dinner:

Plucked back thus sudden to that far innocence,
She, in her shabby travel garb, began
Walking eager toward water, when there, one by one,
Clam-diggers rose up out of dark slime at her offense. (CP, ll. 20-23)

The dream has turned into a nightmare. The clam-diggers, who have become 'grim as gargoyles' as they have waited for her return '[t]o trap this wayward girl at her first move of love,/ Now with stake and pitchfork... advance, flint eyes fixed on murder'. What her 'offense' was is never stated, but it has something to do with 'her first move of love' and the fact that she is 'wayward'. This last word means capricious and resistant to proper guidance, but it comes from the Middle English *awayward*, meaning one who wanders away from the path of goodness — itself a spatial metaphor. Especially in her earlier poetry, Plath looked deeply into the etymology of the words she used. A college roommate described her writing process: 'She wrote slowly, plodding through the dictionary and thesaurus searching for the exact word to create the poetic impression she intended. Sometimes she chose words with disquieting connotations for their shock value [...]'.¹³⁷ Significantly, she is not permitted to enter the water — the unitary space she remembers is now divided. The dream suggests a sense of overwhelming guilt connected with childhood happiness. A biographical reading would link this poem to 'Electra on Azalea Path', in which the speaker, transparently Plath herself, addresses her father who was buried in the cemetery of Churchyard Hill near a path by that name:

My mother dreamed you face down in the sea [...]
I brought my love to bear, and then you died.
It was the gangrene ate you to the bone [...]
O pardon the one who knocks for pardon at
Your gate, father — your hound-bitch, daughter, friend.
It was my love that did us both to death. (CP, ll. 36-46)

¹³⁷ Quoted in Peter K. Steinberg, *Great Writers: Sylvia Plath* (Philadelphia: Chelsea House, 2006), p. 44.

In any case, a barrier of murderous guilt separates the protagonist in 'Dream' from the sea. The beach of her innocent childhood is a lost world.

In 'Full Fathom Five' from 1959, a transitional year in Plath's life and poetry, the speaker, who again is evidently a persona of Plath herself, associates the sea-god Neptune and the seascape itself with her father.¹³⁸ Fully integrating his imagined presence into the verbal picture in a single complex personification, she describes the sea's surface in terms of the 'old man's' expansive presence which, when he appears, becomes the winter sea itself, permeating the waves:

Old man, you surface seldom.
Then you come in with the tide's coming
When seas wash cold, foam-

Capped: white hair, white beard, far-flung,
A dragnet, rising, falling, as waves
Crest and trough. (CP, ll. 1-6)

The sea-god's body is repeatedly figured in terms of entanglement: 'a dragnet,' 'wrinkling skeins/ Knotted, caught', and 'labyrinthine tangle'. The speaker is aware that the father-god's 'dangers are many'; he 'float[s] near/ As keeled ice-mountains/ / Of the north, to be steered clear/ Of, not fathomed'. Below the surface, moreover, he 'root[s] deep among knuckles, shinbones,/ Skulls'. His 'dragnet' threatens to pull her under. Yet she 'walk[s] dry on [his] kingdom's border/ Exiled to no good', much as Plath was exiled from the sea by her father's death.¹³⁹ The speaker here duplicates or divides the natural space as she offers its ubiquity to her father while she is contently 'exiled'.

The speaker's deeply conflicted attitude to the space of the seashore, and to the imago of her father, is summarised in the poem's closing lines: 'Father, this thick air is murderous. I would breathe water'. This could be read as a desire to be reunited with her father in death. Yet it is the air of the shore that is 'murderous', not the water, which she wishes to 'breathe'. Perhaps, then, it is the sea itself with which she longs to be reunited.¹⁴⁰ Life and death, like the relative 'thicknesses' of air and water, have changed places.

¹³⁸ The groundwork for this association is laid in an earlier poem, 'On the Decline of Oracles', as Plath describes the conch shell he keeps on his bookshelf (Neptune's son, the god Triton, used a conch as a trumpet). The title references a song from Shakespeare's *The Tempest*: 'Full fathom five thy father lies,/ Of his bones are coral made/, Those are pearls that were his eyes'.

¹³⁹ The speaker's sense of exile echoes 'Dream with Clam Diggers' and 'Green Rock, Winthrop Bay'.

¹⁴⁰ Compare Sexton's desire to be united with the sea as a perfect mother who gives her the gift of death in 'In Excelsis'.

In 'Blackberrying', a poem from September 1961, Plath again seems to associate the sea with death — but not only with death, as we will discover. The speaker sets the scene: 'Nobody in the lane, and nothing, nothing but blackberries,/ Blackberries on either side [...] / A blackberry alley [...] and a sea/ Somewhere at the end of it, heaving'. Already the word 'heaving' is ominous: it suggests both strenuous effort and nausea. As if to counter the 'nobody and 'nothing', the scene, though, is immediately infused with the pathetic fallacy: the berries 'squander' their juice on her fingers. 'I had not asked for such a blood sisterhood; they must love me'. The blackberries are not only 'something' against the 'nothing'; they become 'somebodies', the speaker's 'blood sisters', sharing the female fecundity manifested in menstruation.

The cheerful if slightly anxious tone continues in the second stanza with 'high, green meadows' that are 'glowing, as if lit from within'. Plath includes an image of fecundity fused with decay: 'I come to one bush of berries so ripe it is a bush of flies', where the flies, their bodies and wings forming a 'Chinese screen', enjoy a 'honey-feast of the berries' that has 'stunned them'. The flies 'believe in heaven'. Anthropomorphism has intensified throughout these stanzas to the point at which the flies can 'believe in heaven' even if the speaker cannot. The underlying anxiety about the imminence of the sea, however, suggests, as did 'nothing' and 'nothing' and 'nobody' earlier, that this is a psychic defence. The speaker, with evident relief, says: 'I do not think the sea will appear at all'.

In the next stanza, however, the speaker realises she is wrong: Though the surrounding hills are 'too green and sweet to have tasted salt', '[t]he only thing to come now is the sea'. The environment abruptly turns hostile, as '[f]rom between two hills a sudden wind funnels at me,/ Slapping its phantom laundry in my face'. When she walks beyond the hills, she sees they look out on 'nothing but a great space/ Of white and pewter lights, and a din like silversmiths/ Beating and beating at an intractable metal'. All the colour and fertility of nature are gone, as well as the pathetic fallacy that has linked it to the speaker's cheerful mood. There is only lifeless desolation, a 'nothing', a boundaryless 'great space' that is also a hard, metallic, 'intractable' blank.¹⁴¹ She cannot 'beat' her subjectivity into it; though it shines with 'white and pewter lights', it is a mirror that reflects back no image, not even an

¹⁴¹ Jung, discussing the archetypal symbolism of the sea, asserts: 'the maternal aspect of the sea [womb] contains nothing'. Carl Gustav Jung, *Symbols of Transformation: An Analysis of the Prelude to a case of Schizophrenia*, 5, 1956, 258-280 (267).

image of death.¹⁴² This is at least superficially an instance of what Britzolakis calls the ‘hostility’ of an aspect of nature to anthropomorphic identification. Yet the sea is the only part of the scene that affects the speaker in this way. The question we will seek to answer is why the sea in this case is the alien, ‘intractable’ element, by addressing the similarities between this and similarly impenetrable elements in other poems. Such elements appear much earlier in her poems about the Yorkshire landscape.

Plath visited West Yorkshire in June 1957 to meet Ted Hughes’ family, whose house was in the village of Heptonstall. The moorland village is located above a deep rocky gorge called Hardcastle Crags; as we will see, the gorge gave Plath the title of a poem that actually depicts Heptonstall and the surrounding countryside, but not the gorge itself. In the poem ‘Hardcastle Crags’, a third-person protagonist walks out at night through Heptonstall to the nearby farmland. The scene is described in terms of hardness and darkness: ‘Flintlike, her feet struck/ Such a racket of echoes from the steely street [...]’ The protagonist is unable to envision a ‘family-featured ghost’ in a ‘mist-wraith’ she sees, ‘[n]or did any word body with a name/ The blank mood she walked in’.

The poem’s argument here is not unlike that of ‘Tale of a Tub’, in which the speaker eschews fantasy and attempts to face the reality that ‘persists’; but now the protagonist is in a ‘blank mood’ that anticipates the anxious, depressive deadness expressed in much of Plath’s later poetry. Though Kathleen Nichols does not reference this poem in her discussion of what she calls ‘Cold War Gothic’, it partakes in part of the same sensibility. Here, as with the sea in ‘Blackberrying’, it is the *absence* of the pathetic fallacy that is telling. Pathetic fallacy, as discussed earlier, provides a way for subjectivity to find itself in the phenomena that surround it. This landscape renders such connection well-nigh impossible.¹⁴³ The poet concludes:

All the night gave her, in return
For the paltry gift of her bulk and the beat
Of her heart, was the humped indifferent iron
Of its hills, and its pastures bordered by black stone set

¹⁴² This is a sharp contrast with the ocean as she portrays it in her poems from the shore near her childhood home; even when shown as polluted or retrospectively haunted by the image of her dead father, it is accessible to her poetic subjectivity.

¹⁴³ Setha Low cites the work of Kay Milton, who ‘starts with James’s and Damasio’s formulations of emotion-feeling as a response to environmental stimuli. She reframes Damasio’s theory into an ecological model in which emotions and feeling operate between an organism and the environment. An ecological approach locates emotion in the relationship between the individual and the social and nonhuman environment and “does not privilege the social over the non-social.”’ Setha Low, *Spatializing Culture*, p. 149. Even though the ‘emotions and feelings’ experienced by the protagonist in this poem are in a sense ‘echoes’ from a closed environment, the poem is a good illustration of Milton’s point.

On black stone. (CP, ll. 26-30)

All 'indifferent' iron and black stone, nearly everything in the scene resists any engagement with the protagonist's imagination. In this petrified space of dark, mineral surfaces, even the animals have turned away from her: their 'broods and litters' are hidden in barns; the cows in the meadows kneel 'mute as boulders'; sheep 'drowse stoneward'; and the sleeping birds in the trees 'wear granite ruffs'.¹⁴⁴ The 'whole landscape loom[s] absolute' like 'the antique world' 'unaltered by eyes'. This harsh, terrifyingly lonely space threatens her with crushing and extinction.¹⁴⁵ The 'long wind' alone is

Enough to snuff the quick
Of her small heat out, but before the weight
Of stones and hills of stones could break
Her down to mere quartz grit in that stony light
She turned back. (CP, ll. 41-45)

However, there is one element that does yield to her metaphoric imagination. As she leaves behind her the 'dark, dwarfed cottages', she encounters 'fields and the incessant seethe of grasses/ Riding in the full/ Of the moon, manes to the wind,/ Tireless, tied, as a moon-bound sea/ Moves on its root'. The grass has zoömorphically become the manes of horses who are 'riding', both 'tireless' and 'tied' like the sea, which it also resembles (there is a pun on tied/tide here). The grass in the wind is alive in a way nothing else in the scene is, but it is not enough to allow the speaker to get an anthropomorphic poetic grip on the rest of the landscape. In this sense the poem is like a photographic negative of 'Blackberrying'; instead of a landscape generally amenable to the pathetic fallacy that contains one 'blank' impenetrability, 'Hardcastle Crag' presents a uniform, metallic or mineral resistance whose one exception is the grass, which in the wind becomes a herd of wild horses racing — but in fact going nowhere. Nonetheless, the grass is 'tireless', embodying a stubborn persistence of the living in the face of cold and dark.

'Wuthering Heights', the second topographical poem about the Yorkshire moors we will examine, was written considerably later, in 1961. The poem evidently describes a visit to

¹⁴⁴ In fact, the word 'stone' and its variations like 'stony' and 'stoneward' (not counting 'flint', 'boulders', and 'granite') occur seven times in a 45-line poem.

¹⁴⁵ Hargrove comments: "This literal landscape functions as a symbol both of nature's hostility and of its indifference to the human being, represented by the vulnerable, frail, and solitary protagonist. [...] The landscape is self-sufficient, powerful, and enormous in contrast to the weak individual, characterized by "pinch," "paltry," and "small." Nancy D. Hargrove, 'The Poems of 1957', in Harold Bloom, (ed.), *Bloom's Modern Critical Views: Sylvia Plath*, p. 81.

the site of Top Withens, believed to have been the model for the setting of Emily Brontë's eponymous novel. The speaker begins:

The horizons ring me like faggots,
Tilted and disparate, and always unstable.
Touched by a match, they might warm me
And their fine lines singe
The air to orange
Before the distances they pin evaporate,
Weighting the pale sky with a solider color.
But they only dissolve and dissolve
Like a series of promises, as I step forward. (*CP*, ll. 1-9)

There is no warmth, only instability. There is 'no life higher than the grasstops/ Or the hearts of sheep'. The wind, 'like destiny', is 'trying to funnel my heat away', the speaker says, and '[i]f I pay the roots of the heather/ Too close attention, they will invite me/ To whiten my bones among them'.¹⁴⁶ At the same time, though, the skyline appears to the speaker as a ring of highly flammable 'faggots' — bundles of sticks for kindling. This not only subliminally threatens a landscape-obliterating nuclear firestorm that will 'singe the air to orange' but, as Britzolakis notes, recalls the sticks being piled around the witch-speaker in 'For a Birthday'. The modern Gothic theme identified by Nichols is underlain by a traditional one, that of a witch-burning.¹⁴⁷ However, this potential warmth, manifest as 'a series of promises', is likewise denied her. An advance toward pathetic identification by 'step[ping] forward' fails.

The speaker next turns her attention to her close surroundings:

The sheep know where they are,
Browsing in their dirty wool-clouds,
Gray as the weather.
The black slots of their pupils take me in. (*CP* ll. 19-22)

The sheep are in fact partially anthropomorphised, as '[t]hey stand about in grandmotherly disguise,/ All wig curls and yellow teeth.' But behind the 'black slots' of their gaze is only a vacuum. This in turn reduces the speaker to '[a] thin, silly message'. She feels pointless. After passing sheep, the speaker arrives at the ruin, where 'limpid...solitudes... flee through my fingers'.

¹⁴⁶ This echoes 'Full Fathom Five', where the sea-god 'root[s] deep among knuckles, shinbones,/ Skulls'.

¹⁴⁷ Plath has performed a similar layering of traditional and modern or 'Cold War' Gothic in the witch-burning section of 'Poem for a Birthday', wherein the speaker is simultaneously a witch, a grain of rice in a saucepan on a modern gas cooker, and a Jew trying to hide from Nazis.

Hollow doorsteps go from grass to grass;
Lintel and sill have unhinged themselves.
Of people the air only
Remembers a few odd syllables.
It rehearses them moaningly:
Black stone, black stone. (*CP*, ll. 31-6)

‘People’ are barely even a memory here, but ‘the air’ continues to repeat two ‘odd syllables’: ‘black stone’. Nichols argues: ‘The literary tradition of the Gothic has been reduced to a few syllables blown in the wind — in other words, it is so fragmented or depleted that rather than providing meaningful hints, they are as impenetrable as “black stone” or the “darkness” of death that “terrifies” the “distracted” grass’.¹⁴⁸ Yet the phrase ‘black stone’ recurs three times in ‘Hardcastle Craggs’ to twice in ‘Wuthering Heights’. Is the rhetoric of this poem likewise enacting the demise of the traditional Gothic? Moreover, although both this poem and ‘Hardcastle Craggs’ meet Nichols’ criteria for Cold War Gothic landscape, the actual scene — an unhappy young woman alone and far from home on the cold, windy moor — is classic English Gothic.

Now the pathetic fallacy makes a partial return. ‘The grass’, ‘beating its head distractedly’, externalises the speaker’s loneliness, anxiety, and depression:

It is too delicate
For a life in such company;
Darkness terrifies it. (*CP*, ll. 40-42)

The lights of houses, far away, ‘[g]leam like small change’. There is no-one here to help the speaker. The speaker’s ‘delicate’ subjectivity is trapped, becoming so attenuated that while the pathetic fallacy appears at one level to involve only the grass, it is paradoxically infusing the described space not with its presence, but with its absence.¹⁴⁹

Britzolakis argues that in ‘Blackberrying’ and ‘Wuthering Heights’ ‘...the natural world takes on an appearance of active malignity which imperils the inwardness of the subject. Anthropomorphism becomes the plot of the poem, a plot involving a sinister conspiracy of natural objects against the self.’ But this reading seems too sweeping. In each poem there are elements of the speaker’s surroundings that are amenable to

¹⁴⁸ Kathleen Nichols, p. 331.

¹⁴⁹ Compare the treatment of the grass in this poem with its zoöomorphic description as the manes of horses in ‘Hardcastle Craggs’. The grass in ‘Wuthering Heights’ has moved, through prosopopeia, closer to the subjectivity of the speaker even as it loses descriptive specificity. Metaphor appears to have been serving as a bulwark between the poet’s subjectivity and the external world.

anthropomorphism, like the berries and the flies in ‘Blackberrying’ and the grass in ‘Wuthering Heights’, and are therefore in both an affective and etymological sense *sympathetic*. But in each case, part of the surrounding space, extending to the limits of vision — the sea, the horizons, or the nocturnal ‘black stone’ of the houses and ranging across the moors in ‘Hardcastle Crag’ — rejects anthropomorphism. No emotion but dread can be attached to these spaces, which share the qualities of being unbounded and featureless — ‘blank’.

While Plath’s poetic landscape in Devonshire is ‘haunted’ by trees and the moon rather than by the threat of extermination, figures of negativity and absence enter the poems’ metaphoric structures more and more. Why is this happening? In original Romanticism, the use of the pathetic fallacy was a masculine trope. The poets, like Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Shelley, who brought anthropomorphism, prosopopeia, and apostrophic address to natural phenomena or creatures into the center of their poetic practice, were projecting a confident male subjectivity onto nature and receiving its echo back. As men, it was easier for them to feel ‘at one’ with nature — which they often, moreover, gendered as feminine.¹⁵⁰ In part, this gendering was because patriarchal society had long subordinated women to the role of motherhood. This fact immediately problematised any such imaginative union of poetic subjectivity and nature for women, who at the start of the nineteenth century were already beginning a struggle to break out of these limitations. What was a triumph for male poets was for most female poets a surrender.

To Plath, writing most of 150 years after the Romantic era, traditional femininity was suffocating and, in particular, had circumscribed the freedom and vitiated the energy of most female poets. As Kathleen Lant explains, this led Plath to adopt the Anglo-American masculine poetic tradition as models for her earlier poetry, which indeed tends to be emotionally cool and precisely detailed.¹⁵¹ For these reasons, the pathetic fallacy, once Plath started to deploy it as a way of engaging with nature (which included her own female body) contained inherent contradictions. Not the least of these was the internal struggle, already extensively discussed in this study, between a commitment to success as a poet and fulfilment as a wife and mother. This meant that Plath’s poetic subjectivity was always already fractured.

¹⁵⁰ Britzolakis notes, speaking of M.H. Abrams’ *The Mirror and the Lamp*: ‘Abrams’s highly influential conception of ‘Natural Supernaturalism’ implies, as Mary Jacobus has pointed out, a ‘spousal union’ of mind and nature in which the mind is implicitly seen as the active, masculine partner and nature as the feminized object of perception.’ ‘Gothic Subjectivity’, p. 117.

¹⁵¹ Kathleen Lant, ‘The Big Strip Tease’, p. 630.

Her repeated efforts to establish a writerly subjectivity autonomous from male literary tradition, discussed earlier, began to succeed only in the last few months of her life, and at a terrible price — the paralysis and dissolution of the poetic subject. Part of this destructive process is the return of the repressed feminine in the form of a death-mother-muse, personified as the moon, whom we have already encountered in ‘The Detective’. The final part of this section on natural spaces in Plath’s work will deal with these issues as they appear in some late poetry. The poems addressed will be ‘The Moon and the Yew Tree’, ‘Elm’, ‘Winter Trees’, and ‘Sheep in Fog’.

‘The Moon and the Yew Tree’ begins with a series of flat declarative statements that define the ontological terms of the scene and the space it represents: ‘This is the light of the mind, cold and planetary./ The trees of the mind are black. The light is blue’. Both the trees and the light are ‘of the mind’ and therefore exist in an interzone between subjectivity and objectivity. The next line presages the religious themes (pagan versus Christian) that permeate the poem: ‘The grasses unload their griefs on my feet as if I were God [...]’. The ‘place’ is ‘separated from my house by a row of headstones’ — a churchyard.¹⁵² The space of the poem, open in its vertical axis, is restricted in the horizontal; the gaze can ascend to the sky, but can penetrate no further than the churchyard and the church interior. The space is floored by the grasses, which, like those in ‘Wuthering Heights’, are an anthropomorphism for suffering. In an indication of the stasis which seems to be the poem’s real subject, the speaker says: ‘I simply cannot see where there is to get to’. Indeed, during the remainder of the poem, the speaker does not move; she simply gazes. Again, she is bodiless. The next few lines offer a kind of explanation:

The moon is no door. It is a face in its own right,
White as a knuckle and terribly upset.
It drags the sea after it like a dark crime; it is quiet
With the O-gape of complete despair. (CP, ll. 8-11)

The yew tree of the poem’s title ‘points up’ toward the sky. ‘It has a Gothic shape’. The word ‘Gothic’ is originally a term for a style of late-medieval church architecture that emphasises tapering, pointed spires and arches intended to direct the gaze toward heaven; but the ‘spire’ of the yew points only to the moon. (The yew, moreover, is a traditional emblem of mourning,

¹⁵² As Nichols observes: ‘This contemporary poem interrogates the relevance of traditional Gothic to anything in the speaker’s life by undermining one of the most Gothicized settings in the entire Plath canon. First of all, the scene is set in a graveyard on a foggy night with the cold indifferent moon shining overhead [...]’ ‘The Cold War Gothic Poetry of Sylvia Plath’, p. 333.

and often planted by churchyards for that reason.) Not being a ‘door’, the moon provides no escape route from the arrested condition of the speaker. At the same time, it is ‘terribly upset’, in a state of tension manifested in being ‘white as a [clenched] knuckle’. The stasis, therefore, is anything but peaceful; it is being maintained with an effort. The moon’s face is an ‘O-gape of complete despair’ but silent. The implication is that the moon is trying not to scream.¹⁵³

The reason for the moon’s agony is that the heaven it occupies, like the one in ‘Sheep in Fog’, is ‘starless and fatherless’ — the divine paternal presence is gone from it. The speaker adds: ‘The moon is my mother. She is not sweet like Mary./ Her blue garments unloose small bats and owls’.¹⁵⁴ She imagines that ‘Inside the church, the saints will be all blue,/ Floating on their delicate feet over the cold pews [..]’ — a ghostly caricature of Catholic iconography. They are merely phantoms, powerless remnants, blue with cold, because the centre of their faith has abandoned them. The moon, the speaker’s true mother, however, ‘sees nothing of this’, being ‘bald and wild’. Her message is ‘blackness, blackness and silence’. The speaker’s maternity is therefore implicitly paradoxical: she is the daughter of a ‘bald’, barren, inhuman mother. While the moon is luminous, moreover, her message is ‘blackness’, like the ‘black stone’ refrain in ‘Hardcastle Craggs’ and ‘Wuthering Heights’.¹⁵⁵

As Nichols and Gill both note, there is no narrative in this poem, only description.¹⁵⁶ The speaker, for whom the moon is ‘mother’ but ‘no door’, is paralysed in this blue ‘light of the mind’ that illuminates nothing. The moon, the stars, and the saints, all wear blue, indicating that from the speaker’s point of view they are equally unhelpful. And above them is no divine providence, merely emptiness. This poem, despite the objects that fill it, is like ‘The Detective’ in being a description of a space, performed through a series of negations, that is centred on an absence — in this case, the absence or death of the Father-God. Without

¹⁵³ Given the importance of the moon as an image in both Romantic and Gothic writing, this somewhat undermines Nichols’ view of the poem as an implied critique of traditional Gothic.

¹⁵⁴ The robe of the Virgin Mary is also traditionally blue in colour.

¹⁵⁵ Romanticism, as in Wordsworth and Coleridge, often imbues Nature and landscape with immanent divinity. The Gothic landscape, through which the hero travels as a wanderer, is no longer divine but unsympathetic, abandoned, or menacing, so that the Romantic quest leads nowhere, as in some of Shelley’s mid-period poems like ‘Alastor’. Plath seems to be revising this traditional Gothic motif from a female viewpoint in which the absent God is also the lost real-life father. The poem may also be a subtle allegory of the problematic posed by Lant: the poet is attempting to create a fully female poetic subjectivity using the discourse of a masculine poetic tradition, for which the iconography of patriarchal Catholicism is a trope, and the poem is an account of her frustration.

¹⁵⁶ ‘This is both a literal conundrum (she cannot see the way), a figurative one (she is not sure where to turn for help) and an aesthetic one – some sort of creative dead end has been reached’. Jo Gill, *The Cambridge Introduction to Sylvia Plath*, p. 54.

this God, the moon as mother is sterile. This is the central terror of the poem, which links it back to 'Full Fathom Five' and 'The Colossus'.

In 'Elm', Plath uses prosopopeia to create a self-externalisation into the tree in question, which Hughes identifies as a large wych-elm that overshadowed their Devonshire house, Court Green. Plath could see the elm from the window of her study (she also locates the elm tree in 'Three Women': 'Dawn flowers in the great elm outside the house'). Structurally, the poem is a kind of inverse of 'The Applicant': the elm's statements and questions, which are mostly rhetorical, are in reply to an unheard human interlocutor. The space of the poem is that occupied by the elm and its immediate surroundings, the sky above it, and the soil beneath it, reaching down to an unspecified 'bottom'. By implication, this includes the space between the tree and the interlocutor. The elm begins:

I know the bottom, she says. I know it with my great tap root:
It is what you fear.
I do not fear it: I have been there. (CP, ll. 1-3)

The elm, evidently, has acquired knowledge of some depth of being, perhaps an extremity of despair. In several of the first few stanzas, the elm queries the interlocutor about the meaning she perceives in the sounds and movements of its leaves and branches in various weathers, from breeze to rain to gale: 'Is it the sea you hear in me,/ Its dissatisfactions ?/ Or the voice of nothing, that was your madness?' [...] 'Or shall I bring you the sound of poisons?'¹⁵⁷ 'Now I break up in pieces that fly about like clubs./ A wind of such violence/ Will tolerate no bystander: I must shriek'. The elm, then, knows the interlocutor well, including her 'dissatisfactions' linked to her loss of the paradisaic seashore of her childhood and her obsession with 'nothing' and the 'poison' of whiteness. It is then a disagreement with Britzolakis' contention as she claims that the speaker does not maintain any sort of relation with the 'dark thing'. She also tells the interlocutor that 'Love is a shadow' and mocks her longing for it: 'How you lie and cry after it/ Listen: these are its hooves: it has gone off, like a horse'.

In the second part of the poem, however, the elm expresses its own fears, which evidently mirror the interlocutor's. 'The moon, also, is merciless: she would drag me/ Cruelly, being barren./ Her radiance scathes me. Or perhaps I have caught her'. With this ambivalence, the elm here seems to allude to the instability of the pathetic fallacy by which the poet has inserted the moon as a polyvalent symbol into multiple places in different poems.

¹⁵⁷ The elm is offering to pass back to the interlocutor her own themes: the sea, nothing, madness, poisons.

Is the 'cruel, barren' moon 'dragging' the elm (or the poet)? Or has the moon been 'caught' in the tree's branches (or the poet's tropes)? 'How your bad dreams possess and endow me[...]' the elm says, further problematising and destabilising the prosopopoeic relationship.

Now, however, the elm expresses its own fear about what occupies its internal space: 'I am inhabited by a cry. [...] I am terrified by this dark thing/ That sleeps in me [...]'. 'Nightly, it flaps out/ Looking, with its hooks, for something to love' and '[a]ll day I feel its soft, feathery turnings', the reader is led to believe at first that the 'dark thing' is an owl.

But 'Clouds pass and disperse./ Are those the faces of love, those pale irretrievables?' Is it the tree or the interlocutor who asks this question? The figural relationship is breaking down. The elm (or the poet) answers: 'I am incapable of more knowledge'. But it remains anguished:

What is this, this face
So murderous in its strangle of branches?
Its snaky acids kiss.
It petrifies the will. (CP, ll. 38-41)

From being an owl, the 'dark thing' has become the gorgon Medusa, whose hair consisted of poisonous snakes, writhing like the elm's 'strangle of branches'. To see Medusa's face was to be turned to stone. Its poisons are 'the isolate, slow faults/ That kill, that kill, that kill'. In Jungian psychology, Medusa is one of the forms taken by the mother archetype when it becomes negative and destructive.¹⁵⁸ Her mother then is prosopopoeial in nature deferring any instances nature may offer. The interior space of the huge elm, defined by its spreading and interweaving branches, is haunted by this death-mother even as the imaginal or metaphoric space between the poet, familial space, and the tree, defined and bridged by prosopopeia, collapses like a black hole. The barren, stony moon-mother, itself a figure for the poet's despairing paralysis in 'The Moon and the Yew Tree', has metamorphosed from pale to dark. It is 'murderously' projecting both petrification and agonising dissolution by its venomous 'snaky acids' back onto the poet.

'Winter Trees' seems less dark than the previous two poems, and in some ways it is, but it is ultimately no more hopeful. Like many of Plath's earlier poems, it begins with painterly spatial description of the landscape, in which season, time of day, and weather are

¹⁵⁸ It is therefore no surprise that Plath's poem 'Medusa' is about her clingy mother, figured as a kind of octopus-jellyfish. Britzolakis comments: 'The haunting of the elm becomes a metaphor for the recovery of a terrifying maternal double which "petrifies the will"'. Christina Britzolakis, p. 121.

economically established: 'The wet dawn inks are doing their blue dissolve./ On their blotter of fog the trees/ Seem a botanical drawing — ' The speaker, who makes no appearance in the poem, imagines the interiors of the trees in section, punning on their annular rings that are growing like 'memories...A series of weddings'. This genders the trees as feminine as well as defining the space of the poem as both exterior and interior to the trees. In the next stanza, confirming this, the speaker expresses anger toward other women by comparing them to the trees, which '[know] neither abortions nor bitchery' and 'seed so easily'. Moreover, they 'taste the winds' and are 'waist-deep in history'. They are both fully present in the space-time described by the poem and also deeply embedded in its past, a measure of their stability and permanence in contrast to the transient lives of human women — presumably including the speaker. At this point, the speaker seems envious of the trees.

In the third stanza, the trees are seen as '[f]ull of wings, otherworldliness', in a positive version of the inhabitation of the elm by a sort of owl-gorgon-mother — these 'otherworldly' wings even momentarily suggest angels. But '[i]n this, they are Ledas'. This abrupt reference to the myth of Leda is startling, but has been subtly prepared by the gendering of the trees earlier. The speaker now addresses the 'mother of leaves and sweetness', asking plaintively: 'Who are these pietàs?' Even for readers of Plath accustomed to the syncretic mingling of mythologies in her late poetry, the introduction of classical Christian iconography at this point in the poem is startling. One connection between this image and what precedes it is the trope of motherhood. Are the 'Leda' trees now cradling the birds as their children? But the poem's last line tells us they are 'the shadows of ringdoves chanting, but easing nothing'. 'Ringdoves' refers back to the rings in the first stanza, and the dove is a symbol of the Holy Spirit, which appears at a later point in the Christological narrative, after the Resurrection. Unlike the Holy Spirit, though, these shadow-doves bring no relief from sorrow. Motherhood, it seems, has failed; the bare trees have neither leaves nor sweetness. 'Nothing' as the poem's final word gives it a bleakness that entirely fits the imagery that has preceded it.¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁹ Gill comments: 'Many of the images recall the key poems of *Ariel* and earlier; the omniscient but curiously powerless trees, rooted to the spot yet unable to act ('easing nothing', as the final line of 'Winter Trees' puts it), remind us of 'Elm'. Yet these winter trees earn the envy of the woman speaker who sees in their inanimation precisely the kind of distancing from humanity's problems that she desires. More properly, the trees on the horizon deliver a sense of perspective and proportion. It is not, in fact, that they remain dissociated from the human world, it is that they put private concerns ('abortions', 'bitchery') into their true context'. Jo Gill, *The Cambridge Introduction to Sylvia Plath*, p. 66.

Another, very late poem in which space conveys a comparable despair is 'Sheep in Fog'.¹⁶⁰ The scene is essentially the same as that in 'Ariel' — the speaker on a morning ride in the Devonshire countryside — but the mood and motion are almost inverted. Where 'Ariel' depicts an acceleration from 'stasis' through the 'substanceless blue/ Pour of tor and distances into a 'drive/ Into the red/ Eye, the cauldron of morning,' this poem proposes a journey without physical movement out of the world altogether. The poem begins with a scene drained of colour:

The hills step off into whiteness.
People or stars
Regard me sadly, I disappoint them.¹⁶¹ (CP, ll. 1-3)

The fog's whiteness negates any features of the landscape that would allow a precise sense of place. At the same time, it blurs distinctions between near and far, human and inhuman, 'people' and 'stars'. In an apostrophe that goes beyond initial address only to liken the sound of its walking to funeral tolling, the speaker addresses her mount: 'O slow/ Horse the colour of rust,/ Hooves, dolorous bells — ' Amid this pervasive whiteness, with its hint of decay in the rust-red of the horse, 'All morning the/ Morning has been blackening,/ A flower left out'. Where is this blackened morning? Inside the speaker, evidently. This prepares the reader for the devastating conclusion:

... the far
Fields melt my heart.

They threaten
To let me through to a heaven
Starless and fatherless, a dark water. (CP, ll. 11-5)

The phrasing here is subtle in its approach to space and motion. The 'far fields' have presumably 'stepped off into whiteness' like the hills; what melts the speaker's heart, then, is precisely their disappearance, their nothingness. This void 'threatens to let [her] through' — as if she had been half-trying to enter, but had been temporising, and this opening out of life

¹⁶⁰ Introducing this poem in a reading prepared for BBC radio, Plath said: 'In this poem, the speaker's horse is proceeding at a slow, cold walk down a hill of macadam to the stable at the bottom. It is December. It is foggy. In the fog there are sheep'. Notes in *CP*, p. 295.

¹⁶¹ Kendall comments: 'The implication must be that this disappointment will lead to the speaker being banished to a starless fatherless heaven, where the consolations of the *Ariel* mindscape are absent. The new concluding stanza contains one crucial detail: the speaker is 'threaten[ed]' with the prospect of being 'let [...] through to' this desolate heaven. No one forces her: the threat lies only in the possibility that she might be allowed, at last, to arrive where she wants to be'. Tim Kendall, 'From the Bottom of the Pool: Sylvia Plath's Last Poems' in *Bloom's Modern Critical Views: Sylvia Plath*, 147-165 (150). I would add that in this way, Plath's last poems are also reenactments of what Freud calls her 'family romance' — the story of the lost, adored/hated father and the mother who is both clingily inescapable and cold.

will draw her all the way. Also notable is the fact that this is the only motion actually described in the poem, even though Plath told the radio audience that the poem's speaker is riding slowly downhill to the stable — the sound of the 'slow' horse's hooves on the paved path sounds a death knell, unlike in earlier poems discussed in this section, but the speaker's viewpoint never changes. A seemingly final stasis, made fully explicit in 'Edge', has been reached. This is the extreme point of the merger of the attenuated, despairing subjectivity with an emptied, 'voided' landscape — a self-fading to an un-self in a space that is becoming an un-space.

Ironically, Plath wrote about nature and landscape, usually inhabited, more than about any other topic. Her earliest poetry is mostly about nature, because, as she said, as a young person she lacked 'interior experiences', and because she was a passionate observer of everything around her. In 1962, in an interview series with Peter Orr, Plath describes nature as the original inspiration behind her poetry:

Orr: What sort of thing did you write about when you began?

Plath: Nature, I think: birds, bees, spring, fall, and all those subjects which are absolute gifts to the person who doesn't have any interior experience to write about. I think the coming of spring; the stars overhead, the first snowfall and so on are gifts for a child, a young poet.¹⁶²

Moreover, she actively enjoyed nature throughout her life — swimming and playing by the sea, hiking, riding, and gardening. Her earlier poems about nature, which culminate in what has been called the 'transitional' work that went into *The Colossus*, often read like exercises. In these poems Plath makes sparing use of pathetic fallacy and focuses on meticulous description of what she observes, usually without much emotional engagement. The seashore poems examined in this section are exceptions to this rule, selected because they anticipate later developments in Plath's work, especially intense anxiety and Gothic horror.

As Plath's poetics develop, so too do anxieties related to and symbolised by the natural environment. The evolution of her attitude to landscape is shown in the poems she wrote about the Yorkshire moors, which increasingly appear as hostile and dehumanised, as if the human race has vanished or become extinct. This tendency intensifies in poems she wrote about the Devonshire countryside and its flora and fauna, notably about the trees near

¹⁶² Peter Orr and Sylvia Plath, 'A 1962 Sylvia Plath Interview with Peter Orr', *Modern American Poetry* (19 March 2008), p. 2.

her home. In the last poems, there is a movement, interrupted by some of the *Ariel* poems, from sinister or threatening elements of the surroundings to vacancy or void and stasis.

Conclusion: Where There Was to Get to

Sylvia Plath's accounts of space and place, once beyond her juvenile writings, become slowly but inexorably more and more *haunted*. Some of this haunting is by familial ghosts, notably that of her father; she also felt invaded by her mother's suffocating possessiveness and relentless ambition for her. Moreover, even before Hughes left her, his culturally imbued expectation that she performs the bulk of parental duties for their children on top of succeeding as a writer (a goal he sincerely encouraged) reinforced already internalised tension between these two ambitions. Finally, she was haunted by the horrors of World War II and the Holocaust and by Cold War-era political and ecological anxieties in the forms of fear of surveillance and of nuclear annihilation. These anxieties render the boundaries between domestic and exterior space porous at best. On this regard, Lisa Katz states that 'Plath's poetry generally features a rather routine transgression of presumed spatial limits on women's lives'.¹⁶³

By the time Plath was a young adult, one way she learned to cope with these conflicts and fears, which critics have likened to a kind of possession, was to deploy what she called her 'many masks', each of which corresponded to an aspect of how she wished to be perceived by others in order to further her ambitions. In her poetry, this tension is manifest in the Gothic tropes of doubling and splitting of the self. Plath's real-life behavior in this regard is describable in the terms posed by Erving Goffman as various 'presentations of self' — 'dramaturgical' attempts to guide the perceptions of others about oneself by assuming certain behaviours. Butler describes these selves as performances and links them in particular to the performance of *gender*. Linda McDowell, on the other hand, associates the feminine body and performance as essential factors to understand the body as space, stating, that 'Questions of the sexual body, its differential construction, regulation and presentation are absolutely central to an understanding of gender relations at every spatial scale'.¹⁶⁴ Like Sexton, as a consequence of her conflicted self-performance, and in response to the fragmentation and

¹⁶³ Lisa Katz, 'The space of motherhood Sylvia Plath's "Morning Song" and "Three Women"', *Journal of the Association for Research on Mothering* (2002) <<https://pi.library.yorku.ca/ojs/index.php/jarm/article/view/1869/0>> [accessed 20 August 2017].

¹⁶⁴ Linda McDowell, *Gender, Identity and Place: Understanding Feminist Geographies* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), p. 119.

objectification of the feminine body-image in consumer culture, Plath often figured the body itself as a doll or puppet.

This concept of the gendered self as everyday praxis bears an evident relation to theories of space as dynamic and shaped by the activity of those who move through it as developed by a range of theorists and researchers from Foucault and Lefebvre to Doreen Massey and Setha Low. Plath's poetry throughout her career manifests an intense awareness of the spaces its speakers or protagonists occupy, a characteristic she shares with her confessional contemporaries Lowell and Sexton, but in which she exceeds both of them. Her accounts of these spaces evolve from often emotionally detached observation to intense engagement via the pathetic fallacy. In this way, interior spaces, both domestic and clinical, are also often gendered. In keeping with the insights of cultural geographers who do not view subjectivity as confined within the body by a neutral, 'objective' space but rather see body and space as dialectical, mutually constitutive partners, Plath's use of these tropes is not 'hysterical' (as earlier critics from Bloom to Vendler have claimed) but is, rather, an attempt to unify her experiential reality, marked by profound irony. Moreover, as Christina Britzolakis argues, the protagonists in her later poems are unstable identities, constituted within the text as counterparts to aspects of the space they occupy and address and (to use Massey's term) the stories they are telling.

From her student days, Plath was fascinated by the idea of the Double as both myth and psychological archetype and studied it intensively. In her own life, she strove also to be double: both a working writer and a wife and mother. However, the era's coercive norms undermined Plath's own sense of an integrated identity, deepening her ambivalence about her domestic life as she confronted the hard facts of its gendered demands on her.

This anxious ambivalence is manifested in her descriptions of domestic spaces. Objects are the silent sentinels that monitor adherence to the cult of domesticity. It is likewise manifest in the poet's relationship to mirrors, which reinforce the sense of doubling and self-alienation. This estrangement is also manifest in the recurrent imagery of dolls and puppets and of others as animals such as mice, birds, or cows. Moreover, just as the supposed privacy of the American suburban domestic space was being breached by technologies of surveillance during the Cold War era, in post-war England both cramped urban conditions and the close quarters of village life made genuine privacy virtually impossible. Meanwhile, increasing turbulence in her marriage and its painful collapse intensified her estrangement from female domesticity, to the point at which she violently broke with the dominant culture's

mythological valorisation of this gendered space. Thereafter, her wifely persona progressively disappears from the domestic interior entirely, merging like Sexton's 'Housewife' into the house itself.¹⁶⁵

Plath's ambition as a writer was further complicated by the fact that she wanted to write in a way that went beyond the decorum of her immediate female predecessors. Plath's poetic career can be read as a continual adoption, development, and discarding of strategies for this exploration derived from poetic tradition, until in the last year and a half of her life she arrived at a 'voice' — an ensemble of techniques — that permitted her to engage with her subject matter in a way isomorphic with her own female experience. However, as her depression deepened, the central 'pathetic' tropes began to fail her and the anti-images of blankness, silence, and absence overwhelmed the textual spaces of her poetry as despair overwhelmed her life.

¹⁶⁵ The only late poems of which this is not true are the *Ariel* poems about her children, such as 'Nick and the Candlestick' and 'Balloons', written in the last weeks of her residence at Court Green and after she moved to London. These maternal relationships were evidently Plath's last affective anchor. Both Sexton's 'The Fortress' and Lowell's 'The Fall 1961' highlight the issue of domestic vulnerability and the blurred inside-outside boundaries.

Chapter Three

‘The Country of Comfort, Spanked into the Oxygens of Death’¹: A Grand Tour of Space in Anne Sexton’s Poetry

Introduction

Anne Sexton, née Harvey, was born in 1928 to well-educated parents, Ralph and Mary Gray Staples Harvey, in Newton, Massachusetts. When Anne Harvey was twenty, she married Alfred Muller Sexton II, known as ‘Kayo’. They had two daughters, Linda Gray and Joyce Ladd. Eight years into her marriage, Sexton tried to kill herself with barbiturates. Constant suicidal thoughts and depression motivated her to start psychotherapy. Her depression may have been partly caused by the fact that she was forced to leave college because of her marriage. In this respect, she followed the statistical trend cited by Betty Friedan in her seminal study, *The Feminine Mystique*:

[t]he proportion of women attending college in comparison with men dropped from 47 per cent in 1910 to 35 per cent in 1958. [...] By the mid-fifties, 60 per cent dropped out of college to marry, or because they were afraid too much education would be a marriage bar. [...] A new degree was instituted for the wives – ‘P.H.T’. (Putting Husband Through).²

Her withdrawal from higher education under this societal pressure was one reason why Sexton as an adult had low self-esteem and felt intellectually inadequate. These feelings of inadequacy, however, began much earlier.³ Sexton continued to be plagued by these feelings of inadequacy, despite numerous achievements: her successes were only a temporary and partial remedy for her low self-esteem. Sexton always wanted to escape from the social roles assigned to her, but at the same time she wanted her writing to meet with public acclaim and the approval of people whose opinions she valued.⁴

¹ Anne Sexton, *The Complete Poems of Anne Sexton* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2000), p. 392. Hereafter only line number(s) will appear in parentheses.

² Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: Dell, 1977), p. 12.

³ Nancy K. Miller states that Anne Sexton was convinced of her lack of intelligence from early childhood: ‘[h]er mother was the family intellectual, [...] it was her mother who was writing, and it was her mother who convinced her she was too stupid, and could never write or do anything but ride around Wellesley in her convertible and flirt with boys – and she did a lot of that’. Nancy K. Miller, ‘Remembering Anne Sexton: Maxine Kumin in Conversation with Diane Middlebrook,’ in *PMLA*, 127.2 (March 2012), pp. 292-300, p. 294.

⁴ Clare Pollard, ‘Her Kind: Anne Sexton, the Cold War and the idea of the housewife,’ *Critical Quarterly*, 48.1, 3 (Autumn 2006), pp. 1-24.

It was also Dr. Orne who suggested that Sexton begin writing poetry as part of her therapy. Sexton explained during one of the therapeutic sessions in 1957 that writing for her was not a choice, but rather an uneasy obligation. Poetry for Sexton was therapeutic, yet she did not believe that it offered a complete cure. She maintained that poetry must be ‘a shock to the senses. It should almost hurt’.⁵ Typically, Sexton’s poems are statements of a problem, or part of a quest, rather than analyses or solutions — though her emotional honesty and sharp perceptiveness allowed her to arrive at deep insights into the problems she wrote about.⁶ In fact, Sexton claimed that ‘[t]he poetry is often more advanced in terms of my unconscious than I am’.⁷ Writing poetry helped her to organise her perceptions of her life as well as providing it with a structure that allowed her to escape the constricting role of suburban housewife and mother while still delving into it in her poetry.

Sexton’s evolving identity is intimately linked in complex ways to the spaces she occupied. She wrote about her housewife-and-mother identity, which by the time she started writing seriously she had already begun to reject (or felt unable to fulfil), in the context of the domestic spaces of kitchen and bedroom. But as she reached back into her past to grasp the ways her family life had formed her, she meticulously mapped the spaces of her family home and their varied emotional connotations to comprehend how they had shaped her role as a daughter. To examine a third, emergent identity, ‘crazy lady’, she explored the institutional spaces of the psychiatric hospital. To manage the contradictions between these fragmentary identities, she invented another, the witch, who is at once rebel and mother. And in each of these personae she gravitated again and again to a specific location where she had felt freest, happiest, and most secure: the Atlantic shore.

As hardworking and meticulous as she was through most of her poetic career, Sexton did not confine herself to writing according to the ‘conventions’ in content any more than in form. Her poetry dealt with topics such as entrapment, alcoholism, addiction, menstruation, abortion, private marital relationships, adultery, masturbation, and (extensively) madness. Contemporary conservative critics, including those who praised her poetic gift, condemned Sexton’s writing about these subjects as a violation of the traditions and norms of both

⁵ Steven E. Colburn, ed., *No Evil Star: Selected Essays, Interviews, and Prose [of] Anne Sexton* (Ann Arbor: Michigan University Press, 1985), p. 72.

⁶ Maria O’Neill, *Sex and Selfhood in The Poetry of Anne Sexton: Many Sundry Wits Gathered Together*, eds. by S. G. Fernández-Corugedo, et. al. (A Coruña: University of A Coruña, 1996), p. 251.

⁷ Barbara Kevles, “The Art of Poetry: Anne Sexton” in *Anne Sexton: The Artists and Her Critics*, ed. by J.D. McClatchy (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978), pp. 3-29, p. 5.

literary and feminine decorum.⁸ Bravely, Sexton marked herself as a nonconformist by insisting on telling her truth (even when fictionalized, as she admitted it sometimes was) and she knew there was a price to be paid for that. Since ‘every memory is a memory of place’, Sexton’s references to a wide variety of events, people, and experiences almost always allude to the settings in which they occur, whether literal or figurative (as in the interior spaces of the body or the psyche).⁹ Jo Gill argues convincingly that to understand Sexton’s engagement with her past experiences, ‘it is also necessary and fruitful, to consider its relation to place and space’.¹⁰ Later, Gill points out that ‘what has not yet been proposed is a critical analysis of Sexton’s poetry that situates it spatially’.¹¹ It is my intention to undertake such an analysis.

In the first section below Anne Sexton’s ambivalent revolt against domestic space and the roles assigned to her within it will be discussed. This will focus on close readings of ‘The Farmer’s Wife’, ‘The House’, ‘Self in 1958’, ‘Housewife’, and ‘Her Kind’, but also address other relevant poems contextually. Critical perspectives deployed in this examination include contemporary feminist criticism and consideration of the cogent social and political contexts of suburban American life in the 1950s and 1960s. In the second section, Sexton’s hospital poems will be examined from the standpoint of her fundamental conception of these institutional sites as spaces of control and surveillance. The primary focus here will be on ‘Noon Walk on the Asylum Lawn,’ ‘You, Doctor Martin’ from *To Bedlam and Part Way Back* (1960), and ‘Flee on Your Donkey’ from *All My Pretty Ones* (1962) with reference to other relevant hospital poems, including ‘Ring the Bells’ and ‘Lullaby’. The main theoretical framework used in this section will be the work of Michel Foucault (*The Birth of the Clinic* (1973), and *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1977)) with particular attention to his concepts of ‘the medical gaze’ and ‘panopticism’. The third and final section will examine Sexton’s poetic approach to the outdoors and semi-public space: urban or semi-urban environments, and the space of the beach or shore, *liminal* sites which represents a boundary zone between one state or world and another — often, as in Lowell, between the past and the present, but sometimes also between chaos and order or between life and death.

⁸ James Dickey, writing in the *New York Times Book Review*, excoriated the poems in *All My Pretty Ones*, saying ‘[i]t would be hard to find a writer who dwells more insistently on the pathetic and disgusting aspects of bodily experience. ...’. Cited in *CP* (Introduction), p. xx. Sexton’s mentor John Holmes was one of many who severely censured Sexton’s work.

⁹ Seta M. Low, *Spatializing Culture: The Ethnography of Space and Place*, p. 77.

¹⁰ Jo Gill, ‘The House of Herself: Reading Place and Space in the Poetry of Anne Sexton’, in *This Business of Words: Reassessing Anne Sexton*, ed. by Amanda Golden (Gainesville, FL: University of Florida Press, 2016), 25-58, p. 25.

¹¹ Jo Gill, ‘The House of Herself’, p. 26.

The first part of this section will consist of close readings of ‘Flight’, and ‘Crossing the Atlantic’ whilst the second will centre on ‘The Exorcists’, ‘The Kite’, ‘February 4th’, and, considered together, ‘There You Were’ and ‘In Excelsis’. The principal theoretical optic utilised here will be works from the field of cultural geography.

Haunted by Houses: Home, Disillusion, and the Wifely Body

With her passage into adulthood, Sexton succumbed to the allure of domesticity, fleeing college with her future husband. She tried very hard to be both a good wife and a housewife. She entirely enclosed herself in her domestic space, performing all of the customary domestic chores, and aspired to be what her husband wanted — the model post-war housewife who ‘learned life [...] answered the phone,/ served cocktails as a wife/ should’ (‘The Double Image’). Less than three months after her marriage in 1948, living in Weston, MA, a Boston suburb, Sexton wrote a letter to her mother, claiming what an enthusiastic housewife she was:

I have been MONSTROUSLY busy cooking, washing . . . cleaning, [...] Doing all my little wifely duties [. . .] My heart’s desire is an electric ‘mix-master’ [. . .] My cooking has taken a slight turn for the better. This morning we had coffee cake with our breakfast [. . .] Tonight I made pineapple.¹²

Sexton is fascinated by the dream kitchen: she does not yet describe any other part of the house — though undoubtedly her washing and cleaning were not confined to the kitchen. In ‘Live,’ Sexton merrily announces that she is an ‘empress’ who ‘wear[s] an apron’. Doing the domestic chores was not at first a burden for Sexton, who seemed immensely proud of fulfilling the role of domestic ‘empress’. With a hint of ironic amusement, she notes that her ‘heart’s desire is an electric ‘mix-master’. Again, this is in keeping with the consumerist imperative of the period that women fill their houses with the latest domestic appliances.¹³

Soon enough, however, Sexton’s perception of domestic space starts to alter, incorporating discontented impulses within depictions of her marriage and questioning the previously paradigmatic role of the suburban housewife. Sexton’s full immersion in this role

¹² Anne Sexton, *Anne Sexton: A Self-Portrait in Letters*, ed. by Linda Gray Sexton and Lois Ames (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1977), p. 19. Sexton’s ‘Welcome Morning’ is an exemplary illustration of her enthusiasm for domesticity and simultaneously shows how the anthropomorphised kitchen appliances correspond with her: ‘the spoon and the chair that cry/ ‘hello there, Anne.’ Conversely, in ‘The Death Baby’, the visual portrayal of the exotic transformation of the appliances, food, and (aquatic) animals reveals the speaker’s repulsion from the domestic space.

¹³ Clare Pollard, ‘Her Kind: Anne Sexton, the Cold War and the Idea of the Housewife,’ *Critical Quarterly*, 48 (3), Autumn 2006, pp. 1-24 (1). It was reported that Sexton’s kitchen was all-electric (this is an allusion to the Cold War ‘Kitchen Debate’). In ‘Welcome Morning,’ Sexton announces that the Joy [of domesticity] that isn’t shared, I’ve heard,/ dies young’.

lasted only six years, from 1948 to 1954. She occupied it intermittently thereafter — certainly as a mother to her two daughters — but no longer exclusively since she had a burgeoning career in poetry. Sexton increasingly depicts the suburban home and its surroundings as a space of alienation in which she presents herself as a neglected ‘doll in a museum case’ as in ‘Cinderella,’ or in a box in a toyshop as ‘the perfect housewife, as the advertised woman in the perfect little ticky tacky suburb’, as she put it.¹⁴ By sardonically calling herself ‘the advertised woman’, she is again aligning the housewife role with consumerism, so much so that the role itself becomes a commodity. Similar portrayals of the suburban house and neighbourhood recur in Sexton’s poetry, where they are typically seen as spaces of entrapment for the housewife.

‘The Farmer’s Wife’ is about a relationship between a husband, ostensibly a farmer, and his discontented wife, but nothing in the poem other than its first few lines ties the home or the relationship to actual farm life. The eponymous farmer’s wife is a persona, a mask for the poet herself, and not a very deceptive one. The relationship is described as ‘the hodge porridge/ of their country lust’ (ll. 1-2). The neologism here conveys the impression that mere ‘country lust’ has brought together an ill-assorted pair. The poet continues:

they name just ten years now
that she has been his habit;
as again tonight he’ll say
honey bunch let’s go (ll. 6-9)

The husband means ‘go to bed’, where he wants to enjoy the comfortable routine of sex. For the speaker, the bedroom is not ‘the innermost sanctum of the home’ as Nelson describes it.¹⁵ Instead, it is a space of male pleasure and power. ‘[H]oney bunch’ in this context is perfunctory, even demeaning — just part of the routine. Sexton is depicting through these characters male dominance in contemporary marriage and the ways in which the approach of many men to sexual intimacy leaves women unsatisfied:

and she will not say how there
must be more to living
than this brief bright bridge
of the raucous bed or even
the slow braille touch of him
like a heavy god grown light [...] (ll. 10-15)

¹⁴ Jo Gill, ‘Anne Sexton’s Poetics of the Suburbs’ in *Health and the Modern Home*, ed. by Mark Jackson (London: Routledge, 2007), pp. 62-83 (78).

¹⁵ Deborah Nelson, *Pursuing Privacy in Cold War America*, p. 95.

The sex itself, it seems, is at least transiently enjoyable to the wife; the farmer, clearly, is not brutish or incompetent as a lover. The problem lies elsewhere as the 'brief bright bridge' is further described as 'that old pantomime of love'. Sexual desire is more or less satisfied, but emotionally it is only a 'pantomime'. The bedroom is transformed into a darkened theatre where these characters perform their roles in mime.¹⁶ The sex 'leaves her still alone'.¹⁷

In a curious turn of phrase, next, she is 'built back again at last'. 'Built' implies that her post-coital aloneness rebuilds ('builds back') a kind of autonomy — in a way that suggests, with 'at last', that this is something she also desires or needs. Enclosed in the space of the bedroom, her subjectivity has created walls that somehow fulfil her or at least provide a semblance of support. Her 'mind's apart from him, living/ her own self in her own words'. Yet this reaffirmed subjectivity is not free: the wife finds herself 'hating the sweat of the house/ they keep when they finally lie/ each in separate dreams'. Sexton's perception of intimate space here is intimately connected to her perception of her husband's presence through the use of masculine pronouns. But the expression also suggests that the 'house' here is a synecdoche for the marriage itself, and for all the work ('sweat') the wife puts into maintaining it — as well, perhaps, as the psychic 'flavour', stale and even pungent, of their limited relationship. The figure hints at the blending of house-space and wife-body that appears in later poems. The poet continues: 'and then how she watches him,/ still strong in the blowzy bag/of his usual sleep while/ her young years bungle past.' The wife watches her husband 'strong' in his 'usual sleep' while she lies awake feeling that her life is going by unfulfilled. The image is of the years passing as the couple is caught in a repetitious, dreary life and the wife's youth is wasted. Their domestic space has turned into a 'battle[field] of hope against experience, where sex becomes a life-draining habit leaving both partners together but alone'.¹⁸ In the final lines, the wife fantasises:

[...] she wishes him cripple, or poet,
or even lonely, or sometimes,
better, my lover, dead. (ll. 30-32)

¹⁶ Maria O'Neill, p. 253.

¹⁷ Although Sexton sometimes refers to the bedroom as a sacred site, the 'marriage temple,' there are many other instances in which repulsion from marriage and particularly from the bedroom space appears in her poetry. Sexton once disclosed that, after having a relationship with another man while she was still married, she forced herself to have sex with Kayo. As with the husband's routine, unfelt endearment in 'The Farmer's Wife,' Sexton describes the husband's flirting words before love-making as 'nonsense'.

¹⁸ Maria O'Neill, pp. 251-2.

In the bedroom, where she ought to be able to feel an authentic self through intimate communion, the wife instead feels alienated and achieves some sense of authenticity only by being ‘built back’ into solitude, a room within a room where she fantasises about gaining power over her husband, leaving him, transforming him, or becoming a widow. As we have noted, though, this estrangement took time to develop. In more directly autobiographical poems, Sexton charts its growth alongside her estrangement from the wifely role itself.

A very late poem of extreme alienation from the domestic space is ‘The Lost Lie’, which appeared posthumously in the ‘Divorce Papers’ section of *45 Mercy Street* (1976). The speaker experiences her body as simultaneously putrifying and petrifying as she contemplates her home in the wake of the collapse of her marriage:

There is rust in my mouth,
the stain of an old kiss.
And my eyes are turning purple,
my mouth is glue
and my hands are two stones [...]
Still I feel no pity for these oddities,
in fact the feeling is one of hatred. (ll. 1-11)

In her bitterness, the speaker views the formerly conjugal space as a house of horrors:

But today I roam a dead house,
a frozen kitchen, a bedroom
like a gas chamber.
The bed itself is an operating table
where my dreams slice me into pieces. (ll. 20-4)

The kitchen, a place of warmth, is now ‘frozen’ as if the refrigerator had anthropomorphically expanded to fill it. In strong echoes of Plath’s *Cold War* and *Holocaust Gothic*, the bedroom has become a death camp, a suffocating site of extermination. In the most chilling image, a recapitulation of the imagery of bodily fragmentation so strongly present in both her own and Plath’s poetry from 1960-63, the speaker’s dreams vivisect her. Unlike those earlier poems, however, ‘The Lost Lie’ is not a critique of male domination or a constricting, alienating female role. It is simply a cry of pain and loss. The intensity of this grief and anger over the failure of a marriage, however, suggests that Sexton really did find moments of happiness and fulfilment there as well as constriction.

Although Sexton’s portrayal of the domestic sphere typically alludes to confinement and alienation, entrapment and oppression, there are poems in which this view is reversed and the home is experienced as a space of safety, pleasure, and nurture. In view of Sexton’s

ability to express these conflicts and complexities in her work, Betty Friedan argued that ‘Sexton explored the difficulties of women in suburbia more subtly’ than any other writer.¹⁹ Gill contends that ‘[a]t a broad level, the suburban home operated not only as a prison [...] but also as a sanctuary or haven, into which she could safely retreat from the dangers of urban life’.²⁰ ‘December 16th’ recalls in a series of ‘Once upon a time’ anaphoras a list of three different domestic environments: the first from her sister’s childhood in New York, the second from her own childhood in the Wellesley house, and the third from the cabin she and her husband had just bought, where they had a ‘power party’ after he hooked up the electricity. The poem ends on a note of sexual and domestic bliss, though not without some ambivalence, expressed by the poet calling her husband ‘my louse’ as well as ‘my love’:

I made gingham curtains. We nailed up your Doctoral degree.
We turned the stove on twice. Oh my love, oh my louse,
We make our own electricity while we play house. (ll. 15-17)

Note, though, that these happy descriptions of houses are indeed almost always looking backward in nostalgia: seldom are they about the present. In ‘February 11th’ the poet longs for her first suburban house in Newton, Massachusetts:

A first home.
A place to take a first baby to.
Railroad tracks
outside the kitchen
window and the good-morning choo-choo. (ll. 8-12)

Here the home is depicted as a place of liveliness, even when the couple has a drunken ‘Bloody Mary Fight’:

Oh baby bunting,
a first house, [...]
and I was happy there (ll. 27-30)

The poet is no longer happy, evidently, but she remembers happiness in that place of beginnings, of babies and kittens and ‘tricycles hanging from the chandeliers’.²¹

¹⁹ Clare Pollard, p. 9.

²⁰ Mark Jackson, *Health and the Modern Home* (London: Routledge, 2007), p. 9. In ‘Those Times,’ the house is perceived as a ‘graveyard full of dolls’ that is her family. Her movement is restricted, as if she lives in a prison: ‘I was locked in my room all day behind a gate, / a prison cell./ I was the exile’.

²¹ Sexton keeps moving from place to another like a nomadic Native American who pitches her tepee wherever it suits her. This nostalgia for warm, lively mess is reminiscent of Lowell’s ‘The Old Flame’.

In some other poems, the house is likewise depicted as a place of intimacy that offers a measure of comfort. In ‘The Fortress’, the speaker describes the house as a sanctuary; but as Gill notes, the poem was written a few months after the catastrophic events of the Bay of Pigs in 1962, as the threat of nuclear war loomed during the Cuban Missile Crisis.²² The poem begins with the speaker talking, perhaps only in her own mind, to her half-sleeping daughter, Linda. They are lying together under the duvet on their ‘square bed’. Sexton talks about her joy in having her daughter back now that she has returned from hospital, but acknowledges her anxieties about the world outside. Wistfully but soberly, she admits that she cannot offer her daughter any sort of safety beyond what they have together in that moment as ‘life is not in [her] hands’ (which recalls Lowell’s similar confession of vulnerability and defencelessness: ‘A father’s no shield/ for his child’). Sexton addresses her daughter, declaring that: ‘life with its terrible changes /will take you, bombs or glands’. Gill argues that ‘preoccupation with the fluid and mutable boundaries between the outside and inside, between private and public’ was among the highest concerns of suburban women.²³ The vulnerability of the inside-outside boundaries creates a feeling that safety is unattainable ‘when the world goes wild’. She tells her daughter: ‘I cannot promise that you will get your wish’. The only promise she is able to give is to be with her and offer her love. This promise, however, is one that was evidently not honoured in her own childhood home, which for her was the subject of recurrent bad dreams.

In fact, Sexton evidently began to experience feelings of anxiety and alienation in the home long before she became a housewife — in fact, this can be traced back to her own childhood and adolescence. In an especially bitter poem, ‘The House’, she describes a recurring dream of her teenage years at home:

In dreams
the same bad dream goes on.
Like some gigantic German toy
the house has been rebuilt
upon its kelly-green lawn.
The same dreadful set,
the same family of orange and pink faces
carved and dressed up like puppets
who wait for their jaws to open and shut. (ll. 1-9)

²² Jo Gill, “‘The House of Herself’, p. 37.

²³ Jo Gill, *The Poetics of the American Suburbs* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p. 178.

These ‘puppets’ in their ‘gigantic German toy’ of a stage-set doll’s house are precursors to Sexton’s own frequent comparisons of herself to a doll.²⁴ The ‘toy’ — later a ‘machine’ — is presumably German first of all because German toymakers and mechanics were famous for their elaborate clockwork automata. But the mere word ‘German’ to someone of Sexton’s generation, who grew up in the shadow of the Second World War, carried an undertone of menace, especially when paired with the word ‘gigantic’. The toy house, as Sexton calls it, sits on an artificial, garish ‘kelly-green lawn’. The family members are transformed into doll-figures similar to puppets, and their suburban home is transmuted into a theatre.

In her dream, the poet is ascending the stairs past the bedrooms of her aunt, her mother, and her father:

[she] turns here at the hall
by the diamonds that she’ll never earn
and the bender that she kissed last night (ll. 89-91)

Her parents, in this dream-vision, are reduced to synecdoches of themselves. They become markers for the spaces in the dream that they occupied in the actual house in waking life. But after ascending to her bedroom in the penthouse, the teenage self whom Sexton remembers in the dream ‘slam[s] the door on all the years she’ll have to live through... [...] to slam the door on all the days she’ll stay the same/ and never ask why and never think who to ask,/ to slam the door and rip off her orange blouse./ *Father, father, I wish I were dead*’. The action of repeatedly slamming the door recalls Nora’s famous gesture in Henrik Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House* (to which we shall turn below). The poem concludes:

All day long the house sits
larger than Russia,
gleaming like a cured hide in the sun.²⁵
All day long the machine waits: rooms,
stairs, carpets, furniture, people —
those people who stand at the open windows like objects
waiting to topple. (ll. 109-115)

Sexton’s childhood home has become not just a puppet theatre but a ‘machine’, a kind of mechanical diorama, whose clockwork inhabitants are ‘objects/ waiting to topple’. It is a

²⁴ I believe that the ‘German toy’ which came out about this time was the original version of the Barbie doll, originally referred to as a Lillie doll. However, this doll was not a toy, it was a sex toy, designed with men in the war during WW II.

²⁵ A cured hide is a large piece of preserved dead skin — in this case, the dead ‘skin’ or wholeness of the family, preserved as the house itself.

machine, presumably, because the whole puppet-play is performed mechanically again and again in the poet's 'bad dreams'. At the same time, it is 'larger than Russia' — another image of menace in the Cold War era and associated with a sense of vast and terrifying space.²⁶ Sexton's vision of the invasion of privacy within the home eerily anticipates America's current preoccupation with 'homeland security,' suggesting that now the collective fetishism of the home has been metaphorically expanded to envelop the entire nation. It waits 'all day long' for her to re-enter in dreams.

While her family home recurred in her dreams as a mechanical puppet theatre in which the puppet occupants re-enact the same drama over and over, Sexton continually describes herself as a dehumanised doll, even more passive than the puppets, which are moved into a semblance of life by their operators; a doll simply stays in the position in which it has been placed. The metaphor of female confinement within a doll-house was of course not new: it can be dated back at least to Henrik Ibsen's 1879 play *A Doll's House*, written specifically as a critique of women's confinement by domesticity. The play was and remains famous — in the early twenty-first century it was the most performed drama worldwide — and Sexton would certainly have known of it. But Sexton's use of the metaphor has at least as much to do with the fetishisation of the perfect wife in the 1950s and early 1960s as an object among other beautiful objects, the crown of a man's possessions. Again, this imagery resembles, even more closely than similar figures in Plath's poetry, the 'Stepford Wife' in Ira Levin's satirical novel. It seems plausible that Levin may have encountered Sexton's poetry, as around the time he wrote the book Sexton was nationally renowned. He may also have read the later poetry of Sylvia Plath — by this time a cultural legend, a decade after her own suicide — which as we have already discussed is littered with images of mannequins and doll parts.

Sexton's own poetry is filled with references to women's dehumanisation using the doll/doll's house metaphor. The doll's house, understood of course not as the physical home so much as the social relationships and ideology enacted within it, gives rise to the doll, understood as the fulfilled and dutifully performed role — and vice versa.²⁷ As Setha Low

²⁶ Waters states that 'Sexton localizes and domesticates the spectre of an excessive, previously remote, violence and gestures towards its inscription upon — the gendered ideologies that govern private space.' Melanie Jane Waters, 'Those Times': Politics, Culture and Confession in the Poetry of Anne Sexton' (Unpublished Doctoral Thesis, Newcastle University, 2007), p. 229.

²⁷ In a letter to Dr. Orne, Sexton states that 'I am nothing, if not an actress off the stage.' Cited in Middlebrook, p. 62.

puts it: ‘The space occupied by the body, and the perception and experience of that space contracts and expands in relationship to a person’s emotions and state of mind, sense of self, social relations, and cultural predispositions’.²⁸ Through the dolls, Sexton creates a miniature world of her own, a model world in grotesque. In this regard, Bachelard states that ‘the miniature deploys the dimensions of the universe. Once more, large is contained in small’.²⁹ In Sexton’s crudely literal terms, Bachelard’s statement seems illogical, as it is hard to imagine the large, multi-storey suburban house (as she describes it in ‘Young’) which she (Sexton) dreams about as a miniature house. In most of her poem, she neither revolts against entrapment nor welcomes it. As a doll, she merely describes her double entrapment in her body and the (doll’s) house (‘I dressed’ which is ‘a sawed-off body’ as if she is ‘somebody’s doll’, Sexton writes in ‘Live’).³⁰ She submits, satisfied to be crammed into a ‘shoebox’. The poet or the synthetic speaking doll (as will be discussed below) reveals her entrapment not only in her man-made body and her diminutive house, but in her entire surroundings. The doll’s world is limited to the doll’s house; all spaces in this poem underscore imprisonment of a profoundly carceral experience.

Though Sexton was deeply anxious about the threat of nuclear war, she does not associate it in her poems, as Plath does, with modern American domesticity. She stages her own version of the Cold War ‘Kitchen Debate’, which took place in the same year as the poem’s subject, in one of her most savage indictments of that domesticity and the feminine role that was inseparable from it. The debate in this poem, ‘Self in 1958’, is between the doll-wife (and the society that ‘placed’ her in the doll’s-house home) and the actual self — or, to be more precise, all the aspects of ‘Self’ that could not fit into the doll-wife role.³¹ In ‘Self in 1958’ (a poem evidently begun in that year, early in her career, and only finished in 1965, according to a footnote by Sexton herself) she portrays herself as a ‘plaster doll’ living in a doll’s house:

What is reality?
I am a plaster doll; I pose

²⁸ Setha M. Low, *Spatializing Culture: The Ethnography of Space and Place* (New York: Routledge, 2016), p. 96.

²⁹ Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, p. 157.

³⁰ Sexton refers to the spatial containment of the house as ‘exile,’ ‘prison cell’ and ‘grotesque’, and finally as a ‘closet’ where the speaker ‘rehearsed’ her life.

³¹ However, in ‘The Death Baby: Dreams,’ Sexton describes a dream of her older sister’s from when she was a baby: ‘[s]omeone put her in the refrigerator/ and she turned as hard as a popsicle’. The inside of the fridge becomes a menacing synecdoche of the kitchen, and by extension of a domestic space that has become polluted with anger and recrimination.

with eyes that cut open without landfall or nightfall
upon some shellacked and grinning person,
eyes that open, blue, steel, and close. (ll. 1-5)

From the very first, the speaker indicates that she is ontologically insecure: a creature of artifice who does not know what is real. As a doll made from fragile plaster, she is simply ‘pos[ing] — as a human woman, a housewife. She asks, ironically: ‘Am I approximately an I. Magnin transplant?’ (I. Magnin was an up-market department store chain which specializes in women’s clothing and accessories.) Here the doll situates herself socioeconomically as upper-middle-class; but as a ‘transplant’ she might in fact be a mannequin (which in those days were in fact made of painted plaster on a wooden armature). She has ‘hair, black angel,/ black-angel-stuffing to comb,/ nylon legs, luminous arms/ and some advertised clothes’. Her hair seems to be branded as ‘black angel’ and is also ‘stuffing’ that can be combed, perhaps by her owner.³² Her clothes have been ‘advertised’; she is a mannequin, as Sexton was a model and her clothes are not a manifestation of an authentic identity, but mere commodities. She continues with a description of her toy home:

I live in a doll’s house
with four chairs,
a counterfeit table, a flat roof
and a big front door. (ll. 11-4)

The ‘big front door’ is presumably the entire front of the house, which on a doll’s house hinges open — a sardonic joke. This is a parody of the suburban house, which was meant to be in part a spectacle for the admiration of the neighbours (see the discussion of ‘Housewife’, below, for more on this point). Then the doll says: ‘Many have come to such a small crossroad’. The doll’s house has become a place where a decision must be made — perhaps the decision as to whether to accept this doll’s life or reject it.

There is an iron bed,
(Life enlarges, life takes aim)
a cardboard floor,
windows that flash open on someone’s city,
and little more. (ll. 16-20)

The description continues straightforwardly except for the interjection ‘(Life enlarges, life takes aim)’. While oblique, this parenthesis suggests that ‘life’ — meaning real existence outside the metaphor — forces itself into the doll’s existence via the bed, nearly always a

³² According to Kumin, ‘she had briefly modelled for the Hart Agency in Boston’ (A Foreword to *CP*), p. xix.

symbol for sex, including both desire and the absence or failure of desire. The bed, though, is iron, in harmony with the ‘blue steel’ of the doll’s eyes. This doll’s house is not a comforting space of feminine fantasy. It is bare and unforgiving with a floor of cardboard, which also suggests cheapness and fakeness. The windows ‘flash open on someone’s city’ — not the speaker’s.

‘Someone’ now becomes an active presence in the poem and in the doll’s existence — a person, sex and age unstated, who ‘plays with me,/ plants me in the all-electric kitchen’. As discussed earlier, the all-electric kitchen was a 1950s consumer dream — no more coal stove, no more icebox as in the kitchens with which most of Sexton’s generation had grown up. Now the spotless suburban kitchen would feature a humming refrigerator and the glowing elements of an electric stove. The doll here positions herself as an anxious novice in the role ‘someone’ has assigned her where she is ‘planted’, like a small doll whose base fits into a slot in the doll-house floor. She continues:

Someone pretends with me —
I am walled in solid by their noise —
or puts me upon their straight bed.
They think I am me! (ll. 21-4)

The doll performs perfunctorily according to *someone* else’s commands. ‘Someone’ is now ‘pretending’ that the doll is a real woman, but has ‘walled [her] in solid’ like the heroine in a Gothic novel, trapping her even more completely with ‘their noise’, which may simply be chatter. The deliberate refusal to assign a gender to ‘someone’ is noteworthy here; it suggests that ‘someone’ is not merely her husband, but a personification of all the social forces and individuals in her life including her mother, who were pressuring her into the housewife role. ‘Someone’ can also choose to put her on their ‘straight bed’ — an adjective that echoes the archaic ‘strait’ meaning narrow, with a more distant echo of ‘straitjacket’. The image suggests a rigid, unbending figure laid flat on a toy bed like a corpse — or a sex doll. The doll exclaims in apparent (or pretended) surprise: ‘They think I am me!’ And if her being is inauthentic, so is the apparent affection or caring of ‘someone’: ‘Their warmth? Their warmth is not a friend!/ They pry my mouth for their cups of gin/ and their stale bread’. The doll now reaffirms her sense of unreality:

What is reality
to this synthetic doll
who should smile, who should shift gears,
should spring the doors open in a wholesome disorder,
and have no evidence of ruin or fears? (ll. 31-5)

The doll knows what she ‘should’ do in order to simulate the woman she is supposed to be and that ‘someone’ pretends she is. Not only should she smile, but she should ‘shift gears’ — a clichéd metaphor for changing one’s emotional or behavioural pattern — and ‘spring the doors open’ in authentic-seeming liveliness, at the same time concealing negative emotions and psychological damage (‘ruin’). Together, ‘gears’ and ‘spring’ suggest a clockwork toy in a mechanical house like the one in ‘House’, that wound up will go through the motions. The doll concludes, miserably:

But I would cry,
rooted into the wall that
was once my mother,
if I could remember how
and if I had the tears. (ll. 36-40)

If the doll ceased to be ‘planted in the all-electric kitchen’, she could be ‘rooted in the wall’³³ that her mother formed in her life — presumably a psychic wall that was both nurturance and blockage. And in that way, she could cry — if she still knew how, and ‘if [she] had the tears’ — which as a doll, she lacks. To live in a doll’s house is ‘to live a paradox — to dwell entirely within the walls of the home, which, though completely divorced from the public, is neither private nor individual’.³⁴ Not only the carefully anonymous ‘someone’ but *anyone* can see the doll in her kitchen or in ‘someone’s’ bed, pretending to be a human woman, simply by opening the ‘large front door’. It is as if the poet lives in an actual house with a front wall made entirely of glass, with no curtains and thus simultaneously experiences isolation and an acute sense of exposure and loss of privacy.

This feeling of being always under scrutiny is a thread running through much of Sexton’s poetry and key to her suturing of domestic and custodial spaces. Gerard Rey Lico states that women are confined in the domestic space through a ‘sequence of spaces at the greatest distance from the public sphere’.³⁵ This protects her as property: ‘she [woman] is

³³ Using ‘plant’ and ‘root,’ the speaker may indirectly allude to the counterpoint between nature and technological imagery. Here, the garden in the machine inverts Leo Marx’s trope from *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal* (1964).

³⁴ Deborah Nelson, *Pursuing Privacy in Cold War America*, p. 88.

³⁵ Gerard Rey Lico, ‘Architecture and Sexuality: The Politics of Gendered Space,’ (2001), *Humanities Diliman* 2.1, 30-44 (37).

controlled by being bounded and positioned at the end of a series of spaces, usually the kitchen or the bedroom, away from the predatory gaze of other men'.³⁶

In the domestic context, though, dolls have multiple meanings for Sexton. In 'The Errand', for instance, Sexton addresses her husband about the failure of their relationship:

I've been going right on, page by page,
since we last kissed, two long dolls in a cage,
two hunger-mongers throwing a myth in and out [...] (ll. 1-3)

Here, the poet and her husband begin as dolls in the 'cage' of domesticity. The couple are 'hunger-mongers', promoting their appetites to each other, 'throwing... in and out' the myth of their domestic happiness. This echoes an earlier poem, 'Cinderella':

Cinderella and the prince
lived, they say, happily ever after,
like two dolls in a museum case[...] (ll. 96-98)

The image of two dolls together, then, is of an illusory happiness, one frozen in time. When the illusion of eternity breaks, the 'happily ever after' of the fairy-tale ending, the couple awakens to the reality that they are in a cage, a 'museum case', and that they have been 'throwing a myth in and out'.

Dolls, then, are not merely metaphors for Sexton, but symbols capable of conveying multiple meanings. They variously represent the performance of gendered roles, the constraining of the female body, or its imaginative fragmentation in advertising. Always, however, the connotation is of artificiality and pretense. And almost always, they suggest containment or confinement and powerlessness, whether in a home or a hospital. The doll implies the doll's house, the display-case. The extreme of objectification, however, goes beyond the doll and doll's house to the woman actually *becoming* her house.

The social experience of space inflects gender and vice versa. Nancy Duncan states that feminists 'are presently exploring the far-reaching implications of a new epistemological viewpoint based on the idea of knowledge as embodied, engendered, and embedded in the material of context and space'.³⁷ This 'epistemological' view is especially applicable to Sexton's short but shocking poem 'Housewife', quoted below in its entirety:

³⁶ Gerard Rey Lico, 'Architecture and Sexuality', p. 32.

³⁷ Nancy Duncan, ed., *Body Space: Destabilizing Geographies of Gender and Sexuality* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 1. Quoting Duncan, Gill meticulously expounds the meaning of 'The "knowledge" in Sexton's

Some women marry houses.
 It's another kind of skin; it has a heart,
 a mouth, a liver and bowel movements.
 The walls are permanent and pink.
 See how she sits on her knees all day,
 faithfully washing herself down.
 Men enter by force, drawn back like Jonah
 into their fleshy mothers.
 A woman is her mother.
 That's the main thing. (ll. 1-10)

To the extent that women identified with their domestic duties, they internalised their houses, even as they were defined by being inside them, functioning as the 'heart' of their home. The first line of 'Housewife' depicts such women as having passively accepted the role assigned to them. In rejecting the role, Sexton 'marries' the image of the house to the image of the female body.

What does it mean for a woman to marry a house? Presumably, the woman marries in order to gain the house as a space to make her own, to fulfil the housewifely destiny that the culture has set out for her, and thereby gain a kind of power, as the poem succinctly expresses. In this sense, the domestic space works as a mechanism of representation that is axiomatically dictated by the culture's constructed identity of women. The designation of the house space in this poem reveals it as a living architecture — presumably female. The label 'housewife' is thus literalised in a play on words. But the house becomes for her 'another kind of skin', substituting its own organs for hers, including 'bowel movements'. 'Its walls are permanent and pink', Sexton writes, alluding simultaneously to the symbolic colour of femininity, the tone of (Caucasian) skin, and openings into the female body like the mouth or the vulva. But in marrying the house and becoming, in the words of Genesis 2:21–24, 'one flesh', the housewife is subjugated to it. The house is *feminine*, an analogue for the female body, and thus a sort of substitution of femininity (embodied in walls, floors, utilities, appliances, and so forth) for biological femaleness. Sexton sees this change of identity as monstrous. That is why she creates a grotesque image of the house as a living organism with bodily functions. In children's textbooks of the time, the home serves as an illustrative metaphor for a description of the living organism (Figure 3).

poem... [it] is the knowledge of suffering and of coercion; the female subject is trapped within rather than liberated by her environment', 'The House of Herself', p. 51.

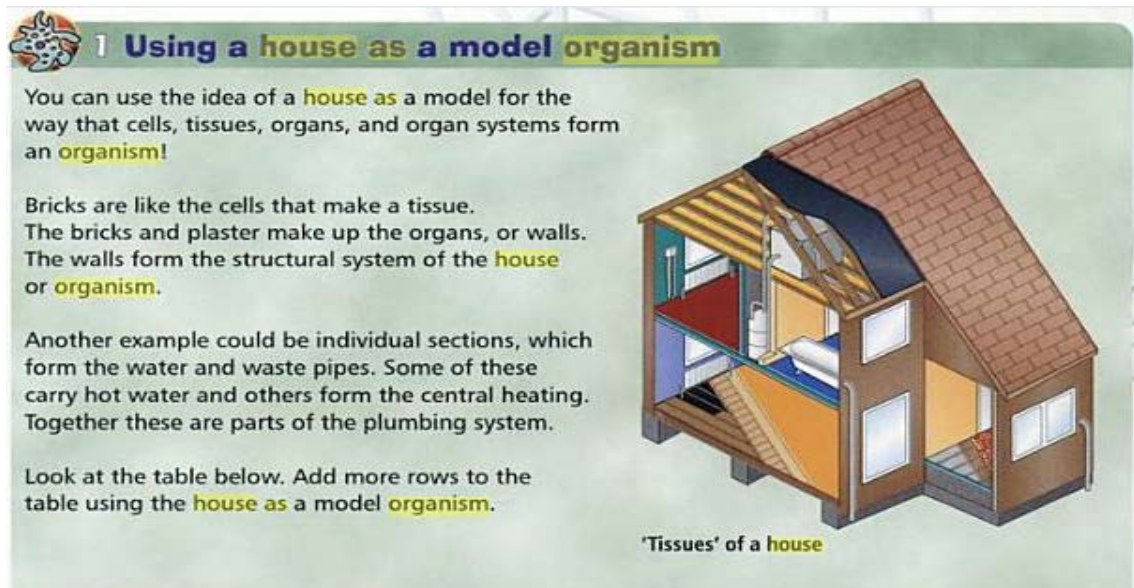


Figure 3: House as a Model Organism³⁸

The emblematic annexation of the female body to the architecture of the house establishes the idea that the house is a body (and vice versa). In this regard, Gerard Rey A. Lico states that the ‘architectural body’ of the house is humanised through the ‘analogical relationship between human body and architecture [which] ensures the transference of natural beauty into architecture.’³⁹ The bricks (as in the construction of Sexton’s body in ‘Mr Mine’: ‘He is building a city, a city of flesh’) are the cells, water pipes and electric cables are blood vessels and nerves (as seen in the image above). Sexton’s somatic analogy between the architecture of the house with its parts and human body permeates the poem (‘the body itself, working like a city’, Sexton writes in ‘Hurry Up Please it’s Time’).⁴⁰

Extending the metaphor, the ‘mouth’ could stand for the dining room or the kitchen (sites of cooking for and feeding of the family); the ‘heart’ is likely the master bedroom, where the wife performs the work of giving her husband sexual pleasure; the ‘liver’ may be the laundry room, where she washes and dries the family’s clothes. The final image in this line is an organ’s function rather than an organ: bowel becomes ‘bowel movement’. Following the same metaphoric logic, this may represent not only cleaning the toilets, but dealing with all the household waste.

³⁸ Using a *House as a Model Organism: ‘Tissues’ of a house* in *Can Stock Photo* <<https://www.canstockphoto.com/house-under-construction-1248023.html>> [accessed 23 June 2015]

³⁹ Gerard Rey Lico, ‘Architecture and Sexuality: The Politics of Gendered Space,’ p. 32.

⁴⁰ Despite the disgust expressed in ‘Housewife’, Sexton uses the body-as-house metaphor more positively in other poems, notably in ‘There You Were’: ‘[t]he house of my body has spoken’.

The house then becomes the site of a kind of repeated rape: '[m]en enter by force'. Sexton reduces the house to a space of conflict between women's compulsory identification and men's forced entrance, thus equating the invasion of the house with that of the wife's bodily boundaries. This equation implicitly contrasts the myth of 'mass-produced' domestic privacy with the reality of gender inequality: because of this inequality, men, the poet implies, *always and necessarily* enter the house/wife by force. At the same time, though, we should note that the men are being swallowed, 'drawn back like Jonah/ into their fleshy mothers'. This is a self-consciously Freudian trope: the house/wife, by becoming the house, simultaneously becomes the image of domesticity for the men who 'enter' her space, which for them is a maternal image.⁴¹ The poet concludes with emphasis: 'A woman *is* her mother./ That's the main thing'. Superficially, this is just a restatement of the truism that children gradually become their own parents in middle age. Sexton in this line expresses matrophobia — the fear of becoming one's mother.⁴² But by placing these lines in the context of this poem, and particularly the Oedipal image of the men 'drawn back... into their fleshy mothers', Sexton adds an ironic twist: women 'are' their mothers because this is what men demand of them — mothering. The house/wife invites men into herself by becoming the image of their desire, the wife/mommy, who is both nurturing and seductive. As the house substitutes itself for actual female embodiment, it also becomes a mother-space. Recall that in 'Self in 1958' the doll-woman concludes with the image of being 'rooted in the wall' that her mother built.⁴³ The speaker's skin is another wall. The metaphorical linkage of the body to the architecture of the house continues to include not only the womb, skin, or flesh but the whole body: '[e]ach cell has a life'.⁴⁴

In 'Housewife', Sexton depicts the house as a kind of trap for both the wife and 'men'; and yet in her own life, she utilised the home — and the image of the housewife she once was — to further her own poetic ambitions. Homes, in their most practical sense, after all, bring security from outside dangers and provide the possibility of privacy. Her daughter Linda Gray Sexton, in *Anne Sexton: A Self-Portrait in Letters*, writes that Sexton once

⁴¹ Freud wrote of the maternal body that 'there is no other place of which one can say with so much certainty that one has already been there' (*The Interpretation of Dreams*, p. 40).

⁴² Deborah D. Rogers, *The Matrophobic Gothic and its Legacy: Sacrificing Mothers in the Novel and in Popular Culture* (New York: Peter Lang, 2007), p. 88. The definition originates with the poet Lynn Sukenick (1938-1995) and developed later by Adrienne Rich (1929-2012).

⁴³ This image of immurement also recalls the nightmares of being immured — bricked up behind a wall — that recur in the Gothic tales of Edgar Allan Poe, such as 'The Black Cat', in which a woman's corpse is concealed in a wall, or 'The Cask of Amontillado', in which the narrator treats an enemy of his in the same way.

⁴⁴ There may be a pun here on 'prison cell'.

declared that she ‘feel[s] today at home at home. You remember I said I didn’t feel at home in life [...] I’ve stayed home hiding from the world. Hiding is different from being “at home”’.⁴⁵

The quasi-religious value placed in the 1950s and 1960s on inanimate objects such as home appliances and homes themselves — a time when consumerism was ascendant, with available credit and relatively cheap manufactured goods — is extended and inverted by Sexton.⁴⁶ Marcuse suggested that consumers from this era found their ‘soul’ in goods like the automobile and split-level home, as if the goods themselves were more human than the consumers.⁴⁷ Marx defined the fetishism of commodities as what occurs when the products of human labour are estranged from their producers by becoming commodities for sale and ‘relations between people take on the fantastical form of relations between things’ as if there is a kind of spirituality around the commodity fetish.⁴⁸ Similarly, Marcuse suggested that consumers recognise themselves within commodities — identifying their humanity with mass produced goods. In *One Dimensional Man*, he writes, ‘this civilization transforms the object world into an extension of man’s mind and body [...] people recognize themselves in their commodities; they find their souls in their automobile, hi-fi set, split-level home, kitchen equipment.’⁴⁹ This is in part what Sexton’s poetry explores. If women are supposed to find their ‘soul’ within goods in the home (and subsequently remain trapped there), then Sexton’s poetry tries to complicate that association, to find alternate identities not tied to domesticity.

As the wife is objectified by becoming one with the house — or by becoming a domestic doll, as in ‘Self in 1958’ — the house itself acquires human-like qualities by absorbing the wife’s continual labour, which in turn is largely invisible to the husband and other men who are ‘drawn’ to it. They see the appliances — washer and dryer, cooker, blender, and so forth — that are in fact the instruments of her labour (and the products of the labour of workers in factories) as if they were what actually did the work, since that is how they were presented in advertising.

⁴⁵ Anne Sexton, *Anne Sexton: A Self Portrait in Letters*, ed. by Linda Gray Sexton and Lois Ames (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1977), p. 123.

⁴⁶ Quasi-religious value is defined by Max Weber as ‘probability of obeying a definitive command’. Hartmut Böhme, *Fetishism and Culture: A Different Theory of Modernity* (Boston: Walter de Gruyter, 2014), p. 212.

⁴⁷ Herbert Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1964), p. 38.

⁴⁸ Karl Marx, *Capital I* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1977), p. 30.

⁴⁹ Herbert Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man*, p. 13.

The negative account of domestic space in Sexton's poetry, then, is at least partly driven by 'the cold-war political propaganda that advertised [the domestic space] as the pinnacle of American democratic confidence and figure[s] both the ultimate impossibility of privacy' and 'the various myths that plague the concept of the suburban'.⁵⁰ Besides the panoptic surveillance of the FBI and local police 'Red Squads', suburban housewives were also subject to another kind of surveillance: that of other wives with whom they socialised while their husbands were at work. Although she is actually in private, because she is now so identified with the house, the woman acts as though she is exposed to the public (or neighbourhood) eye: '[s]ee how she sits on her knees all day/ faithfully washing herself down'. Though Sexton outlined the boundaries between domestic and public space, she admitted, in Deborah Nelson's words 'the uselessness of and the impossibility of maintaining a rigid division between the two' in the age of surveillance.⁵¹ The transgression of the private boundary of the house extends to her body, and therefore 'the only private space left to her is that which is within the body. All spaces external to the body have become public spaces'.⁵² This summarises how the poet expresses her relationship to her own body as object or dwelling, and how it is connected to contemporary social and ideological constructions of gender.

As she is merged with the house, the woman is therefore both publicly exposed and muzzled. But Sexton, perceiving this merger, refuses to be silent. Sexton herself transgresses the boundaries between public and private space in the opposite direction. Since she cannot hide from an oppressive society in the supposedly private space of the home, she decides to give voice to all the unspoken, 'public secrets' of women's lives in America in a perverse but also productive double-bind. But by doing so, she places herself outside the norms of middle-class, mid-century white femininity.

⁵⁰ Nicole Moore, *Censorship and the Limits of the Literary: A Global View* (New York: Bloomsbury USA, 2015), p. 167. Sexton's poetry resists 'the rhetoric of America's glamorised suburban home and life: 'the institution of the home is rendered a paradoxical space, incapable of security [...]', p. 176.

⁵¹ Deborah Nelson, 'Penetrating Privacy: Confessional Poetry and the Surveillance Society', in *Homemaking: Women Writers and the Politics and Poetics of Home*, (ed.), Catherine Wiley, Fiona R Barnes, p. 104.

⁵² Deborah Nelson, *Pursuing Privacy in Cold War America*, p. 98. Nelson's notion of the internal organs as private is challenged by Sexton's 'Death of the Father' in which the speaker probes the 'stranger' 'to take the you out of the me' as his acidic 'sperm' dissolves her womb. No space is left uninvaded. Sexton's body parts are reified: 'My tears became two glass beads./ My mouth stiffened into a dumb howl'.

In 'Her Kind', Sexton confronts these social norms boldly by violating public/private boundaries and rejecting the traditional perceptions of housewife and mother.⁵³ It is notable that the titles she gave earlier drafts of this much-revised poem were first 'Night Voice on a Broomstick' and then 'Witch'.⁵⁴ The first draft was written in 1957 in a workshop, but it took Sexton two years of recurrent revision — an entire week's work in total, she said — to bring it to its final state.⁵⁵ Other than poetic form itself, the main difference between these drafts is the variety of imagined spaces in which the events occur. In the final version of this poem, the setting is no longer limited to one place — Boston's suburbs, where she grew up and was actually living. The main speaker flies over houses, travels to caves in the woods, and finally is driven across the countryside in a cart.

Living alone in the suburbs when her husband was away for long periods, Sexton became more and more aware of the gap between her subjectivity and society's requirements: 'I fear I am not myself here in my suburban housewife role'.⁵⁶ In this poem, the poet assumes the persona of a witch: an icon who is 'one of the very few images of independent female power [...]; to gain freedom, modern women needed, therefore, to become witches again, and could be so simply by being female, untamed, angry, joyous and immortal'.⁵⁷ This is an instance of how Sexton uses personae and imagined spaces to express her rejection of the socially determined self she attempted unsuccessfully to perform. Sexton, with her subversion of domesticity and her insistence that the roles of housewife and mother were not enough for women, but that many women also still crave domesticity, adopted the witch as a persona that could accommodate this complexity. As she declared in a 1968 interview:

Until I was twenty-eight I had a kind of buried self who didn't know she could do anything but make white sauce and diaper babies. I didn't know I had any creative depths. I was a victim of the American Dream, the bourgeois, middle-class dream. All

⁵³ In 1957-8, Sexton was still trying to fulfil her role as wife and mother but was already deeply unhappy, having been hospitalized once. We know from her biographers and from her psychiatrist that she was tormented by guilt over her inability to meet the familial obligations imposed by society—and by her own previous life choices. One possible response to this was to valorise the negative image of the 'bad woman'—the bad mother, the unfaithful wife, the 'crazy lady', all unfit to carry out her social and familial duty.

⁵⁴ Diane Wood Middlebrook, *Anne Sexton: A Biography* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1991). Quoted in 'On 'Her Kind,' *Modern American Poetry*. URL: http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/s_z/sexton/herkind.htm [accessed 10 July 2015].

⁵⁵ Diane Wood Middlebrook, p. 113. Quoted in 'On 'Her Kind,' *Modern American Poetry*. < http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/s_z/sexton/herkind.htm > [accessed 17 December 2016].

⁵⁶ Quoted in Jo Gill, 'Anne Sexton's Poetics of the Suburbs,' in *Health and the Modern Home*, ed. by Mark Jackson (London: Routledge, 2007), pp. 62-83 (63).

⁵⁷ Willem de Blecourt, Ronald Hutton, and Jean La Fontaine, eds., *Witchcraft and Magic in Europe, Volume 6: The Twentieth Century*, 6.1 (London: The Athlone Press, 1999), p. 61.

I wanted was a little piece of life, to be married, to have children. [...] But one can't build white picket fences to keep nightmares out.⁵⁸

'Her Kind' is a complex protest against that insufficiency — successively a fantasy of escape, a transformation of the everyday into magical form, and an expression of defiance toward social sanction for nonconformity. Sexton used to open every reading with it. The poem consists of three seven-line stanzas. Middlebrook states that "'Her Kind'" contains its own perfect reader, its own namesake, "I".⁵⁹

The poet begins: 'I have gone out, a possessed witch,/ haunting the black air, braver at night [...]'. The first four words, the main clause of the sentence, immediately establish the speaker's refusal to stay within the domestic boundaries. She is claiming the open space of the night, and the sky itself, as available to her. She continues: 'dreaming evil, I have done my hitch/ over the plain houses, light by light:' (Note that the persona is only 'dreaming' evil, not committing it.) The speaker then claims: 'I have done my hitch'. The expression 'to do [one's] hitch' means to complete a specified period of military service. This adds an odd overtone of duty to the bold expression of 'evil' in the earlier lines and somewhat undercuts the exhilaration of flying and the slight scorn expressed by describing the houses as 'plain'. However, this confident assertion is more dramatically undercut by the speaker's self-description in the next line: 'lonely thing, twelve-fingered, out of mind'.⁶⁰

With 'A woman like that is not a woman, quite' the speaker has claimed freedom to fly through the 'black air' of night, a boundless space that is also lonely, and where she is unrecognised, invisible, 'out of mind'. To have these abilities and qualities is to 'not quite' meet the definition of the feminine gender — an acknowledgment that this definition is oppressive. Then comes the admission: 'I have found the warm caves in the woods'. There seems to be continuity of persona from the first stanza; the witch-speaker has travelled through the air to a space outside human settlement, the forest, which in fairy-tales always signifies wildness and potential danger. But there are 'warm caves' in the woods for the speaker to inhabit. She fills them with 'skillets, carvings, shelves, closets, silks, innumerable goods' — an apparently random list that includes kitchen implements, decorative objects, and fixtures for storage'.

⁵⁸ Barbara Kevles, 'The Art of Poetry: Anne Sexton' in *Anne Sexton: The Artists and Her Critics*, ed. by J. D. McClatchy (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978), (3-29), p. 3.

⁵⁹ Diane Wood Middlebrook, *Anne Sexton: A Biography*, pp. 114-115.

⁶⁰ Having six fingers on each hand was believed to be a sure mark of being a witch.

Not content with all this furnishing and decorating, the speaker tells us that she has been ‘fix[ing] the suppers for the worms and the elves’. As a one-time housewife, she continues to be a nurturer, unable to escape fully from the role. The worms and the elves are now her family. Clearly, she has brought her complaints and habits from the suburban ‘plain house’ into the magical caves. ‘A woman like that is misunderstood,’ she comments dryly.

Yet Sexton’s ‘caves in the woods’ are in a remote place and under the ground. They are not situated in the suburban neighborhood, where everyone knows each other and every housewife wonders what others might say. Unlike the suburban home, where the boundaries of private and public space are blurred, the caves in the woods are absolutely private. The witch accumulates ‘innumerable goods’ in the caves, but these are mainly things with aesthetic or magical rather than functional significance. Pollard sees the ‘worms and the elves’ whom the witch feeds as children.⁶¹ The cave in the woods is thus both a contrast to and an allegory of the suburban house.

Tamar R. Lehigh states that ‘Sexton inverted the distinction between public and private and challenged gender norms’.⁶² In ‘Her Kind,’ the witch is a metaphor for any woman who transgresses the domestic boundaries: Sexton figures her as an outcast of society, marginalised and ‘misunderstood’.⁶³ Erica Jong argues that Sexton’s ‘indifference to traditional concepts of privacy was part of what made it possible for her to write the way she did, to track the nightmare down into its lair, to ride her witch’s broom into pure metaphor’.⁶⁴

In ‘Her Kind’ Sexton allegorises her own problems with social expectations of women of her time and class and imagines an escape by depicting herself as a witch who can fly to the pagan sanctuary of caves in the woods. But she is too honest and self-aware to turn this fantasy into a mere dream of escape. Rather, she uses it as a mirror to reflect the actual spaces she inhabits and her conflicted attachment to what she does in them. Although the image of flying over the houses gives an impression that the speaker is empowered by her dark art, Sexton uses this metaphor to address the limitations, difficulty and pain of the creative process outside of her domestic role. Melanie Waters claims that ‘Sexton sets out to

⁶¹ Clare Pollard, ‘*Her Kind*: Anne Sexton, the Cold War and the idea of the housewife,’ *Critical Quarterly*, 48.3, (Autumn 2006), pp. 1-24 (4).

⁶² Tamar R. Lehigh, ‘To Bedlam and Part Way Back: Anne Sexton, Her Therapy Tapes, and the Meaning of Privacy’, *UCLA Women’s LJ* 2 (1992), 165-221 (169).

⁶³ Nicole Yox, Woman as Witch in Anne Sexton’s ‘Her Kind.’ URL: http://www.centerforfutureconsciousness.com/pdf_files/2008_Essays/Woman%20as%20Witch%20in%20Anne%20Sexton.pdf Retrieved on 20/04/15.

⁶⁴ Tamar R. Lehigh, ‘To Bedlam and Part Way Back: Anne Sexton, Her Therapy Tapes, and the Meaning of Privacy’, p. 196.

process the political through the filter of (fictionalised) personal experience’⁶⁵ For this reason, the spatial politics of this poem manifest the same ‘inconsistency’ concerning the imaginary space of the cave as does her portrayal of the suburban house. The cave she escapes to is different from the house she leaves behind, but has similar contours and complaints. At first she envisions the witch’s life as an escape, but soon discovers that it is only another prison.

Sexton, already alienated from domesticity by her familial experience, increasingly rejected the Cold War-era domesticity that depended on the self-suppression and subordination of women; even as she had largely escaped it, her poetry continued to protest it. Depicting her younger self as a doll in a doll’s house, she went on to cut more and more deeply into the conventions of middle-class marriage, motherhood, and femininity, arriving at the brilliantly compressed dissection of all three that is ‘Housewife’. She was honest enough to express her ambivalence and describe her own periods of domestic happiness as wife and mother in tender lyrics. Haunted by houses, she built her own house from poetry — the home to which she could always return. But there was a real space to which she was *compelled* to return, over and over again, one that for Sexton was both a kind of home and its antipode: the mental hospital.

The Ambivalent Space of the Hospital and the Reversible Panoptical Machine

Sexton’s experience of clinical institutions was not limited to her recurrent manic-depressive episodes, suicide attempts, and supposedly schizophrenic bouts, but also included her hospitalisation for a broken hip in November 1966 and inpatient treatment for alcohol addiction. Sexton wrote many poems while actually in hospital, and it is crucial to understanding her perception of the hospital space that her journey of writing poetry for therapeutic purposes began there.

In her first breakdown in 1954, Sexton was initially diagnosed with postpartum depression, though her psychiatrist later noted that this diagnosis had been superficial. Three years after giving birth to her first daughter, Linda (1953), Sexton was admitted to Westwood Lodge, a private neuropsychiatric hospital, for her first psychological diagnosis, after she had overdosed on sleeping pills. Eventually, she gave her mother-in-law temporary custody of her children, who were then cared for by their grandmothers.⁶⁶ Spending three weeks at Westwood Lodge seems to have changed her perception of mental hospitals, particularly

⁶⁵ Waters, p. 24. One may take for example ‘Hansel and Gretel’, ‘After Auschwitz’ and ‘Loving the Killer’.

⁶⁶ Paula M. Salvio, *Teacher of Weird Abundance* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2012), p. 96.

when she began treatment with Dr. Martin Orne, who had already collected information about Sexton from Sexton's family psychiatric and alcoholic history; both Sexton's father and her great-aunt had been Dr. Orne's patients.⁶⁷ His preliminary diagnosis, though, concluded with 'no apparent answers to the roots of Sexton's misery'.⁶⁸ Nonetheless, it was Orne who repeatedly encouraged Sexton to write poetry as a potentially therapeutic release and self-discovery. He also constantly reassured her — against the constantly reiterated opinion of her parents — that she was intelligent and talented. Her family's long history with Dr. Orne's mother gave Sexton a sense of familiarity in the patient-doctor relationship. This relationship soon bore fruit, becoming a turning point in Sexton's life. From this point, a sense of intimacy between the doctor and his patient recurs in her poetry, though (as we shall see) she was also aware and at times wary of his power over her life. Having a close and relatively trusted relationship with an authority figure within the confining space of the hospital seems to have reinforced her feeling of 'belonging' there, having discovered that other people — and especially other women — suffered from psychological illnesses. Sexton, in an interview for *Paris Review* in 1972, tells Barbara Kevles how she perceived the hospital:

When I first got sick and became a displaced person, I thought I was quite alone, but when I went into the mental hospital, I found I wasn't, that there were other people like me. It made me feel better — more real, sane. I felt, 'These are my people'.⁶⁹

This attitude, however, did not last. By the time she wrote 'Flee on Your Donkey', Sexton was weary of the mental hospital, as she was of her own illness, and had a very negative view of her fellow patients, as we will see below.

Sexton's fluctuant feelings concerning open and closed spaces are seen in her respective agoraphobic and claustrophobic impulses. The agoraphobe feels both trapped and reassured by enclosure, which in Sexton is an emotional conflict parallel to, but distinct from, bipolar disorder. Sexton's continual travelling — more and more between about 1960 and 1972 — to give readings and to undertake fellowships and the like, as well as travel in Europe, seems to have exacerbated her agoraphobia. Gill notes that '[s]everal poems of this period invoke the significance of travel to, across, or between particular locations — none of which, alone, provides the secure foothold sought by the speaker in order to ground her

⁶⁷ Tamar R. Lehigh, 'To Bedlam and Part Way Back: Anne Sexton, Her Therapy Tapes, and the Meaning of Privacy,' *UCLA Women's LJ* 2 (1992): 165-221 (172).

⁶⁸ Paula M. Salvio, *Teacher of Weird Abundance*, p. 96.

⁶⁹ Paula M. Salvio, *Teacher of Weird Abundance*, pp. 56-7.

increasingly vulnerable subjectivity’⁷⁰. During the last few years of her life, ‘[a] change in geography, for leaving town, leaving the house, or travelling to give a poetry reading could paralyze her’.⁷¹ Thus, her feeling of comfort while in hospital is not surprising; the hospital environment was enclosed, controlled, and predictable. Sexton’s frequent hospitalisations, then, helped her to feel a contradictory sort of ease and familiarity.⁷²

Sexton’s attitude to confinement as manifested in her poems, whether inside or outside of the institution, is therefore both conflicted and evolving. Often, the hospital is associated with stringent order, security, and surveillance. But it can also represent safety, refuge, and recovery — sometimes in the same poem. In this section, I will address to what extent the hospitals in which the poet is confined are places of retreat and to what extent spaces of fear, and how she uses this ‘therapeutic’ space to express these conflicting attitudes.

These ‘restrictive’ spaces do not always have the same coercive aspects, though all the basics of confinement are present. As noted, Sexton’s institutionalisations began in 1954, shortly before a major shift in care for the mentally ill got started in the United States, and her subsequent experiences manifest the transitions that were underway⁷³ Sexton’s poetry recognises constant surveillance, a rigid daily schedule, physical restraint, and occupational therapy as essential methods for maintaining order inside these institutions, as will be seen in ‘You, Doctor Martin’. The broader government surveillance associated with the Cold War, as well as the informal conformity-reinforcing surveillance by neighbours, form the context for this institutional therapeutic scrutiny (as implied in ‘Noon Walk on the Asylum Lawn’ which is a lyrical articulation of acute paranoia).

What all these institutions have in common with the psychotherapy Sexton underwent more or less continually throughout her life even when she was not in hospital, is what Foucault in *The Birth of the Clinic* describes as ‘the medical gaze’. Sexton began writing poetry essentially under this gaze, as most of her early poems were shown first to Dr. Orne. ‘[W]e must place ourselves...at the level of the fundamental spatialisation and verbalisation

⁷⁰ Jo Gill, ‘The House of Herself’, p. 31.

⁷¹ Paula M. Salvio, *Teacher of Weird Abundance*, p. 96.

⁷² Paula M. Salvio, *Teacher of Weird Abundance*, p. 96.

⁷³ Martin Halliwell, *Therapeutic Revolutions: Medicine, Psychiatry, and American Culture 1945-70* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2014), p. 205. Halliwell writes: ‘Truman’s and Eisenhower’s investments in improving the standards of public hospitals were partly attempts to undo the negative public perception of the institutions as snake pits. But, although there were marked improvements in the care provided in state hospitals during the 1950s, the quality range was huge at the beginning of the 1960s, and the experiences of inpatients varied widely’.

of the pathological, where the loquacious gaze with which the doctor observes the poisonous heart of things is born and communes with itself'.⁷⁴ In her poetry, Sexton covers a wide range of therapeutic trends in the United States over three decades. The advanced and creative treatment Dr. Orne offered Sexton contrasts markedly with the horrifying (and often justified) traditional image of mental hospitals widespread in popular culture at the time, as in the 1948 Hollywood film *The Snake Pit*. Instead, these institutions, at the beginning of her treatment and her poetic career, are presented (not without some irony) as spaces of leisure: as resort, hotel, and muse.

Despite this attitude — or perhaps because of it — John Holmes, Sexton's mentor and at times a conservative critic of her work, urged her repeatedly not to publish any of her hospital poems: 'I can't bear to have you publish something that I regret and that you might live to regret, too'.⁷⁵ Holmes did not stop at this point, but went further:

I distrust the very source and subject of a great many of your poems, namely, all those that describe and dwell on your time in the hospital. [...] Something about asserting the hospital and psychiatric experience seems to me very selfish [...]. It bothers me that you use poetry this way. Don't publish it in a book.⁷⁶

This advice did not stop Sexton from making these poems public. She responded gently to Holmes in a poem, 'For John, Who Begg Me Not to Enquire Further':

Not that it was beautiful,
but that I found some order there.
There ought to be something special
for someone
in this kind of hope.
This is something I would never find
in a lovelier place, my dear,
although your fear is anyone's fear,
like an invisible veil between us all . . . (ll. 1-9)

This 'invisible veil' of fear of revelation was what Sexton tore open. One can argue that, far from being selfish, Sexton's commitment to writing about her illness and confinement — as well as about other intimate matters that women poets had seldom if ever written about, like

⁷⁴ Michel Foucault, *The Birth of the Clinic* (London: Routledge, 2003), p. xiii.

⁷⁵ Diane Wood Middlebrook and Marilyn Yalom, *Coming to Light: American Women Poets in the Twentieth Century* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1985), p. 203. Sexton (and Maxine Kumin) came to feel that the reason for Holmes' vehemence that she not publish the poems about her mental illness was not limited to her violation of her own privacy, but was likely also because his first wife was a mental patient who had committed suicide. Anne Sexton, *No Evil Star: Selected Essays, Interviews, and Prose*, ed. by Steven E. Colburn (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1985), p. 164.

⁷⁶ Diane Wood Middlebrook and Marilyn Yalom, *Coming to Light: American Women Poets in the Twentieth Century*, p. 203.

menstruation, masturbation, and sexual frustration — was an act of great generosity and courage. Certainly, many women who had shared similar experiences thought so, which is why Sexton became one of the most popular poets in America. During the same period, the era of the Cold War, surveillance both formal and informal was creating a ‘panoptical’ dragnet, in which individual citizens could not be certain whether they were being surveilled and consequently tended to behave as if they were, inducing an anxious and suffocating conformism. Foucault describes ‘panopticism’ as follows:

Hence the major effect of the Panopticon: to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power. So to arrange things that the surveillance is permanent in its effects, even if it is discontinuous in its action; that the perfection of power should tend to render its actual exercise unnecessary [...] ⁷⁷

Mental illness in mid-twentieth-century America carried a powerful stigma, and many sufferers — again, especially women like Sexton who tended to be isolated in the home — felt desperately alone in their condition, which was actually widespread. In the Panopticon, each ‘inmate’ is similarly isolated. The rooms of the Panopticon are ‘like so many cages, so many small theatres, in which each actor is alone, perfectly individualized and constantly visible’. ⁷⁸

By writing powerfully of her illness, her desires and fears, and the problems within her birth family and her marriage (and of fictions created from this material), Sexton is in a sense reversing the polarity of panopticism. Instead of being visible only to the ‘inspector’ in the central chamber, Sexton in her poetry metaphorically occupies this chamber and becomes visible to her fellow-‘inmates’ — middle-class women suffering emotionally from their isolated confinement, not necessarily in mental hospitals but within their homes, their family systems, and the roles they had felt compelled to play in them. As Sexton puts the mechanism into reverse, they recognise themselves in her. The next step for these women, obviously, is to become fully visible to each other. ⁷⁹

This understanding complicates a ‘reading’ of Sexton’s attachment to Dr. Orne, who sincerely tried to help her get out of a cycle of breakdown and institutionalisation, and who certainly was crucial to her decision to pursue poetry seriously. Orne’s success in stimulating

⁷⁷ Michel Foucault, *The Birth of the Clinic*, p. 201.

⁷⁸ Michel Foucault, *The Birth of the Clinic*, p. 200.

⁷⁹ This was the function of the ‘consciousness-raising groups’ that were the fundamental unit of the Women’s Liberation movement beginning in the later 1960s and that took on questions of health, both physical and mental, from a feminist perspective (Martin Halliwell, *Therapeutic Revolutions*, p. 295).

Sexton to write poetry about her illness and hospitalisation, which — unlike John Holmes — he did not urge her to suppress, seemingly contradicts Foucault’s view of confinement and madness in such institutions. Foucault argues that ‘madness in the classical period ceased to be the sign of another world and [...] became the paradoxical manifestation of non-being’.⁸⁰ This was, however, clearly not the case with Sexton and Orne. While confinement in the hospital had aspects that Sexton, with her lively intelligence, found boring and pointless, like making moccasins or being part of a little chorus of hand-bell-ringers, it was also in its own way reassuring. The poems in *To Bedlam and Part Way Back* depict the poet finding a form of being and belonging within the kingdom of madness, where she appointed herself ‘a queen’ among the patients, as opposed to intense feelings of anomie and ‘non-being’ that she had been experiencing in the outside world, as she describes in poems like ‘Housewife’. Yet at the same time, as we will see, Sexton remained acutely aware of the power Dr. Orne held over her and her fellow-patients. The Panopticon was still very much in operation in these institutions of constant surveillance.

‘You, Doctor Martin’ is the first poem in *To Bedlam and Part Way Back* (1960). It was drafted while Sexton was a patient at the clinic where Orne worked. Although there are allusions to his visits to her in the hospital, the sessions are not described at all. Rather, she focuses on the ‘way the patients’ bodies are controlled and monitored’.⁸¹ Confinement is enforced in this institution to achieve order and discipline and at the same time, supposedly, to keep the patients safe from themselves and each other. Diane Middlebrook argues that ‘Sexton’s work offered the mental hospital as a metaphorical space in which to articulate the crazy-making pressures of middle-class life, particularly for women’.⁸² In other words, the hospital is a kind of figurative theatre in which these pressures can be materialised as physical controls and constraints and in which emotional responses can be acted out. Sexton’s poetry, in fact, forces a form of discipline on madness. As Sheri Kristen Kwee Hwa Goh notes: ‘Sexton may have felt free to write about what she wanted to, as long as she conformed to a certain set of rules of poetic behaviour by ‘caging’ her writing with formal structures. It

⁸⁰ Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, trans. by Richard Howard (New York, Vintage Books, 1988), p. 115.

⁸¹ Walter Kalaidjian, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Modern American Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), p. 150.

⁸² Diane Wood Middlebrook, *Anne Sexton: A Biography*, p. 274.

was a method with which to control her explorations of madness'.⁸³ (More will be said later about this 'cage' and its implications for the poem.)

'You, Doctor Martin' is an extraordinary achievement for a novice poet (or any poet) — in its form, in the complexity of its emotional and metaphorical content, and in the way the poet's use of form both intensifies and complicates that content, including the sense of space and movement through space that permeates the poem. The poem consists of six stanzas of seven lines each. Each stanza has a regular rhyme scheme — *abcabcb*. The lines are often sharply enjambed, and there is no regular measure or line length, though traces of iambic pentameter or tetrameter lines are sometimes present under the apparent irregularity.

The poem's first sentence, justly famous, establishes the way motion and space are figured in much of the rest: 'You, Doctor Martin, walk/ from breakfast to madness'. In the eponymous Doctor Martin's case, his movement from home to the hospital is also from the concrete ('breakfast') to the abstract ('madness'). In this regard, Catherine Emerson argues: '[c]oncrete spaces are there to be discovered, but the way in which we discover them creates abstract spaces that we invest with meaning'.⁸⁴ The two different spaces are brought together in his person.⁸⁵ Fixing the time of year, the speaker then presents a more complex image of her own motion in this interior space:

I speed through the antiseptic tunnel
where the moving dead still talk
of pushing their bones against the thrust
of cure. (ll. 3-6)

The speaker 'speeds' past other patients in what must presumably be a windowless corridor of the hospital. They are 'the moving dead', perhaps because they are resisting 'the thrust of cure' — though their resistance is only 'talk'. But their deadness also suggests the effects of powerful antipsychotic drugs like Thorazine. (A decade later, Sexton found herself having to choose between taking Thorazine, which made her feel numb, and succumbing to repeated manic episodes.) Following the first image, this conjures a still lively Sexton rushing

⁸³ Sheri Kristen Kwee Hwa Goh, 'The Ax For The Frozen Sea Within Us': Representations Of Madness In The Writings Of Anne Sexton' (Unpublished dissertation, Goldsmiths, University of London, 2015) <<http://research.gold.ac.uk/id/eprint/11250>> [accessed 13 June 2016], p. 17.

⁸⁴ Catherine Emerson, 'Op Weg Naar Broxeele: The Productions of Shared Spaces' in *Spatiality and Symbolic Expression: On the Link Between Place and Culture*, edited by Bill Richardson (New York: Macmillan, 2015), 191-209 (91).

⁸⁵ Fukuda Shiho, 'Beyond the Doctor-Patient Relationship: Anne Sexton and her Psychiatrist, Dr. Martin T. Orne,' *Revista de Estudios Norteamericanos* 11 (2006): 81-92 (85).

past other patients like slow-moving zombies to get to her therapy appointment with Orne. The speaker seems elated: '[a]nd I am queen of this summer hotel/ or the laughing bee on a stalk'.

There follows one of the abrupt, almost shocking turns that Sexton's use of enjambment makes possible. The 'stalk' on which the poet-bee perches is 'a stalk/ of death'. From describing herself as distinct from the other patients, the 'moving dead', she becomes one of them:

We stand in broken
lines and wait while they unlock
the door and count us at the frozen gates
of dinner. The shibboleth is spoken
and we move to gravy in our smock
of smiles. (ll. 8-13)

The doctor has left, and it is now the end of the day. The speaker's self-distinction from the other patients has dissolved. Subjected like the others to the hospital's routine, the speaker becomes passive, standing in line, waiting for the door to be unlocked at 'the frozen gates/ of dinner'. Here the enjambment yields bathos: 'the frozen gates' is romantic, almost grandiose, and then 'of dinner' crashes the image down into banality. This figuration of space mirrors the speaker's reduction to the same condition as her fellow-patients. The 'broken/ lines' waiting for dinner are mimed by the jagged enjambments in this stanza, in which two lines begin with 'of'. Though the 'antiseptic tunnel' was enclosed and constrictive, the speaker could move swiftly through it. Now, no longer a queen/bee, she is forced to stand and wait with the others. She is a member of the community of patients, but their interaction seems compelled by panopticism; they wear the 'smock of smiles,' an attitude unofficially mandated both by the expectations and norms of the institution and by the terms of 1950s middle-class femininity. In this regard, Diana Hume George shows 'the speaker's double sense of herself as aggressor and victim, "queen" and prisoner'.⁸⁶ These dichotomies reveal how Sexton 'seek[s] to occupy the spaces that have been designated by the doctors or therapists as normalized spaces'.⁸⁷

'We' must wait for the 'shibboleth' — in this case, a form of words that 'we' understand to mean that 'we' may enter the dining room after 'we' have been counted like a

⁸⁶ In Jeanne H. Kammer and Linda Wagner-Martin, eds., *The Witch's Life: Confession and Control in the Early Poetry of Anne Sexton*, p. 275.

⁸⁷ Judith Harris, *Signifying Pain*, p. 219.

herd of animals. The patients' facial expressions become part of their uniform as they 'move to gravy' and 'chew in rows', now completely regimented and controlled.⁸⁸ Yet they themselves are the agents of this control. As Foucault notes: 'He who is subjected to a field of visibility, and who knows it, assumes responsibility for the constraints of power; he makes them play spontaneously upon himself; he inscribes in himself the power relation in panopticism in which he simultaneously plays both roles; he becomes the principle of his own subjection'.⁸⁹

Throughout these first two stanzas, the spatial movement of the patients has been towards control and conformity: where at the beginning they still talked of resisting 'the thrust of cure', and then as they waited to be let into the dining room, their lines were 'broken', they now 'chew in rows' in their smocks — and the speaker is simply one of them. As they chew, their 'plates whine and scratch like chalk/ in school'.

Across the next stanza break, and through this metaphoric shift, the patients have become childlike. We learn why their eating is so noisy: 'There are no knives/ for cutting your throat' (which means they are cutting their food with the edges of forks or spoons, thus scraping their plates). This recalls the final, devastating line of Lowell's 'Waking in the Blue': 'Each of us holds a locked razor'. Both small children and mental patients are treated as groups incapable of understanding and predicting the consequences of their actions; children may harm themselves by accident or because of curiosity, and patients could harm themselves or others when in delusional, deeply depressive, or manic states. Hence, alluding to the school as an analogous example of order and discipline indicates that

there is something to be learned from all this, but the lesson resonates less than the distracting sound the students themselves produce. The restrictions of the dining room reveal the danger these patients pose to themselves. Part of the therapeutic goal is to replace those self-destructive tendencies with constructive ones.⁹⁰

What the patients are actually learning in this 'school' is to tolerate being infantilised and deprived of dignity and individuality. The narrative (together with the spatial location and time) shifts again, but in a direction foreshadowed by the 'school' metaphor that precedes it: 'I make/ moccasins all morning' — presumably in the day-room. With this shift, the poet has returned to the first person singular. She speaks of her initial resistance to this occupational

⁸⁸ The patients' smocks recall a similar image in Lowell's 'In the Cage' where the 'lifers' wear their 'laundered denim'.

⁸⁹ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, p. 202.

⁹⁰ Colin Ambrose Clarke, *In the Ward*, p. 78.

therapy (which sounds more like make-work, since ‘I mend what another will break/tomorrow’):

At first my hands
kept empty, unraveled for the lives
they used to work. Now I learn to take
them back [...] (ll. 17-20)

Evidently the poet, who has lost her role as housewife and mother, taking care of her family, ‘the lives/ they used to work’, at first refused this therapy. But she now sees the work as in some way ‘tak[ing] them back’. A thread of similarity between the patients and the moccasins is stitched in this stanza, as both ‘are there to be inventoried (as in diagnosed and treated), so they can either be worn (as in released) or put back in storage.’⁹¹ Rothman refers to training in such occupational skills as a ‘major part of therapy’ in asylums and mental hospitals from the late nineteenth century until recently.⁹² The poet in this stanza keeps herself busy making moccasins, giving herself something to do with her hands, though hesitating. This, too, is a cog in the panoptic machinery: ‘the foremost role of the panopticon is to reform and rehabilitate the inmates, as they continuously fall under visual surveillance, and they are seen in a state of conscious and permanent visibility, which hence assures the automatic functioning of power’.⁹³ But these are individuals *already formed* by the wider panopticism of a surveillance-based society: ‘it is not that the beautiful totality of the individual is amputated, repressed, altered by our social order, it is rather that the individual is carefully fabricated in it, according to a whole technique of forces and bodies’.⁹⁴ Fortunately for poetry (and human freedom) this ‘fabrication’ is evidently flawed. Such flaws made Sexton and her ‘reverse panopticism’ possible.

With ‘tomorrow’ across the enjambment as the first word in the next stanza, the poet again shifts tone:

Of course, I love you;
you lean above the plastic sky,
god of our block, prince of all the foxes. (ll. 22-24)

⁹¹ Judith Harris, *Signifying Pain: Constructing and Healing the Self through Writing* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2012), p. 22.

⁹² David J. Rothman, *The Discovery of the Asylum: Social Order and Disorder in the New Republic* (New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 1971), p. 343.

⁹³ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, p. 201.

⁹⁴ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, p. 217.

The poet is addressing ‘Doctor Martin’ directly again for the first time since the poem’s opening line. ‘Of course, I love you,’ she says, and proceeds to explain why. (Both Axelrod and Harris employ Freud’s concept of clinical ‘transference’ in explaining Sexton’s attachment to her psychiatrist.)⁹⁵ Whereas in that first stanza the poet envisioned herself as ‘queen of this summer hotel,’ the doctor now appears to her as ‘god of our [hospital] block’, leaning down into it from above the false ceiling (‘the plastic sky’), and, rather mysteriously, as ‘prince of all the foxes’.⁹⁶ Here, the foxes are the female patients. It is hard to say in what way they are fox-like, except perhaps in being nervous, shy, elusive creatures who fear men. This epithet seems more like teasing than criticism, unlike the sardonic ‘god of our block’. The ‘fox’ metaphor reinforces the poet as ‘bee’ from earlier, creating an almost subliminal sense of the hospital ward as a ‘second nature’, a ‘nest,’ as she puts it a little later.⁹⁷ Moreover, Sexton’s use of animal and insect metaphors is an exploration of the bestial nature in humans: Sexton once stated that: ‘I look at the strangeness in them (humans) and the naturalness they cannot help, in order to find some virtue in the beast in me.’⁹⁸ The animal metaphors also recall some comments of Sexton’s during an interview with Patricia Marx:

[...] if you used form it was like letting a lot of wild animals out in the arena, but enclosing them in a cage, and you could let some extraordinary animals out if you had the right cage, and that cage would be form.⁹⁹

The poem’s form, then, with its combination of rigorously shaped stanzas, accentual rhythm, and abrupt enjambments, mimics the space of the hospital — the cage within which the psychotic patients, like ‘extraordinary animals’, are contained. Together with the ‘goat’ bleating in another building of the hospital in ‘Lullaby’, this creates an ironic image of the hospital space as quasi-pastoral — something between a farm and a zoo. This analogical relationship between Sexton’s early poetics and her experience of hospital space may help to explain why she felt ‘at home’ in it as a poet.

⁹⁵ The Freudian concept of transference explains how classical feelings of love are projected onto the therapist, which can often happen during the interaction. A very useful explanation of ‘transference’ is presented by Judith Harris, *Signifying Pain*. For further clarification, see page 224.

⁹⁶ I have shown earlier in this chapter how the house is perceived as a mechanical diorama whose surroundings are a fake façade, mainly plastic; this is a similar image to the hospital’s ‘plastic sky’.

⁹⁷ In ‘The Operation’, Sexton perceives the wards as sirens that ‘...are calling/all night long, while the night outside/ sucks at the trees’.

⁹⁸ Rigoberto Gonzales, ‘Bestiary U.S.A.,’ *Poetry Foundation*, <<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/harriet/2007/09/bestiary-usa/>> [accessed 31 January 2017]. Although the animals’ presence is high in her poetry, no study has yet concentrated on Sexton’s pervasive use of animal images within and without (enclosed) spaces. These spaces can even be internal to her own body, as when she writes in ‘The Poet of Ignorance’: ‘There is an animal inside me,/clutching fast to my heart,/a huge crab’.

⁹⁹ Steven E. Colburn, *Anne Sexton: Telling the Tale*, p. 223.

Yet this ‘at-homeness’ is undercut by the next sentence: ‘Your third eye/ moves among us and lights the separate boxes/ where we sleep or cry’.¹⁰⁰ The third eye in Hinduism is the main organ of spiritual perception, the highest of the chakras, and identified anatomically with the pineal gland, located behind the frontal bone of the forehead. This is likely a figure for the doctor’s insight into his patients, which Sexton admired and respected. The image, however, also suggests the flashlight of the night attendant (again reminiscent of Lowell’s ‘Waking in the Blue’) checking on the patients sleeping or crying in their ‘separate boxes’, and perhaps of the disk-shaped concave mirror many doctors of the period wore attached to their foreheads for performing examinations. In any case, in this stanza, ‘the observational capacity of Doctor Martin is abstracted into a range of optical metaphors’.¹⁰¹ The patients feel compelled to wear their ‘smock[s] of smiles’ in the collective spaces of the hospital, but even in the confines of their ‘separate boxes’, where they can ‘sleep or cry’ in privacy from each other, they are under the medico-panoptical gaze.

More ominously, the ‘third eye’ is a figure of surveillance; the patient’s small, boxlike rooms are their only spaces of individuality and privacy, and the doctor’s ‘third eye’ ‘lights’ them, revealing and exposing. Deborah Nelson states that given the ‘growing awareness of surveillance, a right to privacy was vehemently affirmed as necessary to combat the technological and organizational intrusions of modern life’.¹⁰² The structure of power within the walls of the hospital is mapped as a new system in which everybody finds himself located in ‘a great enclosed, complex, and hierarchised structure’ and subject to a continuous regime of surveillance and manipulation..¹⁰³ The phrase ‘ocular eye’ ‘points to the increasingly panoptical nature of this institutional surveillance’.¹⁰⁴ Gill notes that Deborah Nelson situates Sexton’s parallel ambivalences about home and hospital in relation to the ‘contradictory impulses of the Cold War years’.¹⁰⁵ Few if any other passages in the poem better display the poet’s ambivalence toward the doctor and toward the psychotherapeutic process than the following, in which the poet exclaims:

¹⁰⁰ Melanie Waters states that ‘the speaker is removed from the domestic ‘sphere of influence’ to the secure environment of the asylum, where her movements can be monitored and controlled’, p. 185.

¹⁰¹ Melanie Waters, p. 185. Judith Harris goes beyond Waters’ ‘optical metaphor’, perceiving the ‘flashlight’ as a guard’s light and the ‘boxes’ as camp bunks,’ p. 224. The spatial and visual dimensions of the hospital are inverted. It is no longer metaphorically a hotel or an office but a military barrack. There is a suggestion, if another reading is possible, that the hospital space is a charnel house: ‘the moving dead still talk /of pushing their bones’ and the speaker is no exception: ‘my hands swinging down like hooks’.

¹⁰² Deborah Nelson, *Pursuing Privacy in Cold War America Gender and Culture*, p. 75.

¹⁰³ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, p. 115.

¹⁰⁴ Melanie Jane Waters, p. 186.

¹⁰⁵ Jo Gill, ‘The House of Herself,’ p. 49.

What large children we are
here. All over I grow most tall
in the best ward. (ll. 29-31)

Again, the enjambment is masterly. The irony of '[w]hat large children we are' — following on the earlier descriptions that show the patients as infantilised by the institution — is sharply underlined by 'here', enjambéd to the next line. These are grown women, and it is only within the regimentation of the hospital that they are 'large children'. The next sentence with its odd syntax and grammar — 'most tall' instead of 'tallest', and the ambiguous 'all over' ('above all', or perhaps the American colloquialism meaning 'everywhere'?) — almost sounds as if it was written by a child. The space of clinical confinement she now inhabits, the ward, will be 'the best ward' because it is the one in which she will 'grow most tall'.

'Your business is people,' the poet tells him, a line that recurs in 'The Poet to the Analyst'. '[Y]ou call at the madhouse, an oracular/ eye in our nest'. This sentence loops back to the poem's beginning. Instead of 'walk[ing] from breakfast to madness,' the doctor is now portrayed as 'call[ing] at the madhouse'. Nevertheless, though merely a visitor, he is 'an oracular eye', a phrase that builds on the 'third eye' image. This gaze — the eye of an oracle or seer — is one of wisdom. But it has invaded the space of the hospital that the poet now describes as 'our nest'. The doctor's gaze is one that, in the space of the hospital, combines insight and surveillance, just as the hospital space itself combines regimentation and security. However, the doctor is also subject to the needs of his patients, and as a human being rather than a metonymised 'eye' he must occupy particular physical spaces in the institution one at a time. We can infer that he is meeting with the poet in her 'box' of a private room when '[o]ut in the hall/ the intercom pages you'.

This workaday phrase with its matter-of-fact acknowledgement of technology is in jarring contrast to the sentences that precede and now follow it: 'You twist in the pull/ of the foxy children who fall// like floods of life in frost'. This is a very complex image. Clearly, the doctor is being summoned for some patient's emergency. Suddenly puppet-like, he 'twist[s] in the pull/ of the 'foxy children' — a phrase that combines two earlier epithets applied to the patients. 'Foxy' is an idiom for cunning, as the fox is proverbially said to be. This expression gives the patients a kind of agency they have not previously possessed in the poem. At the same time, though, it underlines their childlike status, suggesting that as 'foxy children' they are manipulative and devious in the way children, lacking the power of adults, can be. But

‘they fall// like floods of life in frost’. They are no longer ‘the moving dead’ but are a flooding warmth that melts wintry cold.

The next sentence is also mysterious: ‘And we are magic talking to itself,/noisy and alone’. At the most superficial level, this conjures an image of a psychotic patient talking to imaginary interlocutors in words only she can understand, isolated in her madness. But in context, it suggests that the women are possessed of ‘magic’ which, because it is feminine in a male-dominated society, can only ‘talk to itself’, heard but not understood. In the apparent unreason of these psychotic women’s discourses there may be a hidden power which the poet wishes to liberate.

These words preface a reverie by the poet about her own condition. No longer ‘queen of this summer hotel’, she is now ‘queen of all [her] sins’. But once again, enjambment and line breaks complicate and enrich this expression: ‘I am queen of all my sins/ forgotten. Am I still lost?’ The line break creates uncertainty as to whether it is the speaker as ‘queen’ or her ‘sins’ that are ‘forgotten’. After all, Sexton when she wrote this was isolated from family and friends in the hospital, having had to surrender custody of her small children, and was (according to her biographer) overcome with guilt. If it is her sins that are forgotten, then they are not necessarily forgiven, since it is not entirely clear who has forgotten them — the speaker or those that know her. If on the other hand it is she herself who is forgotten, that would give additional weight to the painful query ‘Am I still lost?’ Arguably, if one asks this question, the answer is normally and necessarily ‘yes’.

But the poet continues, in a line as famous as the opening ones: ‘Once I was beautiful. Now I am myself’. Spivack, who knew Sexton well, described her as ‘glamorous’ like a 1940s movie star.¹⁰⁶ Here in the hospital, unable to maintain this image, she has struggled to ‘meet the institutional requirements’ and to be recognised as ‘herself again,’ by ‘being self-recognizable or whole’.¹⁰⁷ The poet is no longer seeing herself through the (male-defined) gaze of others, but as who she is to herself, having gained an autonomous identity, however fragile, within the regimented space of the hospital. The moccasins no longer matter — they are indifferently ‘this row and that row’. In the space of the day room, the awareness of other patients around her has fallen away. The shelf, like her surroundings, is ‘silent’, but the poet is not.

¹⁰⁶ Kathleen Spivack, *With Robert Lowell and His Circle*, p. 54.

¹⁰⁷ Judith Harris, ‘To Bedlam and Almost All the Way Back’, p. 224.

I have noted that the poet's newly achieved identity was fragile. That said, though 'Noon Walk on the Asylum Lawn' follows 'You, Doctor Martin' in the sequence of the collection, it may come from an earlier stage in Sexton's stay in the hospital. And it may, in fact, not describe Sexton's own experience at all, but that of another patient whom she observed. In any case, it is a powerful depiction of acute paranoia from the inside. Formally, it is in a loosely rhymed free verse (the rhyme scheme is *abxcbdaxeadfxgf*, where the *x*'s are the interjections discussed below). The repetition of the vowel rhyme 'ā' ('ray/day/way' at irregular intervals, together with the vowel rhyme 'face/place') contributes to the feeling of disjointed and obsessive thoughts.

In a setting that should be pleasant if not idyllic - the open but secure space of the mental-hospital garden - the speaker is experiencing severe anxiety and a feeling of being not only watched but menaced and even asphyxiated. The speaker uses nature as a platform to project her fear from what lies behind the tree. She begins: 'The summer sun ray/ shifts through a suspicious tree'. It is a highest projection of pathetic fallacy. The sunlight itself seems to trigger anxiety as it 'shifts'. The tree is 'suspicious' — which in formal English would mean that it is suspicious of the speaker. However, the adjective 'suspicious' is often used in colloquial English speech to mean 'suspect', meaning something that inspires suspicion. In this reading, the suspicion is mutual: the speaker suspects the tree of suspecting her. In this regard, my reading of Sexton contradicts Silverberg's who claims that 'Sexton's poem is a case study in the ineffective use of pathetic fallacy to create psychological drama'.¹⁰⁸

Then follows an interjection: '*though I walk through the valley of the shadow*'. This is the first of three such interjected quotations from Psalm 23, the most famous and widely quoted of the Psalms. Because these quotations are italicised and unpunctuated, some critics have argued that they represent the speaker actually saying the lines to herself as a form of prayer in her extremity of fear. Sexton's conventional New England Protestant background would certainly mean that she knew the psalm well, so this seems plausible. It is noteworthy, however, that she does not finish the quoted line with its last two words: 'of death'. The poet feels herself not in the 'valley of the shadow of death' — Sexton seems not to have feared death, and often even to have longed for it — but under a different shadow, one that can darken her sight even in bright summer sunshine. She continues: '[i]t sucks the air'. The 'sun

¹⁰⁸ Mark Silverberg, *The New York School Poets and the Neo-Avant-Garde*, pp. 194-5.

ray' somehow takes air from the poet's lungs, making it harder to breathe, perhaps from anxiety. The sun, the most powerful and normally benign force in nature, is now hostile, probing for her like the searchlights scanning the yard and walls during a movie about a prison escape. This terror of surveillance is expressed through the speaker's fear of an invisible eye. The persona believes that the sun 'looks around for [her]' only. This underlines her extreme sense of isolation. She has abstracted and inverted the panoptical gaze into one that seeks her out from all directions at once; where in the Panopticon the inspector sits at the centre, gazing out at the occupants of the cells arranged around him in a 360-degree ring, now from everywhere around her the persona of the poem is being sought out and inspected.

The power of surveillance 'was exercised over individuals in order to tame them, shape them, and guide their conduct', and this is exactly what happens with the persona in the poem.¹⁰⁹ Although this sort of gaze is ostensibly maintained for the benefit of patients, since it keeps the subject of surveillance from harming herself or others, it is still terrifying to the speaker. Even the grass has turned against her: '[t]he grass speaks/ I hear green chanting all day'. This lyrical image, made sinister by its context, is followed by the second interjected quote from Psalm 23, which follows in the original text directly from the previous phrase: '*I will fear no evil, fear no evil*' — the repetition suggesting again that the speaker is muttering the words to herself as she walks as a way to calm herself — since she manifestly does fear evil. The speaker hears 'green chanting' 'ominously as a Greek chorus, a foreboding of the doom to come'.¹¹⁰ The phrase from the Psalm that interrupts the main voice is changed as 'I fear no evil' is repeated twice. The complete line is 'I will fear no evil, for thou art with me'.¹¹¹ But there is no such 'thou' present. In her fearful loneliness, she tries to convince herself not to be afraid, but fails; she can only repeat 'fear no evil', as if it was a magic formula.

The speaker returns to the topic of the grass. The threat from the grass is intensified by the double meaning of the word 'blade'. This passage oddly recalls, as in a distorting mirror, the imagery of Whitman's 'Song of Myself' in the famous "What is the grass?" passage. Here, Whitman uses the grass — the central metaphor for his own poetry — as an emblem of life emerging from death: 'And now it seems to me the beautiful uncut hair of graves.// Tenderly will I use you curling grass,/ It may be you transpire from the breasts of

¹⁰⁹ James Miller, *The Passion of Michel Foucault* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), p. 222.

¹¹⁰ Steven E. Colburn, *Anne Sexton: Telling the Tale*, p. 104.

¹¹¹ *The Holy Bible: King James Version* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2004), Psalms 23:4.

young men [...]'.¹¹² Conversely, for the persona in Sexton's poem, the grass offers only menace. The speaker is reaching the point of auditory and visual hallucination, an impression sustained by the next couplet: 'The sky breaks./ It sags and breathes upon my face'.

This is a horrifying image of claustrophobia experienced in the open air; the sky has collapsed like a ceiling, threatening to crush the speaker, and the breeze is experienced as having someone breathe in her face from inches away. She utters a final fragment of the Psalm, repeating the last two words: *in the presence of mine enemies, mine enemies*. A closer look at Psalm 23 tells us that it is opposed in both sentiment and setting to the poem. The asylum is pitted against 'the House of the Lord' and the asylum lawn is an ironic reminder of the Psalm's 'green pastures'.¹¹³ Nevertheless, the paranoid speaker has forgotten or cannot speak the words from the Psalm, which traditionally brings feelings of protection and peacefulness, and has selected only those words that refer to her current state of mind: those that focus on the evil and enemies. The actual line in the Psalm is 'Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies'. But the God of the Psalms has deserted the speaker; no table has been prepared for her. Instead, 'The world is full of enemies./ There is no safe place'. This is as pure a statement of paranoia as one might find. The poem ends on a note of utter terror.

As Foucault notes, within a hierarchical society, the project of 'mental health' is contained with normative assumptions imposed by that society and is inscribed into the panoptical structure of self-repression. There is also a still wider socio-political context. With the line 'the world is full of enemies' and the image of the sun as a searchlight seeking out the speaker, the poem links the speaker's paranoia to the social paranoia of the Cold War era that was at its height when Sexton was coming of age. Later, as the Vietnam War approached its climax of violence around 1970 amid massive public protests, her anxiety about being surveilled was transmuted into outrage.¹¹⁴ But at this phase of Sexton's estrangement from her assigned social roles, the hospital still provided relief — and at nights, oblivion.

¹¹²M. Jimmie Killingsworth, *The Cambridge Introduction to Walt Whitman* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 29.

¹¹³ Steven E. Colburn, *Anne Sexton: Telling the Tale*, p. 105.

¹¹⁴ One of the most powerful political images Sexton employs in her poetry, I think, can be seen in 'The Firebombers', where she depicts America's participation in wars in terms of consumerism. She announces that America is 'a death market' and describes Americans as 'coffin fillers'. It is a grisly trade. Sexton views her homeland as the biggest death supplier in this market. The portrayal of the corpses as vegetables opens the way to the 'crates' (coffins) to be packed.

The poem 'Lullaby', situating an episode very precisely in space and time (of day and season), is on the surface almost a polar opposite to 'Noon Walk' in mood: 'It is a summer evening. [...] This is the TV parlor/ in the best ward at Bedlam' (reminding us of the poet calling herself 'the most tall in the best ward' in 'You, Doctor Martin'). Between these two locators in time and space is a passage of meticulous description, which sets a standard for what 'best' means in this context:

The yellow moths sag
against the locked screens
and the faded curtains
suck over the window sills
and from another building
a goat calls in his dreams. (ll. 2-7)

The 'goat', since it calls 'from another building' in the hospital complex, is evidently not actually a goat, but another patient, presumably male, making goat-like bleating sounds in his sleep. Again, this recalls 'You, Doctor Martin' with its figuration of patients as animals. It contributes to a quasi-pastoral atmosphere in this somewhat run-down environment, in which the moths 'sag' and the curtains are 'faded'. The windows are open, the speaker claims, which creates a boundless space for it to fly freely to the outside world. Yet we are reminded that 'the best ward in Bedlam' is still a space of confinement: the screens on the windows are locked. Now follows the main action of the poem:

The night nurse is passing
out the evening pills.
She walks on two erasers,
padding by us one by one. (ll. 10-13)

The crepe rubber soles of the nurse's shoes become 'two erasers'. What do they erase? Not only loud footfalls but also the unhappiness of the patients, because she brings them medications that (temporarily) numb the pain.

My sleeping pill is white.
It is a splendid pearl;
it floats me out of myself... (ll. 14-6)

Given what we know of Sexton's ambivalence toward the hospital, there is a double-edged irony to her description of her sleeping pill as 'a splendid pearl': on the one hand, it really does relax her and in fact appears to induce a mild euphoria; on the other, she is well aware that she is being drugged in order to render her calm enough to sleep, in a situation in which her life is rigidly controlled and surveilled. She continues:

my stung skin as alien
as a loose bolt of cloth.
I will ignore the bed.
I am linen on a shelf. (ll. 17-9)

The ‘pearl’, in keeping with its marine associations, ‘floats [her] out of [her]self’. It is not clear why her skin is ‘stung’, but now it is ‘alien’ to her, a ‘loose bolt of cloth’ that becomes ‘linen on a shelf’. She has ‘floated’ far enough that she feels she does not even need her bed; she is content to rest inanimate where she is, like a folded-up hospital sheet. The spatial boundaries of the TV lounge, the ward, and the hospital itself have dissolved, as has her bond to the literal. The speaker murmurs: ‘Let the others moan in secret;/ let each lost butterfly/ go home’. The other patients ‘moan[ing] in secret’ recall the ‘boxes where we sleep or cry’ in ‘You, Doctor Martin’. She wishes their psyches (the psyche or soul is figured in Greek myth as a butterfly) to find their way home, whether this is to sleep or to cure. The speaker concludes:

Old woollen head,
take me like a yellow moth
while the goat calls hush
a-bye. (ll. 23-26)

What is the ‘old woollen head’ and to whom does it belong? It may represent the ‘woolly’ state of mind induced by the soporific she has just taken. In any case, rather than a butterfly, she wishes to be a yellow moth like the ones she is watching ‘sag’ against the window screen — which may be a wish for the permanent sleep of death.¹¹⁵ But the ‘goat’ across the way is the singer of the lullaby.

This nature imagery maintains the thread of ironic or distorted pastoral that runs through the other poems just discussed and with the renewal of ‘bee’ imagery in ‘Ringing the Bells’, examined below. The line break in the middle of ‘hushabye’ (another term for lullaby) achieves a subtly brilliant diminuendo, like someone actually falling asleep, their head lolling forward; and the break also creates the word ‘bye’ as the last line; the poet is bidding the world, and the reader, farewell. Whether this poem offers a hint of suicidal feelings is not clear; but certainly the speaker welcomes her temporary oblivion. She figures herself as a nocturnal moth drawn to light — an image associated with self-destruction. But in the

¹¹⁵ The desire to be a yellow moth specifically may be a reference to ‘The Yellow Wallpaper’, Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s classic story of a woman being driven insane by confinement ‘for her own good’.

daytime of this pastoral, she and her fellow-patients appear as a sturdier but equally powerless kind of insect.

We have seen in 'You, Doctor Martin' that Sexton has proclaimed herself a 'queen of this summer hotel', but this sense of empowerment does not last long.¹¹⁶ In 'Ringing the Bells,' she expresses 'frustration with confinement and her treatment'.¹¹⁷ The poem was written in 1959 while she was hospitalised in Westwood Lodge for mental distress. It is in the somewhat sing-song, chant-like anaphoric style of 'The House That Jack Built' or 'For Want of a Nail the Shoe Was Lost', but without the accretion that in those folk poems builds to a climax.

And this is the way they ring
the bells in Bedlam
and this is the bell-lady
who comes each Tuesday morning
to give us a music lesson (ll. 1-5)

All quite benign, so far, though set 'in Bedlam', a space the reader already knows is highly controlled and regulated. But the next few lines remind us that this music lesson is not voluntary:

and because the attendants make you go
and because we mind by instinct,
like bees caught in the wrong hive [...] (ll. 6-8)

So the speaker and her fellow patients are subject to a double compulsion. Not only do 'the attendants 'make [them] go, but they 'mind by instinct'. Sexton means by this that because they are women, it is second nature for them to do as they are told. The use of this idiom, now almost archaic, to mean 'obey', was generally limited to children (which in return transforms the spatial identification of the institution into a school and the wards into classes). This subtly underscores the infantilisation of the patients as well as their internalised authoritarianism. They are 'bees caught in the wrong hive' (all worker bees are female), and so must comply with whatever pressure is applied to them. The speaker has demoted herself from a queen/bee in 'You, Doctor Martin' to a trapped worker bee just like the others. And

¹¹⁶ The 'summer hotel' or 'the summer's retreat' and 'white office', as she calls it in 'The Operation', the spatial configuration of the hospital is no longer a safe refuge since it is a space of 'oily rape', 'fear', 'hostile air', 'smells of dying', where 'The rooms down the hall are calling' and a slaughterhouse as 'limbs [are] falling' and the nurses as 'starchy ghosts'.

¹¹⁷ Anne Sexton, *Anne Sexton: A Self-Portrait in Letters*, eds. by Linda Gray Sexton and Lois Ames (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1977), p. 54.

this is the *wrong* hive; the internalised constraint toward behavioural norms is, the speaker implies, compelling the woman-bees to ‘work’ that is useless.¹¹⁸ She continues:

we are the circle of the crazy ladies
who sit in the lounge of the mental house
and smile at the smiling woman
who passes us each a bell (ll. 9-12)

Here the speaker uses the banal, insulting, thoughtless language of outsiders to describe herself, the other patients, and the place in which they are confined. Demeaned further by this description, they are conditioned as females to smile at the authority figure: as in ‘You, Doctor Martin’, they wear the ‘smock of smiles’.

In a suspension of the sequence after the bell lady indicates to the speaker that it is her turn to ring her handbell, the speaker now describes the two fellow patients who flank her in the circle: a ‘gray dress’ (‘gray’ being the colour of old age), a synecdoche for an old lady who ‘grumbles’ with a certain sense of privilege on account of her age, and a ‘small hunched squirrel girl’ (another animal metaphor) who picks at her facial hairs.¹¹⁹ Both the old woman and the young woman are caught in repetitive-compulsive behaviours, which the poet indicates by the repetitions of ‘to be old’ and ‘who picks at the hairs over her lip’. She continues:

and this is how the bells really sound,
as untroubled and clean
as a workable kitchen,
and this is always my bell responding
to my hand that responds to the lady
who points at me, E flat; (ll. 23-8)

The sound of the hand-bells reminds the speaker of a clean, calm, functional kitchen — the domestic space where women in the 1950s were said to have power — yet which, Sexton knew, was in reality a space of confinement, another panoptic cell. The speaker finds herself compelled to obedience: ‘her bell responds to [her] hand that responds to the lady’ as if she

¹¹⁸ Misplacement in the wrong hive recalls another image, though not in the hospital space, of Sexton as a pigeon who ‘came to the suburbs/by mistake’ (‘Man and Wife’) and ‘I am locked in the wrong house’ (‘In Celebration of My Uterus’). Confinement and/or being locked in the wrong place is repeated in ‘December 12th’ as the speaker imagines herself *locked up* ‘where the retarded [...] with hospital techniques.’

¹¹⁹ In this respect, Susan Schweik states that Sexton’s perception of the patients is as ‘objectified [...] animalized and enfreaked’ and she likewise describes her classmates as ‘little [obedient] doggies’. Quoted from Kamran Javadizadeh, ‘Anne Sexton’s Institutional Voice’ in *This Business of Words: Reassessing Anne Sexton*, ed. by Amanda Golden (Gainesville, FL: University of Florida Press, 2016), p. 127.

had no choice in the matter, a mere mechanical intermediary between the bell-lady and her bell. She concludes: 'and although we are no better for it,/ they tell you to go. And you do'.

The shift in pronouns here is a subtle drawing-in of the reader towards confidential intimacy with the speaker. 'We' — the 'crazy ladies' — are not in any way improved in 'our' condition by the activity. But 'they tell *you* to go. And *you* do'. Gill comments: 'Sexton's "we" has become a "you," a pronoun that serves at once as a proxy for the "I" who is altogether absent from the poem and for the reader who enters its institutional architecture.'¹²⁰ Gill is right to note this, but Sexton's implied argument goes further. The implication is that 'you', placed in the same circumstances, would act the same way, suffer the same mild humiliation and boredom and feeling of futility, without complaint. This trope partially dissolves the separation between 'crazy' and 'sane', between the controlled space of the hospital and the 'free' space outside. In so doing, it also makes the feminist point that 'you' — meaning especially the female reader, since Sexton is writing as a 'crazy lady' — do a lot of things because 'they' tell you to do them, even though you 'are no better for it'. 'The Panopticon is a marvelous machine which, whatever use one may wish to put it to, produces homogeneous effects of power. [...] So it is not necessary to use force to constrain the convict to good behaviour, the madman to calm, the worker to work, the schoolboy to application, the patient to the observation of the regulations'.¹²¹ Or, one might add, the housewife to her domestic duties. Panopticism can compel compliance without requiring belief in its intrinsic value. As an occupant of the 'best ward', she likely expects to be released relatively soon, but there are no guarantees. The systemic hierarchy, with Doctor Martin at its pinnacle, will determine when that will occur, just as it will determine what modes of treatment she will receive.¹²²

In this ironic pastoral, none of the creatures are free. In particular, the repeated figuration of the patients as insects (bees, moths, and butterflies) suggests that they have become less than human, repeating over and over the same limited range of behaviours — swarming in the hallways, feeding mechanically, succumbing to their tics and compulsions. Occasionally, they are viewed as mammalian, displaying cunning and warmth as foxes or 'foxy children,' pathos as the goat-voiced patient in 'Lullaby', or, as we will see, weak devotion, like the poet's muse-turned-mouse in 'Flee on Your Donkey'. The inversion of

¹²⁰ Jo Gill, 'The House of Herself,' p. 127.

¹²¹ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, p. 202.

¹²² Like the floating eye above the Masonic pyramid on the back of the dollar bill.

pastoral is at its most intense in ‘Noon Walk on the Asylum Lawn’, where all of nature — leafy tree, sunshine, green grass — that would ordinarily be idyllic is full of menace and terrifies the speaker, who in bright daylight feels she is ‘walk[ing] through the valley of the shadow’. Whitman’s transcendental vision of the grass and collective unity in ‘Song of Myself’ becomes an image of hellish isolation. A kind of hell is how Sexton comes to describe the hospital in a later, longer, and much darker poem; it is hell because she and the other patients are trapped irrevocably and unable to transcend their ‘ruined’ condition.

Four years later, in 1962, Sexton is even less sanguine about the hospital, as we see in her long poem ‘Flee on Your Donkey’. The title is an English rendering of the refrain from a short poem by the radical French poet Arthur Rimbaud, which contains a play on words between the name *Anne* and *ane*, the French word for donkey. In the French original, therefore, an identity is created between woman and animal. This too, for Sexton, is a gesture toward ironic pastoral. She is no better than the donkey of her will, on which she has already ‘fled’ her daily life.

At the beginning of the poem’s narrative, the speaker is checking herself back into the mental hospital:

Because there was no other place
to flee to,
I came back to the scene of the disordered senses,
came back last night at midnight,
arriving in the thick June night
without luggage or defences [...]
I signed myself in where a stranger
puts the inked-in X’s —
for this is a mental hospital,
not a child’s game. (ll. 1-10)

The ‘scene of the disordered senses’ is another Rimbaud reference. In one of Rimbaud’s letters, written when he was sixteen, he says that the poet, in order to become a ‘seer’, must undergo ‘a systematic disordering of all the senses’ and implies that alcohol and drugs can be used to this end.¹²³ By describing the hospital in this way, Sexton is implicitly rejecting the teenage Rimbaud’s prescription for becoming a poet, and by further implication her own previous description of it, however tinged with irony, as a ‘summer hotel’. As she says bluntly: ‘this is a mental hospital, not a child’s game’. This verse paragraph — the poem is in

¹²³ Arthur Rimbaud, *Letter to Georges Izambard*, ed. and trans. by Louise Varèse, 13 May 1871, in *Illuminations* (New York: New Directions, 1957), p. 7.

a loosely rhymed free verse throughout, suggesting a loss of control on the poet's part — sets the grim tone for what follows. 'Everyone has left me/ except my muse, *that good nurse./* She stays in my hand,/ a mild white mouse'. The poet still has her muse, now also transmuted into an animal. Her muse/nurse/mouse (note the succession of half-rhymes, suggesting a diminuendo) will make this poem possible and provide a kind of care, but it is small and 'mild', just as she is now 'terribly patient'.

As in 'Lullaby', the poet turns her attention to the window, whose 'lazy and delicate' curtains 'billow and flutter and drop' like the 'Victorian skirts' of her 'two maiden aunts' — suggesting modesty, even prudishness. But the poem takes an abrupt turn into fearful paranoia, though with a back-reference to the world of the maiden aunts with the simile of 'floral arrangements' that darkens that previous image:

Hornets have been sent.
They cluster like floral arrangements on the screen.
Hornets, dragging their thin stingers,
hover outside, all knowing,
hissing: the hornet knows. (ll. 30-4)

This is an alarming image of paranoia, recalling 'Noon Walk' in its projection of sentient hostility onto the environment. Instead of bees, the hospital is at first associated with 'hissing' hornets, known for their severe stings. The pastoral has once again turned sinister. Moreover, the poet's descriptions of her psychotic fellow patients, presented in a deadpan tone of weary familiarity, suggest that she is far from happy to belong. She knows altogether too much about this place, where '[a] new doctor makes rounds/ advertising tranquilisers, insulin, or shock/ to the uninitiated'. She is both cynical and bitter about the 'six years' she has lost to her illness and to her confinement in places like this one, time during which she could have travelled or 'had new children'. 'O my hunger! My hunger!' she cries — a hunger for life, for health, for sanity — before a savage survey of what she sees around her:

In here,
it's the same old crowd,
the same ruined scene. [...].
The permanent guests have done nothing new.
Their faces are still small
like babies with jaundice. (ll. 59-64)

In the same bitter tone, the poet then reflects on the sad and ugly deaths of her parents that occurred during those six years and on the decay of her family. In one of the only

passages in her work that directly addresses her relationship with Dr. Orne outside the hospital, she expresses her feelings about their therapeutic relationship:

But you, my doctor, my enthusiast,
were better than Christ;
you promised me another world
to tell me who
I was. (ll. 80-84)

The poet describes Orne's therapeutic space as 'that little hut,/ that naked blue-veined place,/ my eyes shut on the confusing office,/ eyes circling into my childhood,/ eyes newly cut'. She narrates an incident in which she collapsed in the snow outside Orne's office, lay there for hours unnoticed, and was finally carried back inside by the nurse — perhaps signifying a failed escape attempt. She describes the hypnotic regression, her recording of dreams 'like third string fighters,/ each one a bad bet/ because there was no other':

I stared at them,
concentrating on the abyss
the way one looks down into a rock quarry,
uncountable miles down,
my hands swinging down like hooks
to pull dreams up out of their cage. (ll. 113-8)

The asylum once more appears as a carceral and disciplinary space when the speaker links its architecture and interiors to 'a cage'. Orne's therapy, in other words, conducted in his office, has opened up interior spaces — 'that naked, blue-veined place' of memories recalled with closed eyes — and an 'abyss' from which she pull[s] dreams up out of their cage'. Repeating the refrain 'My hunger! My hunger!' the poet circles back to her mother's death, to how Orne taught her 'to believe in dreams' and how she 'dredg[ed] them up' for him until they became 'mournful and weak', and finally speaks of giving birth to her children. But the exploration of these spaces within the clinical setting of Orne's office has not healed her. This circling mimes the theme of sad, useless repetition that pervades the poem: mirroring the patient who repeats phrases or moves round the perimeter of the room in endless clockwork ritual.

The speaker returns her attention to her surroundings, where 'the curtains flutter out/ and slump against the bars'. This is a figure for her own efforts to escape her illness and the exhausted resignation that has brought her back to the hospital, looking out of the window at the hospital grounds and beyond.

I have come back
but disorder is not what it was.

I have lost the trick of it!
The innocence of it! (ll. 186-9)

Sexton likely means the ability to gain fresh perceptions and make poetry from them while in hospital. Experience has replaced innocence, in William Blake's terms, and what was once intriguing about being in mental hospital — the other patients and their disorders as well as her own, the relationships she sees there, the psychiatric and nursing staff — is now all sadly familiar and banal. She is 'recommitted,/fastened to the wall like a bathroom plunger,/ held like a prisoner/ who was so poor/ he fell in love with jail'. The hospital has become visibly to her what it had perhaps always been essentially — a prison, in which she is a 'lifer'.

I stand at this old window
complaining of the soup,
examining the grounds,
allowing myself the wasted life. (ll. 199-202)

The sense of futility is overpowering. Without prior knowledge of the setting and the poet, one may speculate that the poem is written in/about prison. Feeling herself surrender to the panoptical authority, 'this hierarchy of death,' she asks whether she is finally ready for the ECT she has previously rejected: 'Is this the old trick, the wasting away,/ the skull that waits for its dose/ of electric power?' In a final cry of despair, she urges herself to 'for once make a deliberate decision' to 'flee this sad hotel', no longer the 'summer hotel' of four summers ago. 'Ride out/ any old way you please!' The possibility of meaningful communication with others is shut down. The poet summarises bluntly: 'In this place everyone talks to his own mouth./That's what it means to be crazy'.

The central contradiction of this major poem is of course that Sexton is *not* 'talk[ing] to [her] own mouth'. She is talking about people who have no one to talk to — speaking for people to whom no one really listens. She has in fact successfully and powerfully communicated her experience and her emotions. The choice she describes is between uncontrolled psychosis or suicidal depression and the dismal dullness of the hospital space with its mind-numbing drugs, its panoptical, confining routines, and its patients who seem not to progress but rather to deteriorate. Yet in writing the poem she has at least temporarily escaped this fate. She has again, with her rigorous, painful exposure, pulled off her trick of reverse panopticism in a work of great though dark power.

Sexton, then, became caught in a cycle between home and hospital. Yet throughout the cycle, much of her existence was also spent outside — in the city, and on the shore. She

wrote with similarly complex and conflicted feelings about both spaces to which we shall now turn.

Into the Open and Half Way Back: Sexton in the Outside World

We can envision Sexton's cyclical existence not merely in temporal terms but in spatial ones as an array of overlapping, narrow loops centring mainly on a few institutions in which she spent time and on the places she lived as an adult nearly all of which were in and around Boston, Massachusetts. Fewer, more various, and much larger loops represent her travel further afield, to give readings, to undertake residencies and teaching fellowships, and on a few occasions to travel abroad. As her agoraphobia gripped her more and more tightly toward the end of her life, these loops got smaller: visits to a few friends and her therapist alongside the occasional reading.

Sexton was a lifelong inhabitant of the suburbs of Boston. As a child and adolescent, she spent time on the New England coast every summer, and not infrequently later on as well. As an adult, she was a frequent visitor to New York City, and in her thirties spent some weeks in Paris, Belgium and Italy. Though she seldom writes about public open spaces or events at length, they nonetheless form a backdrop to important events in her personal life, and are referenced or described as such: 'I don't think I write public poems. I write very personal poems'.¹²⁴ As I have tried to show, Sexton's poetry, while appearing to be merely personal, in fact is simultaneously 'paradigmatic of the opposite tendency' because so many of the experiences she wrote about were privately shared by millions of other women as public secrets — topics widely known but seldom discussed.¹²⁵ Hence, although she did not directly focus her poems on exterior spaces or events, she did compose poems that indirectly approach her *personal* configuration of such spaces. There are, however, no topographical poems of social criticism, such as the title poem in Lowell's *For the Union Dead* or 'Central Park'. This is at least partly because for Sexton's generation, the public sphere was still almost exclusively under the control of men, while women were meant to be confined to the private, domestic and familial realm. Gill notes that 'Sexton seeks to secure or ground her narratives; in each case it appears that the only fit locus for her despair is a dystopian waste land'.¹²⁶ In this sense, it is not 'enough to constitute a biography or autobiography in

¹²⁴ Anne Sexton, *No Evil Star: Selected Essays, Interviews and Prose*, ed. by Steven E. Colburn (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1985), p. 83.

¹²⁵ Caroline King Barnard Hall, *Anne Sexton* (Boston: Twayne, 1989), p. 43.

¹²⁶ Jo Gill, 'The House of Herself: Reading Place and Space in the Poetry of Anne Sexton,' p. 49.

narrative terms; one must also, and more crucially, do a topoanalysis of the places one has inhabited or experienced'.¹²⁷ Sexton's statement that she writes only 'personal' poetry and Linda Gray Sexton's correspondence that describes her mother's fear of 'open' space contradict what is really found in her poetry. And in any case, the personal is always already inscribed within the social. This section will show the ambivalence in Sexton's portrayal of spaces outside the home. In this context, Jo Gill quotes Doreen Massey:

The social spaces through which we live do not only consist of physical things: of bricks and mortar, streets and bridges, mountains and sea-shore, and of what we make of these things. They consist also of those less tangible spaces we construct out of social interaction.¹²⁸

This is a succinct summary of the underlying premise of cultural geography. Massey's use of the preposition 'through' is noteworthy, because it implies not only that 'we' move through these spaces but that they are essential to our existence: we live only 'through' (by means of) them. Gill goes on to argue persuasively: Sexton 'explicitly yoke[s] space and time, that locate[s] experience and the memory of it in specific places and, conversely, that use place and space as an index of particular temporal moments and thus as a productive route to understanding'.¹²⁹

A poem that precisely and evocatively yokes emotion to spatial distance and the effort to close it is 'Flight'. In this case, the emotion is passion: the poet wants literally to fly to her lover, unable to bear being separated from him any longer. In this emotional field of force, the people, places, and objects the poet encounters in transit, or simply imagines, are charged with vividness. The poem falls into the typically masculine genre of the 'road trip' in its linear account of what the speaker sees along a specific geographical route, but, unusually for the period, it is written by a woman and from an emphatically feminine perspective — in contrast, say, to the most narrative of this kind at the time, Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*. She begins: 'Thinking that I would find you,/ thinking I would make the plane/ that goes hourly out of Boston/ I drove into the city'. The body of the poem describes this journey in enough detail that anyone who knows Boston could trace Sexton's route. The time is sunset and the

¹²⁷ Edward Casey, *The Fate of Place: A Philosophical History* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2013), p. 289.

¹²⁸ Jo Gill, 'The House of Herself', p. 25.

¹²⁹ Jo Gill, 'The House of Herself', p. 33. Gill has opened a new way of looking at memory which is 'dredged' from spatial association and used as material for reimagining both the experience and the spatial locus itself. Such process is less frequent in the later work of Sexton, where revisions of fairy tales, the search for religious faith, and even daily horoscopes serve successively as frameworks for the poetry.

season likely to be autumn: 'There was rose and violet on the river/ as I drove through the mist into the city'.

In contrast to her own agitation, the poet imagines others, 'even the river', relaxing at the end of the day:

Thinking that on such a night
every thirsty man would have his jug
and that the Negro women would lie down
on pale sheets and even the river into town
would stretch out naturally on its couch
I drove into the city. (ll. 5-10)

Sexton reveals her class and race-bound social naiveté — and perhaps unconscious prejudice — in these images of men with their 'jugs' of ale and 'Negro women' contrasting in colour with their sheets. Versions of the final phrase, variously permuted, are repeated several times throughout the poem, adding to the poet's sense of urgency: she not only drives, but is also driven, by her desire.

Foot on the gas
I sang aloud to the front seat,
to the clumps of women in cotton dresses,
to the patches of fog crusting the banks,
and to the sailboats swinging on their expensive hooks. (ll. 13-17)

The speaker at this point in the journey is joyful because she believes she is drawing closer to her lover as she approaches the airport near the mouth of the Charles: 'I dropped through the city/ as the river does [...]'. Also, evident from these details is that the speaker knows the city very well indeed and — during this trip through it at least — feels affection for it, even its less obviously attractive parts:

through the Sumner Tunnel,
trunk by trunk through its sulphurous walls,
tile by tile like a men's urinal,
slipping through
like somebody else's package. (ll. 18-22)

The affective mapping created by the speaker's journey now comes momentarily to a halt as she 'parks ... on a dime' in the airport car park. Her motion resumes with another urgently repeated sentence: 'I ran through the airport./ Wild for love, I ran through the airport,/ stockings and skirts and dollars'. Again, it is worth mentioning that Sexton can act on this sort of impulse because she has the 'dollars' to do so. Then comes the anticlimax, with '[t]he night clerk [who] yawned all night at the public,/ his mind on tomorrow's wages'. This description, which mingles class-based condescension with the speaker's frustration,

again reminds the reader that Sexton's social and cultural experience is circumscribed by her privileged background. The emotional and geographic movement of the poem grinds to a halt in short sentences whose sound ('sat...sat', pool of glue') conveys the stasis they describe, and then goes into reverse:

All flights were grounded.
The planes sat and the gulls sat,
heavy and rigid in a pool of glue.
Knowing I would never find you
I drove out of the city. (ll. 42-46)

Sexton's description of the return journey is coloured by her gloomy mood, as fog becomes rain and as she drives 'past the eye and ear infirmaries,/ past the office buildings lined up like dentures [...]'. These lines seem to give the city a face — and, with 'dentures', reinforced by 'infirmaries' the face of an old and perhaps dying person. This further tilts the poem's tone away from passion and purposeful direction and towards resignation and the dead end of mortality. The poem concludes:

and along Storrow Drive the streetlights
sucked in all the insects who
had nowhere else to go. (ll. 54-56)

Though the poet is describing in some detail actual physical motion through a real place, the poem can be read retrospectively as a symbolic landscape. The pathetic fallacy of the insects underlines the speaker's feeling of defeat and despair; Sexton here is comparing herself once again to a moth, as in 'Lullaby', in a kind of inverted pastoral. 'Knowing that [she] will never find' her lover, she is no different from the insects who have no other destination but the streetlights they are 'suck[ed] into' and cluster pointlessly around. In fact, her entire journey is reduced metaphorically to an insect that is drawn to a light only to find that it is not a true destination. Unlike the insects — and unlike the protagonists of masculine road narratives — she cannot find a destination. Her story ends with a despairing drift towards death. All her passionate efforts to close the distance to her lover have failed.

Another poem in which space serves to figure time and vice versa, here in a sort of para-urban setting aboard the ocean liner the *Queen Elizabeth*, is 'Crossing the Atlantic'. Having described the 'oyster-gray wind' into which the ship is sailing on this 'out of season' voyage, the speaker tells us:

The ship is 27 hours out.
I have entered her.

She might be a whale,
sleeping 2000 and ship's company,
the last 40¢ martini
and steel staterooms where night goes on forever. [...]
I have walked cities,
miles of mole alleys with carpets. (ll. 15-25)

The liner's interior is a sort of underground metropolis, with its windowless 'steel staterooms' that evidently give the speaker claustrophobia, despite 'the last 40¢ martini' on sale in the bars, as she sardonically observes. The ship's passageways are 'mole alleys' through this pseudo-subterranean space that to the poet feels like entire 'cities', presumably because they are large and densely populated — passageways lined with cabin doors, like streets — and yet anonymous.

At the opening of the poem, the speaker is located at the stern, looking back toward the New England coastline and its small fishing harbours. Now she looks back to it in memory in an apostrophe: 'Oh my Atlantic of the cracked shores,/ those blemished gates of Rockport and Boothbay,/ those harbor smells like the innards of animals!' She remembers the *Queen Elizabeth's* predecessor, the *Queen Mary*, the 'bayer at wharfs and Victorian houses', which carried her mother and grandmother on the same voyage to England. She states, almost chanting:

I have read each page of my mother's voyage.
I have read each page of her mother's voyage.
I have learned their words as they learned Dickens'.
I have swallowed these words like bullets. (ll. 34-37)

The past has invaded the present through the psychogeography of the journey. Her mother and grandmother would have likely read Dickens' novels as an introduction to England and English sensibilities, and the poet reads their diaries likewise to gain understanding of how her female forebears viewed what they found on the trip across and thereafter. Their words are 'like bullets' presumably because they are hard, unyielding, and injurious. Hence she draws a contrast with her maternal forebears on this voyage, with whom she does not identify despite immersing herself in their narratives: 'Unlike them, I cannot toss in the cabin/ as in childbirth'. She is still sitting 'wrapped in robes' toward the stern, fascinated by the wake: 'a ragged bridal veil, unexplained,/ seductive [...]'. The wake (with an overtone of a funeral party below the wedding metaphor), bridal white and translucent, is 'rushing down the stairs' of the larger ripples the ship trails. This is the sign of some radical insufficiency in her life and those of her mother and grandmother, connected to their marriages, 'seductive' but

‘never enough’. The speaker is looking back toward America and her heritage: her now-dead mother and grandmother, and given the ragged veil, perhaps her own unhappy marriage. The voyage, however, is relentless:

The ship goes on
as though nothing else were happening.
Generation after generation,
I go her way. (ll. 46-49)

The speaker has become her forebears, subjectively lengthening the duration of the journey. She feels compelled, as the crossing becomes symbolic as well as literal, to repeat the same pattern of life as her mother and grandmother. Sexton here uses the journey as a way to express her feelings of entrapment in family tradition and history. Space has become time whilst motion has become cyclical repetition. Now the ship’s physically smooth motion appears metaphorically as violence:

She will run East, knot by knot, over an old bloodstream,
stripping it clear,
each hour ripping it, pounding, pounding,
forcing through as through a virgin. (ll. 50-53)

Though the ship is conventionally gendered as ‘she’, its motion is now ‘stripping... clear’ the ‘old bloodstream’ of the poet’s maternal inheritance in what is described in the terms of a marital rape. The poem ends on a note of panic: ‘Oh she is so quick!/ This dead street never stops!’ The ‘dead street’, picking up the earlier description of the ship’s interior as ‘cities’ threaded with ‘miles of mole alleys’, is now a figure for the ‘deadness’ of the repetition she is enduring, and the sense that this journey through space — her journey through time, towards the fates of her mother and grandmother — is also swift and unstoppable. A ‘city’ afloat is bearing the speaker towards recapitulating a life she does not want as she assumes the weight of female adulthood in her family line. The home, the hospital, and most exterior spaces became oppressive to her over time. This begs the question: Were there spaces in Sexton’s past, before she became trapped in the back-and-forth of agoraphobia and claustrophobia, in which she felt happy and free? We shall address this question below.

Where the public and commercial space of the city — including the floating pseudo-city of an ocean liner — is generally associated with adulthood in Sexton’s poetry, the shore itself and the houses by the sea in which she spent time are typically associated with childhood and adolescence. For the poet as adult, this ‘in between’ space is typically erotically charged. In almost all of Sexton’s shore poems, we see a triad: the speaker, another

person (often a lover, sometimes a family member, in the late poems her therapist) and the space she describes. Unlike urban/suburban space, which tends to induce anxiety, the poet mostly feels a degree of liberty and even abandon in this setting — though not always. And in the last months of Sexton's life, the sea comes to represent, contradictorily, both emotional chaos and the limitless space of oblivion.

The very next poem after 'Her Kind' in *To Bedlam and Part Way Back* is a narrative about the seashore entitled 'The Exorcists'. Given the title and this context, one might have expected a poem, say, about psychiatrists trying to purge the speaker of her demonic rebelliousness. Instead, 'The Exorcists' tells a story as if testifying before some authority, paradoxically denying that the events it recounts ever happened:

And I solemnly swear
on the chill of secrecy
that I know you not, this room never, [...]
I say: this small event
is not. (ll. 1-5)

The language has biblical overtones: 'I know you not' echoes the denials of St. Peter before the Romans. (The other Biblical association is the use of the verb 'to know' to mean 'to have intercourse with'.) The speaker goes on to deny that she knows 'this room', her 'swollen dress' (perhaps because she is pregnant), the calendar, and 'the pulse we pare and cover' — which may mean a desire that the speaker and the addressee must both conceal by denying that it ever happened. She continues, though: 'So I prepare, am dosed/ in ether and will not cry what stays unsaid'. It is as if she is about to undergo a kind of surgery, 'dosed in ether', to remove this memory, which, since she claims she 'will not cry' [for] what she asserts that she will not speak about, must be of great emotional significance. The speaker then proceeds, in contradictory fashion, to narrate the 'small event' with vivid realism:

I was brown with August,
the clapping waves at my thighs
and a storm riding into the cove. We swam
while the others beached and burst
for their boarded huts, their hale cries
shouting back to us and the hollow slam
of the dory against the float.¹³⁰ (ll. 13-9)

¹³⁰ A dory is a small, shallow-draft boat, about 5 to 7 m. long, traditionally used for fishing and in particular by lobstermen along the New England coast.

Being ‘brown’ and suntanned is a recurrent figure for freedom in Sexton’s work — the sign that she has been out of doors, out of both the domestic and custodial spaces in which she feels confined.¹³¹ She and the addressee are doing something dangerous but exciting: staying in the ocean when an electrical storm is ‘riding into the cove’. The other swimmers have, in an explosively alliterative passage that conveys their urgent haste, ‘beached and burst/ for their boarded huts’ on the sand above the tideline. The poet recalls the sounds of ‘their hale cries’ mingling with the sound of a boat ‘slam[med]’ by the rising waves against the float to which it is tethered.

The storm breaks over the speaker and the addressee with ‘black arms of thunder,’ an abrupt shift back into the metaphorical that inverts the mood of the more subtle ‘clapping waves’ a few lines earlier. Alarmed now, ‘breath[ing] in rain’, they ‘thrash’ for shore

as if we were trapped
in green and that suddenly inadequate stain¹³²
of lightning belling around
our skin. (ll. 30-4)

Here, the lightning’s illumination may be ‘suddenly inadequate’ because the sky has darkened and they feel the need for more light, even as they worry about lightning striking near them. Then:

Bodies in air
we raced for the empty lobsterman-shack.
It was yellow inside, the sound
of the underwing of the sun. (ll. 34-7)

Where the other bathers are sheltering in their own ‘boarded huts’, the speaker and the addressee take cover in an empty ‘lobsterman-shack’. Sexton tells us, synaesthetically (hinted at in the lightning ‘belling’ above), that the yellow colour of its interior was ‘the sound/ of the underwing of the sun’. The phrase evokes the storm-clouds, or light breaking horizontally over the sea below them. The energy and fitful illumination of the storm in this contained space suggest a growing erotic energy between the speaker and her companion.

¹³¹ Plath expresses a similar longing to be brown-skinned and by the sea in her letters.

¹³² This is not the only time that Sexton will describe light in or near the sea as a ‘stain’. See also the opening lines of ‘The Kite’, discussed below.

Here the narrative abruptly breaks off. We do not know what happens between the speaker and the addressee in the shack, but given what follows, it is probably a sexual encounter. The speaker half-keeps her undertaking not to speak of it:

I swear,
I most solemnly swear, on all the bric-a-brac
of summer loves, I know
you not. (ll. 37-40)

So, while the speaker feels constrained not to describe the rest of the incident — perhaps because she and the addressee are now both married to other people — it is clear that she feels nostalgic delight in what happened. That the encounter was pleasurable rather than otherwise is implied by the speaker's mock-legalistic of a 'solemn' oath 'on all the bric-a-brac/ of summer loves'. A word like 'bric-a-brac' and the expression 'summer loves' — commonplace at the time to discuss liaisons among high-school and college students working summer jobs in seaside resort towns — hardly suggests a rape or attempted rape. However, the poem's opening lines also suggest something more significant than an innocent 'summer love'. The sea, the beach, and the shack are all spaces of freedom in this poem but still charged electrically with the possibility of trauma and threat.

Earlier in the collection there is another beach poem, 'The Kite'. The space is only partly open, as the beach belongs to the hotel where the speaker is staying. (This in itself is a geographical class marker.) The poem is subtitled 'West Harwich, Massachusetts, 1954-1959'. Evidently Sexton and her husband stayed at this hotel every summer between those years. The triad in this poem, then, is the speaker, the space of the beach, and the husband, who is invisible in the poem except as a component of 'we'. She sets the scene:

Here, in front of the summer hotel
the beach waits like an altar.
We are lying on a cloth of sand
while the Atlantic noon stains
the world in light. (ll. 1-5)

The beach is 'like an altar' where the couple lie 'on a cloth of sand' — the altar cloth. To what deity the beach is an altar is not stated, but perhaps to the sun itself, which at noon 'stains/ the world in light' as the lightning in 'The Exorcists' was an 'inadequate stain'. (Note that 'this summer hotel' is also how Sexton metaphorically describes the mental hospital in 'You, Doctor Martin'. As so often, figurative language links the different and contrasting

spaces she writes about.) ‘It was much the same/ five years ago,’ the poet says casually, but rather deceptively as it turns out. She continues:

I remember
how Ezio Pinza was flying a kite
for the children. None of us noticed
it then. (ll. 7-10)

Aside from the contradiction between these two sentences, the event is clearly significant, since it is the only unique happening in the poem. The rest of the passage simply describes the various modes of inattention of the guests on the beach:

The pleated lady
was still a nest of her knitting.
Four pouchy fellows kept their policy
of gin and tonic while trading some money.
The parasol girls slept, sun-sitting
their lovely years. (ll. 10-15)

Each social type is labelled with a sardonic modifier, linked through alliteration: ‘pleated’, ‘pouchy’, ‘parasol’. Despite the fact that Pinza was not only a famous opera singer but a Hollywood star, no-one apparently notices him playing with some kids — including the speaker, who includes herself in the ‘us’ with the other guests on the beach. The poet enlarges on this theme:

No one thought
how precious it was, or even how funny
the festival seemed, square rigged in the air.
The air was a season they had bought,
like the cloth of sand. (ll. 15-9)

‘No-one thought’ echoes ‘none of us noticed’ — but with a subtle difference. The speaker is no longer included directly in the group. She is confirming that she did in fact notice that what Pinza was doing was ‘precious’ — valuable, beautiful and funny. The well-to-do guests have ‘bought’ the summer air and the (private) beach and take them for granted. They are oblivious to the real, joyful life of the singer and the children with the kite.

The speaker then turns the focus on herself: ‘I’ve been waiting/ on this private stretch of summer land,/ counting these five years and wondering why’. The space of the beach is defined by two modifiers: ‘private’ and ‘summer’. These are its socio-cultural markers. We can infer that she is not content; she is waiting for something, some happiness that does not arrive. (The husband barely alluded to, who forms a kind of present absence in the poem,

may be a source of the speaker's discontent.) But while 'wondering why' seems to refer primarily to 'counting the years', it may also have a less specific referent: Why is she there? Why is she waiting? She concludes:

I mean, it was different that time with
Ezio Pinza flying a kite.
Maybe, after all, he knew something more
and was right. (ll. 23-6)

The tone is deliberately hesitant, close to everyday speech ('I mean..', [m]aybe..) as if the speaker were struggling to articulate the affective kernel inside this remembrance. She seems to be saying, with a degree of calculated inarticulacy, that Pinza's playing with the children offered an instance of an alternative mode of being — attentive, adventurous, playful, open — not shared by the other guests or, at the time, by the speaker herself. Pinza and the children truly *inhabit* the space of the beach by exploring and enjoying its potentialities for play. Her failure was not, as with the other guests, failing to notice the event, but rather failing to recognise it for what it was and join in. Pinza's way of being was the 'right' one, but she missed her chance, and now she is trapped in the same affluent boredom and routine.

Unlike the expensive hotel, the beach house, shared with a lover, becomes a place of erotic play and freedom in 'Barefoot': Loving me with my shoes off/ means loving my long brown legs, [...]/ and my feet, those two children/ let out to play naked'. The speaker continues flirtatiously: 'Further up, my darling, the woman/ is calling her secrets'. [...]. She reminds him:

There is no one else but us
in this house on the land spit. [...]
And I'm your barefoot wench for a
whole week. (ll. 16-20)

The sense of being without care, in a timeless time of pleasure, is maintained through a description of the surroundings: 'The gulls kill fish,/ crying out like three-year-olds./ the surf's a narcotic, calling out,/ *I am, I am, I am*/ all night long [...]' (ll. 23-7). This triple cry invokes the sad song of longing sung by the bird in Whitman's 'Out of the Cradle, Endlessly Rocking': '*Blow! blow! blow! Blow up, sea-winds, along Paumanok's shore!*' But here it is the surf simply asserting its being with its sound, 'narcotic' not only because it lulls the speaker to sleep but also because its simple assertion of being soothes her: here in this space by the sea, she is, she *exists*, as herself. Part of the pleasure of being in this house on the shore,

as was the case for the speaker in 'The Exorcists' with the lobsterman's hut, is the combination of the privacy of the interior with the relatively unpopulated, semi-wild exterior.

In 'February 4th', Sexton once again returns in memory to the house on Squirrel Island, a small island off the Maine coast owned by her family, where she spent time in the summers with her adored grandfather, who was nicknamed 'Comfort'.¹³³ 'It's a room I dream about./ I had it twice. Two years out of forty-two./ Once at nine. Once more at thirty-six' The precise chronology establishes a bridge between childhood and adulthood. She has fantasies of omnipotence:

There I was dragging the ocean, that knock-out,
in and out by its bottle-green neck, letting it chew
the rocks, letting it haul beach glass and furniture sticks
in and out. From my room I controlled the woman-of-war,
that Mary who came in and in opening and closing the door. (ll. 4-8)

As a child, she imagines controlling the ocean, creating the tides, as she also believes she controls the maid coming and going. From the window she can see 'the sea scrubbing away like an old woman/ her wash. A lobsterman hunting for a refund, / gulls like flying babies come by for their dole' (ll. 12-15).

There is hard work and hunger in the seashore world she views from her well-to-do window, but it is reliable and familiar. From the child's perspective the poet adopts, there is no essential distinction between the ocean, as it labours like an old washerwoman with its 'hauling' of flotsam and jetsam, the birds 'come for their dole' of fish scraps, or the lobsterman and the maid — they are all simply phenomena of the place. This is of course a class-bound perspective, that of a child in a family that can own an island. Like the sea, the lobstermen and the servant also toil, and the speaker as a child can enjoy fantasies of omnipotence. For the poet, these are treasured experiences, recalled '[a]ll from the room I pray to when I am dreaming and devout'. The space of the room, one of comfort and safety, is contiguous via the window with the wider space of the ocean and its inhabitants, like lobstermen and gulls. The triad here is with her grandfather, who is not fully assimilated into this window-linked contiguous space, and who once again is not immediately present with the poet as a child: she can hear '[m]y grandfather typing,' presumably in the next room (the

¹³³ It is one of the Squirrel Island Maine poems— the most specific poem is 'Grandfather, Your Wound'. The island is a gated community of a kind, a closed private world available from the mainland only by boat, no cars—and the four or five family houses there formed a kind of private compound that was available only to her extended family—a ward of its own, of sorts.

fact that he is represented by a participle, 'typing', rather than a complete verb, reinforces the sense that he is an integral part of the scene, a continual presence). As his nickname implies, he is available to comfort her when she is frightened. 'He is my little Superman, he rocks me when the lighthouse flattens her eyes out'. This verb, which reintroduces the pathetic fallacy with the lighthouse as 'she', is the one element of threat or anxiety depicted in the child's world; but 'rocks me' again echoes Whitman's 'Out of the Cradle...' and its mood of melancholy nostalgia for a lost innocence.

Very late in her poetic career and her own life, Sexton brought back the trope of woman-as-house in an entirely different way, in the poem 'There You Were'. It begins on a beach, again a private one, with Barbara, the woman who is its owner (and is an avatar of Barbara Schwartz, Sexton's last psychotherapist) standing and 'surveying' the scene of a 'calm' sea. The speaker/space/other triad in this scene is not yet complete: the speaker is present only as observer addressing Barbara. In this moment of tranquillity, something unexpected occurs:

...an entire house broke out of the sea
and collapsed at your feet.
And you strode toward it
to see if it had a problem,
or if the sea-carpenter in you
could set it upright. (ll. 12-17)

Barbara, the speaker tells her, 'had only a small fear/ and the fear was not for yourself/ but for her, lest she drift outward,/ into the sea at war with itself'. If we had not previously realised that, while the beach may be real, the 'house' is a metaphor; the speaker's referring to it as 'she' hints at its real significance. The house is a woman, in severe psychic distress, emerging from the sea 'at war with itself' in a fragile and 'collapsed' condition. Curiously, the sea is also part of the woman, but a part that has been externalised from the house; the containing 'structure' with its walls, doors, and windows is an attempt to protect the self from the unbounded, uncontrollable psychic space of the sea.

Sexton tells us in her first collection that 'some women marry houses' and thereby become them. Now she figures a woman as a 'collapsed' and broken house. But Barbara works on repairing her: 'even when fury blew out her chimney,/ even when love lifted the shingles/ even when loss after loss/ cracked her cage/ and the sea boiled at the edge of the structure'. It is notable that Sexton uses the word 'structure' twice in the poem to describe the metaphorical house-self. The word 'structure' was newly current in the discourses of

psychiatry, sociology and philosophy in the 1960s and 1970s. There follows another shift of pronouns, from third person (she/it) to first:

The house of my body has spoken
often as you rebuild me like blocks,
and promise to come visit
when I'm finally adjusted on safe land,
and am livable [...] (ll. 40-4)

The speaker simply yearns to be on 'safe land', no longer at the mercy of the tides of mania and depression. She will have 'storm windows and screens,/ mattresses, fixtures,/ sand dollars, cups' and be, she says airily, 'inhabitable and all that./ But not for sale!'¹³⁴ She is 'not for sale' because she is not going to surrender her independence. She must first of all be 'inhabitable' to herself:

Perhaps when I'm an antique,
as a gift,
cranky but firm,
I'll take in boarders
who admire my ocean view. (ll. 50-4)

Sexton in this poem moves from an exterior, third-person view of herself as house/woman, an enclosure surrounded by the chaos of the sea/outside that threatens to destroy her, to a first-person view of her interior space in the process of 'adjustment'. ('Adjustment' was a commonly used term in psychotherapy at the time which signified the patient learning to manage their psychological condition and to cope with everyday life.)¹³⁵ This is analogous to being made 'inhabitable'. She has accepted her metaphoric identification with houses by making her house-self a beach house with 'storm windows and screens'.

The last poem in which Sexton writes of the sea and the beach, and one of the very last poems she wrote before her suicide, is 'In Excelsis' from August 1974. Its setting is the same as 'There You Were': the beach, with Barbara Schwartz. The poet recapitulates her memories of the sea from earlier times:

I have seen her smooth as a cheek.
I have seen her easy,

¹³⁴ It is interesting that Sexton uses the word 'inhabitable' rather than 'habitable' a synonym for 'livable'. The antonym of 'uninhabitable', the 'in-' prefix suggests a certain interiority, which resonates with 'livable'. To go on living, the poet has to be able to *inhabit* herself at least somewhat comfortably.

¹³⁵ According to some critics of psychiatry – for example, the spokesman for the anti-psychiatry movement, R.D. Laing – this sort of terminology reveals the one-way nature of the patient/doctor relationship. The patient must adjust to society. The possibility that society itself might be maladjusted is automatically dismissed.

doing her business,
lapping in. [...]
I have seen her drown me twice,
and yet not take me. (ll. 15-22)

The ocean, personified as a woman, can be gentle or destructive. This recapitulation is prefatory to a quasi-religious experience the speaker shares with her friend: 'We have come to worship,/ the tongues of the surf are prayers,/ and we vow,/ the unspeakable vow./ Both silently./ Both differently'. The ocean is a goddess, but because 'the tongues of the surf are prayers', the 'vow' may be to some still greater being. Now the poet expresses her desire in a powerful series of similes and metaphors:

I wish to enter her like a dream,
leaving my roots here on the beach
like a pan of knives.
And my past to unravel, with its knots and snarls,
and walk into ocean,
letting it explode over me
and outward, where I would drink the moon
and my clothes would slip away,
and I would sink into the great mother arms
I never had [...] (ll. 33-42)

This is clearly a death-wish, but the death the poet wishes for is ecstatic, a union with the sea-mother after she lets go of all the painful 'knots and snarls' of her and 'drink[s] the moon'. Again, there is a strong echo of 'Out of the Cradle..' and especially of its conclusion: '...the sea,/ Delaying not, hurrying not,/ Whisper'd me through the night, and very plainly before day-break,/ Lisp'd to me the low and delicious word DEATH; And again Death — ever Death, Death, Death'.¹³⁶ In fact, Whitman's elegy almost seems to be the *ur*-text for many if not all of Sexton's shore poems; but only now is the oceanic whisper's meaning clear to the poet. Thus the shore, for Sexton as for Whitman, is essentially liminal; it is the true threshold not only between constraint and freedom but between life and death.

The sea being described in this way also evokes Eric Neumann's *The Great Mother*, a Jungian study of female archetypes, which proposes a polarity along the 'Mother axis' between the Hindu deity Kali, the 'terrible mother' who stands for death, destruction, and chaos, and the Egyptian goddess Isis, the 'good mother' who brings life, birth or rebirth, and

¹³⁶ Killingsworth, *The Cambridge Introduction to Walt Whitman*, p. 73.

fertility. In Sexton's vision, the sea is a fusion of these two opposites, as of course it is in reality: gentle and violent, life-giving and deadly. This is also why the season is 'half winter, half spring' — the season of death and the season of new life experienced together. This fusion at the level of symbol and archetype, however, contains a profound antithesis, which is resolved, as it is for Whitman, by the sea offering death as a gift, an embrace.

But the speaker qualifies her last assertion, that she 'never had' 'mother arms' with 'except here where the abyss/ throws itself on the sand/ blow by blow,/ over and over [...]'. In some profound psychological sense, the sea has been the poet's true mother, an 'abyss' or immense void that is at the same time an immense embrace — a space simultaneously empty and full.

Conclusion: White Space, Black Figure

In 'Cultural Geography and the Place of the Literary,' Sara Blair delineates spatiality as an individual's 'articulation of space' — a social site for interaction that documents their experience. In other words, spatiality is the distillation of people's 'affective and social experience of space'.¹³⁷ It is from this perspective that I have attempted to examine Anne Sexton's descriptions of the spaces through which she moved. The examination has yielded a deeper understanding of the specifically *political* power of her work. Sexton, of the poets dubbed 'Confessional', was the most radical, in content if not in form. With no training in writing until her late twenties and little literary background, she came at poetry as a way to heal herself; her initial goal was therapeutic rather than artistic, although these values quite quickly switched their importance. Taking her own emotions and perceptions directly as her raw material, Sexton acknowledged no boundaries as to what constituted appropriate material, but the cultural and social boundaries of the types of spaces she inhabited were what she tested continually in her poetry. The first of these was the space of the family home.

By the time she began to write, Sexton was already in revolt against the role of housewife that post-World War II mass culture was imposing on middle-class women. Central to this oppressive role, as even the word 'housewife' implies, was the domestic space itself, which the wife was supposed to render into a kind of exemplary tableau in competition with the other women who were her neighbours. The wife was meant to be 'planted' in her kitchen and in the bedroom she shared with her husband, ensuring that the home was

¹³⁷ Sara Blair, 'Cultural Geography and the Place of the Literary', *American Literary History* 10.3 (1998): 544-67 (544-45).

welcoming and comfortable for him, in service to him and her children. As such the wife was near the base of a Foucauldian pyramid of social control and discipline.

After a brief period of enthusiasm for this existence, Sexton — especially after the birth of her first child — discovered that she neither desired the role nor was capable of fulfilling it. This crisis erupted when her mental illness first manifested and was treated. She had come to see herself as a doll in a doll's house, an animated mannequin, a fake. The domestic space felt confining and deadening to her; her home became a version of the theatre of falsehood and alienation that her family home had been to her as an adolescent. Poems like 'The House', 'Self in 1958', and 'Housewife' are the records of Sexton's exploration of the relationship between the physical domestic space, the cultural space that is mapped onto the domestic, and the way the two shaped and constrained the lives of women who inhabited them.

Writing — and especially writing the emotionally frank poetry to which she was committed — was a way to escape the panoptical control to which she was subjected. As I have noted, Sexton's furious and sustained effort to speak the subjective truth of all aspects of her life as a woman, in defiance of feminine decorum, proved liberatory for other women, though she never acknowledged herself as part of a wider women's movement or spoke as 'we' rather than 'I'. The figure of the 'possessed' witch, with her magical power of flight, was a metaphor for the partial freedom offered by writing. But for this very reason, the witch could not be merely a fantasy, nor could the imaginary spaces she inhabits be a true refuge. She was under threat of social sanction for breaking free of domestic space and violating the norms of femininity, even though she recreated a kind of domesticity outside panoptical control; but the poet knew the witch would suffer for her transgression.

Sexton's manic-depressive illness continued, and she was repeatedly hospitalised. At first, partly because of Dr. Orne's flattering attention and partly because it allowed her an escape from the wife-and-mother role she was still trying to fulfil, she experienced her early stays in hospital as vacations at a 'summer hotel' where, relieved of domestic responsibilities, she could focus on her writing. The space of the hospital was thus simultaneously liberating and constraining, rather as a back brace or knee brace allows a person with an injury to move more freely. Moreover, it seems possible that her experience of panoptical control in Westwood Lodge and other psychiatric hospitals gave her insight into the systems of power she had rebelled against — and the role she had been unable to play — in her home and marriage. Much of the poetry in her first book explores her conflicted emotions about the

hospital space and the mixture of adoration and fear she felt towards Orne, whose power over her within that institutional site was enormous.

However, by the time she published her second book, *All My Pretty Ones*, the fascination and even glamour of the mental-hospital experience had clearly worn off. In 'Flee on Your Donkey', she describes the despair she feels when she realises that none of the patients she sees are progressing — in fact, they are deteriorating. She is forced to recognise that her community with them is not just being a 'crazy lady' but being trapped in mental illness. She is caught between fleeing from her life to the hospital as a space of refuge and wanting to flee *from* the hospital as a space of paralysis and virtual incarceration.

The shuttling back and forth between daily life (which now included the demands placed on her by her extraordinarily successful career as a poet as well as her domestic existence) and increasingly miserable stays in hospital intensified her agoraphobia.

Though Sexton was increasingly anxious in public or open spaces, at the same time her career required her to move through them more and more. She seldom writes about them, and even less often maps them directly. The ironically titled 'Flight' is an exception to the general rule. Even the interior of an ocean liner becomes a pseudo-urban space that forms another prison, this time of family heritage. The one truly open space for Sexton was the seashore. Summers spent at the beach or on her grandfather's island off the Maine coast as child, teenager, and adult were a thread of stability and continuity running through the contradictory pressures of her life as she grew older. I have argued that this was precisely because they were threshold, liminal spaces, in which she was able to move back and forth between the open and the enclosed and feel unconstrained in her ambivalence.

In pursuing this study of space and place in Sexton's poetry, the initial difficulty was to escape the pull of merely biographical readings, which directly correlate the speaker of any particular poem with Sexton herself. Given the dramatic events of her life and her determination to build poetry from her own experience, and particularly because she began writing poetry as an adjunct to her psychotherapy, this is an easy trap to fall into. Fortunately, there has been a move away from this sort of reading in the last two decades towards those that take the poems on their own terms as fictions that include not only autobiographical but historical, cultural, social, and (of critical importance to the present study) geographical elements experienced through Sexton's own subjectivity and imagined through her own poetic language. As discussed with respect to Sylvia Plath, factual autobiography in the

poetry of the ‘Confessionals’ was a means rather than an end — a way to get at domains of experience and feeling that less revelatory procedures made much more difficult if not impossible.

Jo Gill’s pioneering use of concepts from cultural geography as a lens through which to examine the work of modern poets, and especially of the so-called Confessionals, has been especially useful to this study. As Gill observes, ‘Sexton’s poetry is rich with specific places (the suburban kitchen, the asylum or ‘summer hotel,’ the beach house) and with abstract spaces (the forest, the stage set). And both...are inextricably associated with the retrospective gaze — a search back through time, a dredging of past memories [...]’¹³⁸. In most of Sexton’s early and mid-period work, a specific topographical setting is integral to the poem’s meaning and effect; places or the memory of places serve as time machines, allowing Sexton to access the materials she will use to assemble the poem — but rather than being autobiographical snippets, the poems are metaphorical maps of affective experience. Real spaces from Sexton’s life are re-imagined as doll’s houses because of and according to how they *feel* to her — and how they feel in turn is shaped by the cultural and social forces operating in and through her, which are inextricably woven through her own personal psychological struggles. Sexton’s practice as a poet also allowed her to integrate the spaces of her own body (and those of others) into these metaphorical constructions as damaged dolls, puppets, or animals. An insistence on embodiment, whether literal or figurative, in a specific space, anchors the emotional content of her poems in a way that gives them additional force.

Extending the application of Foucault’s concept of panopticism from the mental hospital to the situation of housewives in the 1950s and early 1960s proved likewise very fruitful. It allowed an understanding of Sexton’s poetic practice as a kind of panopticism in reverse, in which she made her own psychosocial condition visible to other ‘inmates’ of the suburban female Panopticon of her day making public the painful or joyful experiences of a troubled woman’s life, speaking the previously unspeakable. At the time — the late 1960s and early 1970s — this aided the formation of a new collective female self-definition (and a rejection of what Betty Friedan called the ‘feminine mystique’) in the Women’s Liberation movement. In other words, the possibility of a freer social space for women was constituted inside Sexton’s metaphorically synthesised accounts of constraint, damage, and transgression in her own life and in those of other women she observed. Despite her untimely death by

¹³⁸ Jo Gill, “‘The house / of herself’”, p. 27.

suicide, Sexton's lasting achievement was to create a poetic geography of her own life that resonated strongly with thousands of other women at a time when they were breaking the walls of their own panoptical cells to challenge the roles and limitations imposed on them, in poetry of great metaphorical and emotional power.

Conclusion

‘A Whole History Remains to be Written of Spaces’¹

Space, Text, and Subjectivity

In this concluding chapter, I will summarise the results of the investigation into the Confessional poetics of Anne Sexton, Robert Lowell, and Sylvia Plath as manifested in their work primarily during the period 1959-1975. In order to assess the importance of space and place to these poets and the ways in which they describe or make use of them, it is crucial to establish how each poet constitutes subjectivity in and as *poetic text*. In semiotic terms, this subjectivity is a constantly shifting and evolving referent, itself comprised of a multidimensional web of signifying ‘chains’ at both conscious and unconscious levels.

From this perspective, gender is particularly important in the constituting of textual subjectivity, because, as Lant, Rose, Gill, and other feminist critics point out, the poetic tradition within which the three poets are writing is overwhelmingly masculine, and because much of what women are socialised to notice and how they are conditioned to respond differs often sharply from their male equivalents. This is one of the key distinctions between the work of Lowell and his two female counterparts. Lant in particular notes that the Anglo-American poetic tradition implies a different relationship to the writer’s own body and to the bodies of others than that generally experienced by women. Concomitantly, feminist cultural geography has analysed how men and women experience spaces differently: spaces themselves are to some extent always gendered. These differences were particularly marked during the period in which the poets wrote the works considered in this study, and both Plath and Sexton address these issues in the way they write about domestic space in particular, but also in how they write about landscape, animals, plants, and other aspects of the ‘natural’ world, as well as outdoor or public places. In any poetic text, subjectivity and space are mutually constitutive, like figure and ground in a work of visual art. This is particularly true of the Confessional poets. Space in these poems is constructed by and around subjectivity. For both women, this construction includes the space of the body, which, as Lant observes, is immediately political for women poets of the period because they are attempting to describe

¹ Michel Foucault, ‘The Eye of Power’, in *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977*, ed. by C. Gordon (New York: Pantheon, 1980), pp. 146-165 (p. 149). The title follows Foucault’s injunction to write a history of space in Confessional poetry. It focusses on how space produces, historicises and organises cultural power.

female bodily experience within a masculine discourse. It may have been partly this struggle, requiring as it did an inward turn in their poetry, which led them away from more direct political commentary. It was certainly not because they lacked wider political awareness, as their letters and recorded comments show. Whether or not they would have defined it in this way, the double conflict they experienced — between contradictory desires and demands in their lives as women of their class and time, and between their subjectivity and the discourse available with which to express it — was an internalised struggle with male-dominated society and culture.

Politics Out of Doors

In contrast, Lowell, as a man intensely conscious of his family's place in regional and national history, feels empowered to address broader social and historical issues very directly in his depictions of urban and exurban space. Of particular concern to him is how capitalism is eroding traditions of value other than the commercial. For him, the erasure from public space of *historical memory itself*, of its record not only of grandeur but of failure and shame, is central to the problem. In this sense, all public spaces for Lowell — and even some domestic ones — are 'monumental' in Lefebvre's terms, and all are in some way threatened. In 'For the Union Dead', Lowell constructs a textual model of central Boston and its New England environs which he then both overlays with historical and political relationships and underlays with his own childhood dreams. The poet involves his own illness more directly in his 'mapping' of the decline of a Maine resort town in 'Skunk Hour'. In a form of double exposure, the poet charts the town's crumbling social hierarchy and institutions as an analogue of his own mental disorder and his family's decline.

Sexton creates a somewhat similar psychogeographical map of Boston in 'Flight', though this level of named detail is rare in her work (Plath's 'Hardcastle Crags', which maps a journey through the night-time Yorkshire countryside, is analogous, and similarly unusual for her). However, the affective mapping is almost entirely personal. In fact, Sexton seldom alludes directly to larger socio-political events in her work. Both she and Plath, however, manifest the persistent threat of nuclear war in several spatial contexts. Sexton, in 'The Fortress', expresses grief that she is unable to protect her daughter from this threat. In Plath's case, the anxiety is manifested more in her outdoor poetry, whereby landscape appears as if the human species had vanished and becomes alien and hostile. Plath's late poetry is replete with historical and political allusions, but these are seldom manifest in poems in which

representations of space play a major role. Rather, the threat of nuclear annihilation, which she talks about in her correspondence and was active in protesting, overhangs those representations.

Advertising and Body Politics

Plath's major political focus, like Sexton's, is on what one might call the psychopolitics of gender relations in and around the domestic space, in which advertising plays an often covert but always significant role. Where Lowell alludes glancingly to advertising and commercial display as they come to permeate public and cultural space, for both Sexton and Plath its psychological effects on women are a central concern. A huge proportion of advertising of the period was directed at women. Ads both exploited and reproduced women's anxieties not only about their appearance but also the cleanliness and modernity of their homes. Women's bodies, like their homes, were treated in advertising as collections of *surfaces* to be maintained and improved. The images of dolls and mannequins, whole or dismembered, which recur again and again in the work of both Sexton and Plath, are partly figures for these effects. In 'Self in 1958', for instance, the reduction of the speaker to a doll is accompanied by shrinkage of the domestic space around her. At times this space is reduced to a cellophane-fronted display box in a shop. In 'Housewife' the shrinkage culminates in the fusion of house with wife, so that the house is coterminous with the wife's physiological being. The wife's body is dismantled and built into the house as rooms and functions. Similarly, the doll-wife or wife-robot for sale in Plath's 'The Applicant' has the function not only of serving the 'applicant' husband-to-be but of completing the system of gender in marriage: the 'suit' that comes with her as part of the package completes his masculinity, so that the domestic space can be constituted around their performance of their gender roles. In Plath's 'The Detective', the female victim of what at first seems to be a murder also turns out to have merged with the walls of the home she shared with the man who has left her, having slowly 'vaporized' as her breasts and sex organs withered. In contrast, the speaker of 'In Plaster' undergoes shrinkage and withering, but the space around her, the whole-body cast that is a figure for her gender role and its multiple performances, does not get smaller with her; its rigidity, which allows her no freedom of movement, is responsible for her diminishment. Thus, the female role becomes itself a space of confinement, reciprocally constituted by the domestic space on one side and the female body on the other.

Lowell, as a male, has a different relationship to his body and its representation in the poetry of *Life Studies* and *For the Union Dead*. He expresses sadness and anxiety about aging — he belonged to the generation before Plath and Sexton's — and in several poems seems to view his middle-aged body with some disgust. The disgust is associated with his shame about his mental illness and his inability to rid himself of it. His awareness of advertising and commercialism, of what Debord calls the commodity spectacle, is more directly involved with the public rather than domestic spaces he moves through. In 'For the Union Dead', he ironically contrasts the bronze of Colonel Shaw and his soldiers both with the Mosler Safes ad as a non-monument to World War II and with recent generalised and glamorised images of 'the Union soldier' — essentially commercials for an increasingly mythical past. (York argues that 'in the absence of 'statues,' the ad emerges to perform the work of a monument').² More subtly, he makes a similar point in describing the faux-folk décor given his former Maine home in 'My Old Flame.' For Lowell, this commercialisation is at the heart of his gloomy view of the United States as a civilisation after World War II. It represents to him a collapse not only of civic virtue and compassion but also of *authenticity*.

Domesticity and the Theatre of Self

Variouly expressed, disgust with the inauthentic permeates the spatial descriptions of all three poets. Again, however, the disgust and incipient revolt of the two women gravitates more to the domestic sphere. Besides being a critique of the feminine role, Plath's 'In Plaster' is an extended metaphor of this struggle for authenticity, in the terms authoritatively analysed by Erving Goffman. As Goffman notes: '[T]o the degree that the individual maintains a show before others that he himself does not believe, he can come to experience a special kind of alienation from self [...].'³ According to Butler, however, we always perform various *selves* in response to our social contexts.⁴ The serial metamorphosis of the speaker in Plath's 'Poem for a Birthday' seems to support Butler's thesis: the 'self' described by the speaker gradually becomes more definite as metaphor, as do the details of her surrounding space. The final section in the sequence, 'The Stones', concludes with the speaker as a repaired doll, a creature of artifice in a 'city of spare parts'. I have argued, however, that the poem is in part a

² York, *The Architecture of Address*, p. 9.

³ Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (New York: Doubleday Anchor, 1959), p. 236.

⁴ Judith Butler, 'Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory' in Katie Conboy, Nadia Medina, Sarah Stanbury, eds., *Writing on the Body: Female Embodiment and Feminist Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), p. 23.

narrative of its own composition as a series of efforts to create a poetic discourse adequate to female experience — efforts that are eventually unsuccessful. Butler's critique of Goffman is, however, challenged by another doll/house poem, Sexton's 'Self in 1958.' The doll is clearly unhappy in the performance of her role in the fake, miniature home, where she is 'placed' on the bed or in the kitchen to perform her wifely duties. She wants to be able to cry in order to express her sadness. Likewise, in 'The House', the speaker, in her dream of her family home as a mechanical puppet theatre, expresses her authentic adolescent self by slamming her bedroom door and tearing off her blouse, which might be read as a metaphor for self-revelation.

Any discussion of authentic versus performative identity in either Plath's or Sexton's work must take into account their respective real-life situations as wives and mothers and their sharply distinct personalities. Sexton radically rejected the 1950s suburban housewife-mother role, even surrendering custody of her children for periods, because she felt both unable and unwilling to perform it. As her fame as a poet grew, she became a public figure, performing her work to audiences of hundreds, her books read by thousands. Yet she was increasingly gripped by agoraphobia and by the late 1960s ironically longed to stay at home, where she felt safe, even as her desire for recognition drove her back out into public spaces. In contrast, Plath was equally committed to being a wife and mother and to being a first-rate poet, and was determined to appear in the best possible light in any context. The rage induced in Plath when she was betrayed by Hughes caused her to abandon her performance of femininity in the more active and emotionally violent way described in 'Lesbos'. Combined with body-shame, this continual struggle led to Plath's repeated use of the Gothic doppelgänger motif, whereby the female figure (not always the speaker) in the poem is doubled as a metaphor for psychic splitting. Also doubled in some of these poems is the surrounding space, as in 'Tale of a Tub' or 'Mirror.' ('In Plaster' and 'Face Lift' are also poems of splitting and doubling in the service of performing a desirable femininity.) In these poems, it is sometimes difficult to know which self is the 'real' one.

But a desire for authenticity through motherhood is at the core of the metaphorical structure in 'The Munich Mannequins', which contrasts the dead, opulent elegance of the mannequins with the menstruating speaker: 'Perfection is terrible, it cannot have children.' The mannequin or doll in Plath's work, then, is an image not only of outward conformity to a feminine role and body image but of *sterility*, a betrayal of living, fertile femaleness in favour of the artifice of femininity. While Sexton insists on her biological femaleness in poems like

'Menstruation at Forty', she does not connect it, as Plath does, to fulfilment. Her sexual identity, unlike Plath's, is not inextricably linked to reproduction. Yet both Plath and Sexton desired the freedom to write, and found that freedom only after the hollowing out or actual collapse of their marriages. That exit from marital space permitted them at least partly to occupy — to 'do' in Butler's terms — the space of their own female bodies as the source of their language.

Sexton's expression of this tension — and a similar rage — is evident in her most famous poem, 'Her Kind.' Concealed by darkness or the forest, the witch can define and explore her own space, flying through the sky or creatively furnishing her hidden cave to her own taste. Yet she does not relinquish her maternal role; she is both mother and free. Nevertheless, Sexton's witch persona, like Plath's in 'Poem for a Birthday', is eventually burned alive, punished for her independence.

Lowell, again probably because he was a heterosexual male poet in a patriarchal society, tends not to create imaginary roles for himself. His persona is more subtle, a Goffmanian 'presentation of self' that shifts with the company and the social space he is in. The presentation, again in Goffman's terms, is by no means inauthentic. Rather, it is aspectual. He remarked about his core persona, when the issue of the factuality of his poems was raised, that the poems were about a character called 'Robert Lowell' who was closely based on himself. Yet even 'closely based' is a misleading understatement. Lowell, like most of us, was more than one person, and could be shocked when he gazed on an unfamiliar but truthful image of himself.

Lowell, however, repeatedly expresses longing, usually in retrospect, for domestic happiness. In 'Man and Wife', for example, he contrasts the tenuous and troubled state of the speaker's relationship with his wife, who is turned away from him in their bed but expressing her anger in a 'tirade', with a scene from the beginning of their courtship, in which she is also eloquently holding forth. Both Plath and Sexton also use the image of the couple turned away from each other in the marriage bed as a metonymy for unhappiness and non-communication in the relationship. Sexton, in 'The Farmer's Wife', describes how the wife, with relief, creates a secret mental space of privacy in the bed next to her sleeping husband. In Plath's 'Event', by contrast, the speaker is miserably aware that the few inches between herself and her husband are emotionally a 'cliff' that divides them, leaving her feeling estranged not only from him but from their baby sleeping next to her and even from her own body. In 'Morning Song,' the conjugal 'we' of the shared bed and the side-by-side contemplation of their

newborn collapses into 'I' when the speaker describes listening even in her sleep for the baby's sounds so that she will be able to get up and attend to its needs. The bed, which should be the space of the most intimate communion between wife and husband, has become the opposite.

All three poets also sometimes express a more positive relationship to domestic intimacy. In Lowell's 'My Old Flame', the speaker initially claims that the home he shared with his former wife has been improved by redecoration at the hands of its new owners. But an accumulation of nostalgic detail about their time together there, including conflict and untidiness, is subtly contrasted with a depiction of the house in the present as soulless and fake. Sexton, in several poems such as 'December 16th' and 'February 11th', looks back wistfully on earlier times in her relationship with her husband (and, in the latter poem, her young children) — again, noting the untidy, even improvised quality of these domestic spaces as a positive value. The neatness and superficial normality of the empty home in Plath's 'The Detective' plays a similar role to Lowell's former home in 'My Old Flame.' For all three, domestic happiness is almost always seen in the past.

No Hiding Place: Being Seen

This issue of the *gaze* as it relates to spatial context is crucial. We have discussed the fragmentation and objectification of the female body image induced by advertising that are manifested in the pervasive doll and mannequin imagery in the poetry of both Plath and Sexton. This objectification was in turn a result of the conditioning of young women to attract and condition their femininity in relation to what Laura Mulvey termed the male gaze. In both poets' work, being subject to the male gaze is one layer of a tripartite surveillance to which they feel themselves subject. The next layer is the gaze of other women or couples in the suburban neighbourhood, in which difference is viewed with suspicion. As Friedan notes, suburban wives acted as enforcers of the housewife role and as critics of their peers' appearance and grooming and the cleanliness, order, and décor of their homes. The third layer, notably during the McCarthy-era phase of the Cold War, was actual surveillance by agents of the government on the lookout for 'deviancy' that might be a sign of an individual vulnerable to recruitment by the Communists. Plath's work, like Sexton's and to a lesser extent Lowell's, contains numerous allusions to surveillance and feelings of being watched or investigated. Plath's poem 'The Eavesdropper' is a furious protest against this triple surveillance, as, in a different, almost surrealist style, are Sexton's 'Housewife' and 'Self in

1958.’ Like the doll’s house in the latter poem, the suburban home offers no real privacy; its entire façade might as well be hinged to swing open, revealing every room and its occupants to the curious eye. (The family home in ‘House’ is similar, as is the apparently abandoned residence in Plath’s ‘The Detective’.) In ‘The Solipsist’, Plath imagines a godlike male speaker who, like an all-seeing police agency, can at will observe whatever is going on in the suburban neighbourhood through which he strolls. This is the male gaze — or the gaze of the 1984-like surveillance state — at its asymptote of power: nothing can exist outside it.

The two women, then, as with the use of doll and puppet imagery as tropes for the feminine role, are telling the truth of their experience of surveillance but, following their foremother Emily Dickinson’s injunction, are telling it slant. If Lowell was less anxious about being watched and judged in this way, it was because he had already served time in prison for his political beliefs — and also, probably, because the prominence of his family and his fame as a poet gave him more license.⁵

The Asylum as Panopticon and Zoo

The theme of surveillance is most intense in the poems of all three about being in the institutional space. Sexton and Plath, like Lowell, were also subject to what Foucault calls the medical or clinical gaze as patients. Plath, in ‘The Surgeon at 2 a.m.’, moves to the other pole of this gaze in the persona of the surgeon to whom his patients are merely overgrown gardens, household plumbing, or biological specimens. He is fascinated by their bodies’ interior spaces and unable to view them as human beings. Plath also assumes the position of observer in ‘Miss Drake Proceeds to Dinner.’ In that poem, however, the speaker’s gaze is completely unlike that of the surgeon; her description enters into the mental world of the psychotic woman in an act of imaginative sympathy. (It is notable that Lowell, describing the analogous behaviour of his fellow inmates in ‘Waking in the Blue’, attempts no such empathy, but finally identifies painfully with them.) In ‘Tulips’, the speaker is simultaneously observer and observed, caught ‘between the eye of the sun and the eye of the tulips.’ In her own hospital poems, Sexton develops the theme of surveillance by the clinical gaze and the consequent behavioural conformity imposed on the patients. In ‘You, Doctor Martin’, as in Lowell’s ‘Waking in the Blue’, this development parallels a painful self-recognition and a

⁵ He does, however, manifest an intense anxiety about being watched by the police in ‘Central Park’, even as he finds himself, possibly in the early stages of a manic episode, wandering through the Park and being confronted by images of society’s cruelty and injustice.

pronominal shift: the speaker moves from a cheerful self-description as ‘queen of this summer hotel’ to becoming part of the ‘we’ of the patients lining up outside the dining room and then ‘chewing in rows’ in their ‘smock[s] of smiles.’ Only in their rooms are they partially free of the panoptic gaze. The poet confronts the contradiction that she believes in the possibility of cure for herself under the care of Doctor Martin, who possesses almost godlike powers over the patients, and her awareness of how tightly her behaviour is being controlled and her conformity not only to hospital rules but to a version of the feminine role is being enforced. This aspect is heightened in ‘Ringing the Bells’, in which the patients passively perform the vacuous but mandated activity while showing no improvement. In ‘Waking in the Blue’, Lowell is likewise intensely aware of being an object of surveillance. Because Lowell and his fellow-patients come from the upper class, some eccentricity of behaviour is tolerated in his evidently more mentally damaged fellow patients. Like the attendants, the speaker at first feels superior to them but at the poem’s end acknowledges that he is essentially like them. In the later poem ‘Flee on Your Donkey’, Sexton expresses almost complete disillusion with the hospital, having committed herself there as a last resort; behavioural control by means of drugs and surveillance does not provide a cure, but only a sad respite, in which she becomes an object among objects. Lowell expresses a similar despair and humiliation in the later poem ‘Visitors’.

The theme of surveillance is less evident in Lowell’s two incarceration poems, ‘In the Cage’ and ‘Memories of West Street and Lepke.’ In ‘In the Cage’, the first of the two but written about the later experience of federal prison rather than his earlier brief stay at West Street Jail, the combination of tight and tolerated release creates the sense of a panoptical, closely regulated hell-space, though the guards are never mentioned. In ‘Memories...’, supervision is evidently much looser, but the poet’s fellow-prisoners are shown without a larger social network or context — in a way, the opposite of the description in ‘In the Cage.’ The only character in the poem whose physical environment is described is Czar Lepke, the most disconnected of all.

All three poets use animal imagery extensively to express the dehumanisation imposed by what Goffman calls the ‘total institution.’ Plath describes the patients in the solarium as ‘dream fish’ and caged birds, and ‘Miss Drake’ in terms of a duck. Sexton repeatedly describes her female fellow patients as bees, ‘caught in the wrong hive’, as butterflies trapped in a room with closed windows, as foxes, a squirrel, a goat, and so forth. Lowell compares one of his fellow-patients to a seal and the other to a sperm whale – which

turns the spatial configuration of the hospital into an aquarium. Yet the patients are not in fact animals, but human beings, and the institution denies them this essential dignity even as it provides them with a clean, safe, orderly environment.

The Shore: Space Between Past and Present

While the three poets use animal imagery to create an ironic pseudo-nature inside the hospital or asylum, they write about the natural environment in the form of human-centred stories and pathetic fallacy. The Atlantic shore of New England was a seminal space for all three poets, and plays somewhat similar but nonetheless distinct roles in the work of each. As Doreen Massey notes, all social spaces are created by the people that are moving through and within them, and hence at any given time any space is permeated by stories. This means in turn that there is no space that is not fully interwoven with time, experienced by human beings as memory (past), duration (present) and anticipation (future). As in 'The Old Flame', for example, Lowell often links past to present with an appeal to his interlocutor, usually his wife or ex-wife ('A man without a wife is like a turtle without a shield', Lowell writes in 'Shadow'), to 'remember' a place at a time in the past; this invitation flows into a description of the events. Lowell's 'Water', set in Maine, is another instance of such an appeal.

Sexton's poems about time spent on the storied shore provide particularly useful examples of what Lefebvre calls a 'texture' of space and time. In 'The Exorcists', which likewise addresses an interlocutor, the speaker narrates an exciting and implicitly erotic beach incident from her teenage years in detail while declaring in the poem's present that it never happened; the spatial movement is from the sea and the open beach to a lobsterman's hut. Plath's poems about the beach where she played as a child, like 'Dream with Clam-Diggers', are simultaneously evocations and rejections of nostalgia. Sexton, in 'The Kite', contrasts her present boredom on a private hotel beach with a memory of an occasion from several years earlier. She uses this contrast to criticise both herself and the other guests, caught up in the routines of the affluent that she finds suffocating. And in 'Angel of Beach Houses and Picnics' she writes, in a precise description of the kitchen table, that everything is as it was, except that her lover is not there with her.

While it is not the sea as such that menaces the speaker in Plath's 'Clam Diggers', Plath's feelings of both longing and dread about the seashore are evident in other poems. In 'Full Fathom Five', the sea is overspread by the white beard and hair of a kind of sea-god, an imago of her dead father. The speaker fears being dragged under by him, but also says that

she wants to 'breathe water' in order to be with him. In a later poem, 'Blackberrying', the speaker, walking along a lane as she gathers berries, expresses more and more anxiety about arriving at a view of the sea. When she does, she is confronted with a hard, glaring, metallic nothingness. This somewhat resembles Lowell's descriptions of the ocean in 'Water', in which the sea's coldness becomes a figure for both the failure of emotional connection with the woman he addresses and for the pitiless economic forces that are causing the nearby 'lobster town' to die.

Though Sexton's poems are seldom descriptions of nature in general, in her later work, the shore becomes an opening to the boundlessness and polysemy of the ocean as a symbol. For example, in the late poem 'There You Were', the poet figures herself as a damaged house washed up on her therapist's beach — not the fleshy dwelling described in 'Housewife', but a fragile building of wood and glass. Here the sea is a metaphor for her violent and chaotic emotions. The solace is not the ocean, but the shore and the psychological 'repairs' her therapist then undertakes. But in one of her last poems, set on the same beach, the poet appears as a woman, while the ocean, rather than a figure for her emotions, is a death-mother-goddess, whose embrace she longs for. Like Sexton, Lowell describes the landscape of the shore in a number of poems as neither solace nor menace, but as analogue to the poet's emotional situation. 'Skunk Hour' only incidentally mentions the landscape around Castine, Maine and of Nautilus Island as the topography on which the social structure of the town is overlaid, and the season (autumn) because of its place in the town's economic cycle. Yet the affective details of Lowell's description of the town in the poem's first half, while they do not attain the level of pathetic fallacy, nonetheless create a strong mood that prepare us for the emotional journey in the second.

Animated Spaces: Pathetic Fallacy and Confessional Gothic

The pathetic fallacy, then, is evident in Lowell's poems and to a lesser extent in Sexton's as a prosopopeia of *the surroundings as a whole*. Plath takes this technique much further in late poems as various as 'Hardcastle Crags', 'The Detective,' and 'Sheep in Fog.' The space the speaker occupies in 'Tulips' is metaphorically described as a winter landscape under snow, a subtle metaphor of the speaker's flat, cool affective state. But Plath also animates trees (like the one in 'Elm') plants (like the berries in 'Blackberrying') and repeatedly, the moon, figured as an unloving, sterile mother described as 'staring from her hood of bone' in 'Edge', her final work. In Plath's late poems, in fact, prosopopeia often permeates the text so

thoroughly as to constitute the dominant trope. The spaces of the poems are suffused with the poet's subjectivity to the point at which, as some critics have noted, the prosopopeic threatens paradoxically to dissolve that subjectivity altogether. Lowell and Sexton, for their part, as fragmented and extreme as their imagery sometimes becomes, remain too grounded in narrative realism to risk this sort of dissolution of the subject into the metaphoric space of the poem. Another way to put this is that tenor (the speaking subject) and vehicle (the surrounding space) remain distinguishable, if sometimes only barely.

This prosopopeic blurring or partial dissolution of the distinction between subjective emotion and surroundings is characteristic not only of Expressionism but also of the Gothic, which is arguably a precursor of darker Expressionist modes. All three of the poets here examined display a Gothic sensibility in various ways and to varying degrees. The overriding mood of the Gothic is *dread*, and the most typical figure of the Gothic (other than the villain) is the isolated person facing an incomprehensible and menacing situation. This atmosphere of dread can pervade almost any environment — the home, the asylum, the street, or the countryside. At the same time, though, descriptions of space and place are central to Gothic fiction, as they establish atmosphere as well as serving as a setting for action. Characteristic Gothic tropes are the sense of being watched by someone or something unseen, claustrophobia and captivity, the disappearance of the familiar, the fear (or the discovery) that things or people are not what they seem to be, the double or doppelganger, the animated doll or statue, the grotesque or deformed, the desolate and unpeopled landscape. Characteristic Gothic imagery includes the moon, graveyards, ruined or abandoned buildings, leafless trees, and of course dead bodies.

Plath deploys each of these tropes in her poems, especially the doppelganger motif, as we have noted in 'Tale of a Tub', 'Mirror', 'In Plaster', and 'Facelift', among others. This doubling is often associated with the sense of being watched. The frequently occurring doll and puppet imagery she shares with Sexton is likewise ominous. Even the beach landscape of her childhood becomes menacing in her dreams. Specifically, characteristic of Plath's work, however, is 'Cold War Gothic' — descriptions of bleak landscapes in which other human beings seem no longer to exist and in which the speaker is utterly alone, as if after a nuclear holocaust. In fact, the Gothic permeates many of Plath's descriptions of nature. In her poems about the Yorkshire landscape like 'Wuthering Heights', as in the later 'The Moon and the Yew Tree', images of hardness, stoniness, blackness, blankness or emptiness, and cold

predominate.⁶ This imagery becomes pervasive in her last poems like ‘Sheep in Fog’ and ‘Winter Trees’.

Besides the nightmarish doll and doll’s-house or puppet-theatre imagery in Sexton’s work, the Gothic is manifest most strongly in her asylum poems. The sinister imagery of Doctor Martin’s panoptic ‘third eye’, the terrified and terrifying ‘Noon Walk on the Asylum Lawn’, and the hopeless darkness and grotesque fellow inmates of ‘Flee on Your Donkey’ all partake of the Gothic. Also Gothic in a different mode is ‘Her Kind’ — the witch flying above the houses and furnishing her cave in the woods, then being driven through the villages on her way to execution. The witch-figure in Plath’s ‘Poem for a Birthday’, with its hallucinatory expansions and contractions of space, from garden shed to lily pond to cupboard to town square, also inhabited by grotesques, is a different version of a narrative of ambiguous or failed liberation — the Gothic trope of escape and recapture. The Gothic mood also appears fleetingly in other poems of Sexton’s from this period, like ‘Crossing the Atlantic’ in which the liner has ‘steel staterooms where night goes on forever’ and its wake is compared to a ragged bridal veil, or the imagery of Jack the Ripper in ‘Some Foreign Letters’.

Of the three, Lowell is the least inclined to the Gothic, though there are touches of it throughout, as in the crows that ‘maunder on the petrified fairway’ in ‘Waking in the Blue’ or the accursed atmosphere of ‘In the Cage’. The concluding section of ‘Central Park’, with its transmutation of the luxury apartment buildings overlooking the park into a necropolis and their inhabitants into living dead, is one of the more extended Gothic passages in Lowell’s work of this period. Here and there appear startling Gothic images of death and violence, like the ‘grey-skulled horses [that] whinny for the soot of night’ in ‘Night Sweat’, the ‘hill’s skull’ in ‘Skunk Hour’, or the magnolia blossoms in ‘Home After Three Months Away’ that ‘ignite the morning/ with their murderous five days’ white’.

Inverting the Panopticon: Confessional Poetry and its Politics of Space

The Gothic originally appeared in European, and particularly in English culture, as a reaction to Enlightenment rationalism. The first Gothic novel is generally agreed to be *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), which was written by the English Whig parliamentarian Horace Walpole

⁶ The reading of ‘The Moon and the Yew Tree’ has a significantly different emphasis. Not only does it focus more on space, but it takes the religious imagery seriously with the theme of the anguished moon and the absent father-God, connecting the poem to ‘Sheep in Fog’. In general, it is contrary to Nichols, traditional Gothic motifs are not rejected but added to and reframed.

after a dream vision of a gigantic mailed hand on a staircase. Confessionalism, it can be argued, represents an analogous reaction to the shiny, superficial, commercial optimism of the post-war period. The three poets whose work has been examined in the present study rejected this optimism and brought to light the negative emotions — anxiety, depression, disgust, terror, rebellious rage — that the dominant culture was suppressing. Where the culture pretended that merchandise could bring happiness, that women would be fulfilled by focusing entirely on being wives and mothers, that all psychological problems could be cured, and that consumer capitalism was the best of all possible worlds, these poets roundly rejected such ideological delusions. It should therefore be no surprise that the Gothic sensibility reappears in their poetry, alongside other contemporary cultural manifestations of negativity like film noir or the ‘atomic mutation’ horror film.

The poets’ experiences of mental illness, while on the one hand driving them to emotional extremity, also allowed them to see the realities of their time and place from a different viewpoint. The ways in which they write about the different kinds of space they moved through are essential to their (rarely directly stated) shared project, which was *to write about what their lives actually felt like*. This necessarily included departures from realism and from what we can best determine to have been biographical truth. In particular, the panopticism of the hospitals (and one case, the prisons) they were confined in appears in their work as a concentration and intensification of the panopticism of society at large. Their poetry therefore constitutes a refusal of the conformism enforced by the panoptical regime, which as earlier noted includes the gaze of the surveillance state but of other citizens and, for the women, the male gaze as metonymised through consumer advertising.

I have argued that Sexton in particular engages in ‘reverse panopticism’: deliberate public exposure of experiences and emotions that the flawed privacy and manufactured optimism of the Cold War era, together with pervasive sexism, pressured people to keep hidden. The virtual cell of the Panopticon inmate is turned inside out within the textual space of the poem. Instead of a hollow wedge whose interior is entirely visible only to the authority at the centre, the poems occupy this central space and remove the outer walls so that the reader can ‘see’ the previously hidden subjective reality. To a lesser extent this was also true of Lowell and Plath, though in their work it takes different and (with respect to Plath’s later work) contrasting forms. Lowell’s poems tend to be what I have called affective maps or diagrams of places within a given type of space in which particular places (buildings, objects) typically have both personal and social significance. Plath’s poems, on the other hand, evolve

from similarly semi-realistic descriptions of named places towards a poetry in which the boundaries of subjectivity have expanded via increasingly un-anchored metaphor to incorporate the entire space. Another way to say this is that Lowell's anti-panopticism is extraverted: the poet is showing us the affectively mapped meta-spaces, pointing to specific and recognisable places within them. Plath, on the other hand, requires us in her late poetry to enter this subjectivised, expressionistic meta-space on its own terms, offering little in the way of guideposts or even, by the end, of recognisable narrative. Like the 'The Detective' in Plath's poem, we are left to assemble a coherent story even as the described space is vanishing around us.

Multiple theories of space have been applied to the poems in this study: Lefebvre's space as social and cultural production, Debord's space as spectacle overlaid on and generated by money-commodity relationships, Foucault's space as structures of power and control, Soja's space as mapping of political and social hierarchy, Massey's space as interconnected accumulations of stories, Low's space as materialisation of culture, Butler's space of the (female) body. All of these ways of understanding have variously demonstrated their usefulness in readings of the three poets and in understanding their overall approaches to writing about different kinds of space. The theories were applied on an ad hoc basis to the poems in the context of close reading and in concert with existing criticism in order to produce a layered and synthetic comparative understanding of the way space is figured and configured in the poems examined. Conversely, this understanding has yielded fresh insights into their meanings at other levels and into the socio-political significance of the work.

The spatial theorists whose work has been used in this study agree on one point: all spaces are always at least implicitly political. Moreover, as Gaston Bachelard notes, all spaces have an implicit poetics. The present study is, in sum, an exploration not so much of the politics and poetics of space in the poetry of Plath, Sexton, and Lowell but of the politics and poetics of their *textual representations* and imaginative figurations of space and of how these were conditioned by the geographical and historical specificities of their lives and times. Poems both construct subjectivities and are constructed by them in the process of composition on one side and of reception on the other. Subjectivity itself is not a finished thing but a dynamic process, and a process that happens in space as well as time. This ought to be a fundamental axiom of poetic criticism.

Found in Space: Contributions of This Study

This thesis is not the first application of spatial theory and cultural geography to modern poetry, but it is still an outlier as a book-length comparative study specifically focused, for the most part via close readings, on the responses of a small group of poets to space and place. Jo Gill, with her work on Sexton and her monograph *The Poetics of the American Suburb*, has been a pioneer in the field, and this study owes a great debt to her work. Also important has been the work of the late Jake Adam York in *The Architecture of Address*. That said, the most important contribution of this study is that it closely analyses the role of space and place in the work of Lowell, Plath, and Sexton, singly and comparatively, during a brief but critically important period in modern American history — the later Cold War, which reached its peak in the Cuban Missile Crisis of October 1962 in an episode that very nearly led to nuclear Armageddon. Facilitating this analysis was also the fact that all three poets come from Boston, Massachusetts and the surrounding area, spent a great deal of time on the New England coast as both children and adults, and are products of the region's culture. They were thus responding as poets to closely similar geographical experiences as well as cultural and political ones. Moreover, they knew each other personally. This made them almost ideal subjects for this study in a way that has not been previously exploited with specific respect to space.

A second contribution is the sustained contrapuntal application of the work of three very different but also closely interrelated critical theorists of social space: Guy Debord, Henri Lefebvre, and Michel Foucault. All three are precursors of the field of cultural geography and provided concepts that were especially useful in readings chiefly of public spaces in Lowell's work and domestic spaces in Plath's and Sexton's. Edward Soja's work, both early and late, likewise provided useful insights that drew on these earlier thinkers. Foucault's work, especially from *Discipline and Punish*, provided the concept of panopticism, which became a central organising principle of the study in ways I will discuss further below.

While Gill and a few others have applied insights from cultural geography, and especially from the new feminist cultural geography, to readings of poetry, the present study has made use of the work especially of Doreen Massey and Setha Low in readings of domestic space and natural (rural, littoral) space as they appear in the work of Plath and Sexton in particular. Massey's concept of space as layered with time through the experiences of multiple individuals, and Low's concept of the (female) body as space, have been applied

to multiple poems by the two women. Judith Butler's radical reconception of not only gender but the gendered body itself as performances, as something *done*, proved valuable as an extension of the critical conceit of 'body-as-space'. This made it possible to read more deeply, into the iconography of dolls, mannequins, and puppets that pervades the work of both Plath and Sexton. In particular, this combination of concepts revealed Plath's radical poetic reading of domestic space not only as gendered feminine — an insight she shares with Sexton — but as reciprocally constituted *by the system of gender itself* as performed by female and male bodies in that space. Another related insight, developed from the work of Kathleen Lant, is the way in which Plath's hospital poems, especially 'Poem for a Birthday', manifest her struggles to adapt male-dominated poetic tradition to the expression of female subjectivity, and how her late poems succeed in doing this at the price of weakening the boundaries between self and surroundings within the poetic text by intensive use of the pathetic fallacy.

Other, mostly feminist critics have explored this doll imagery as a manifestation of the effects of the repressive feminine role imposed on young middle-class women in the post-war period and of anxiety-driven advertising aimed at them. However, dolls and puppets, often broken, are also a recurrent figure in Gothic fiction for female fears of depersonalisation by a sinister male power. As such, they also form part of a shifting complex of Gothic motifs that combines the traditional and the modern in the work of all three poets, but especially the women. Much Gothic writing — notably, the Gothic romance tradition that begins in English with the 'terror' novels of Ann Radcliffe at the turn of the nineteenth century and reaches its *zenith* with *Jane Eyre* — has of course been based in women's anxieties and desires. This study has uniquely brought together these two ways of reading this imagery and joined it with three other traditional Gothic themes, each of which is modernised by the poets' contemporary experience.

While the political shock of this poetics of exposure in the midst of the paranoid, fearful panoptical culture of the Cold War era has faded, the emotional intensity has not. In large part this is because of the skillful and variegated use of pathetic fallacy in these poets' accounts of space and place. It has been noted by other critics that this trope (or collection of tropes) recurs strongly in all three poets' work, which as a result has been criticised for being overwrought. However, my application of concepts from cultural geography reveals their use of pathetic fallacy to be what I have called, using a term borrowed from cognitive science, a form of *affective mapping* of space into text. Readings of Lowell's poems of the public

spaces of city and village gave rise to this insight. Moreover, it is equally applicable to the much smaller spaces of the home or the hospital, or to the larger ones of the shore and the sea, the 'tidal zone' where all three poets join their pasts, dreamed or real, to their present. The sea is also the point at which, for Sexton and Plath especially, the 'pathetic' extension of subjectivity into the surrounding space tends to turn back on itself in a polysemic backwash that threatens to dissolve or collapse the imagining subject. What is created by this use of the pathetic fallacy is not a semiological analysis of the described space but an experiential textual analogue in which relations between affectively charged signifiers form a meta-space within the metaphorical system of the poem. If this kind of reading has not yet achieved the status of a method, this is only because it has not yet been widely enough applied.

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