ANNE SEXTON AND CONFESSIONAL POETICS

BY JO GILL

This article re-evaluates the work of the American poet Anne Sexton. It suggests that, far from being the apotheosis of confessionalism, as is typically asserted, Sexton’s writing is engaged in a process of negotiation and contestation with the boundaries of the confessional mode. The article begins by summarizing and critiquing conventional definitions of confessional poetry, as exemplified in the work of Sexton’s contemporaries, A. Alvarez, M. L. Rosenthal, and others. Thereafter, a number of more recent, theoretically rigorous accounts of confessional discourse (including the work of Antony Easthope, Michel Foucault, and Leigh Gilmore) are introduced. Close readings of a number of Sexton’s poems are offered in order to assess the appropriateness of these critical approaches. In particular, the little-known poem ‘Cripples and Other Stories’ is examined. The article suggests that this text reads as a provocative pastiche and rejection of orthodox readings of confessionalism, and anticipates and substantiates the perceptions of confessional discourse proposed by later, post-structuralist, commentators. The argument throughout the article is informed by reference to unpublished material from the Sexton archive at the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, University of Texas at Austin.

A woman like that is misunderstood
I have been her kind

Anne Sexton has been described as the ‘High Priestess’ and the ‘Mother’ of confessional poetry, and as ‘the most persistent and daring of the confessionalists’. It has been said that ‘no poet was more consistently and uniformly confessional than Anne Sexton . . . her name has almost become identified with the genre’. Sexton herself commented, ‘at one time I hated being called confessional and denied it, but mea culpa. Now I say that I’m the only confessional poet’. Yet the evidence of Sexton’s poems, and of comments which she made in letters, interviews, and lectures, belies any

Unpublished materials are reproduced with the permission of the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center (hereafter HRHRC), University of Texas at Austin, and with the permission of Linda Gray Sexton, for the estate of Anne Sexton.

3 Anne Sexton: A Self-Portrait in Letters (Boston, 1979), 372 (Sexton’s emphasis).

such straightforward identification. Indeed, Sexton's own 'mea culpa' may be read as a rueful and ironic sign of a label unwillingly tolerated, rather than as a wholehearted statement of affiliation. Paradoxically, by proclaiming herself 'the only confessional poet', Sexton simultaneously reinforces and denies the received relationship between her writing and confessionalism, contesting the boundaries of the mode as conventionally understood, and staking a claim for her own distinctive poetics—for a confessionalism ne plus ultra.

The claim to be the 'only' confessional poet is at one with the sense conveyed elsewhere—and persistently—by Sexton that what she is doing in her poetry is something quite new and distinctive. Muriel Rukeyser noted with prescience the particular significance of Sexton's work in this respect, seeing in her writing signs that 'the “confessional” poem is beginning to turn into something, and I think we have waited for this for a long time'. In an interview with William Heyen and Al Poulin conducted in September 1973, Sexton reiterates and elaborates on her own statement:

Well, for a while, oh for a long while, perhaps even now, I was called a ‘confessional poet.' And for quite a while I resented it. You know, I thought ‘Why am I in this bag?’ And then I kind of looked around and I thought ‘Look, Anne, you’re the only confessional poet around.’ I mean I don’t see anyone else quite doing this sort of thing.

Here too, however, Sexton’s apparent affiliation with the ‘confessional’ label is tempered by the understanding that the label does not quite fit, that her work transgresses or exceeds the limits of the mode. As she concludes: ‘and then as years go by I get into new themes, etcetera, etcetera, and really don’t think about what I am. You know it shifts anyway.’

Sexton’s relationship with what has been labelled ‘the confessional mode’ is, then, more problematic than has conventionally been recognized. In order to do justice to Sexton’s complex, idiosyncratic, and elusive poetics, it is necessary to identify and evaluate contemporary definitions and conceptualizations of confessionalism and to indicate the ways in which they have influenced subsequent readings of her poetry. The discussion which follows of the work of M. L. Rosenthal (who was instrumental in naming the mode), Robert Phillips (author of the first, and indeed only, full-length study of it), C. B. Cox and A. R. Jones (authors of two influential Critical Quarterly essays), and A. Alvarez (who, in a variety of media, popularized the term) confirms the value of questioning the validity of the term ‘confessional’ as a descriptor of Sexton’s poetry.

7 Although Critical Quarterly is an English journal (and Alvarez, discussed later, an English writer contributing to English media), I think it appropriate to draw on these essays given that
Moreover, in the light of what J. Hillis Miller, Antony Easthope, and John Thompson designate a 'paradigm shift' in approaches to writing (that is, the post-humanist development of a diverse and challenging range of critical theories and practices), it is necessary not simply to reassess the relationship between Sexton's writing and confessionalism, but to re-evaluate confessionalism as a whole.\(^8\) The question then becomes not whether Sexton's poetry falls within the parameters of the mode, as conventionally understood, but whether recent critical thought (specifically, Michel Foucault and Leigh Gilmore on confessional discourse) requires us to redraw these parameters. Might such a reappraisal permit us, at last, to offer a full and fair reading of Sexton's singular ('I am the only confessional poet') work?

M. L. Rosenthal claims to have been the first to name the mode, using the term 'confessional' to describe the poetry of Robert Lowell in a 1959 review of his book *Life Studies*.\(^9\) Here, Rosenthal isolates what were to become the defining features of 'confessional' writing. The new poetry is understood to be primarily therapeutic in intent and effect ('soul's therapy' and 'self-therapeutic'), autobiographical (Lowell's speaker is 'unequivocally himself') and truthful (it features 'uncompromising honesty').\(^10\) The notion of the therapeutic or cathartic potential of this particular literary form, as we shall see, underpins much subsequent writing about confessionalism, this notwithstanding Sexton's own ambivalence about such ends. As she commented in a 1970 interview (characteristically dissociating personal experience from the process of writing, and foregrounding the deceptive nature of the text): 'You don't solve problems in writing. They're still there. I've heard psychiatrists say, “See, you've forgiven your father. There it is in your poem.” But I haven't forgiven my father. I just wrote that I did.'\(^11\)

According to Rosenthal, the author's 'private humiliations, sufferings, and psychological problems' are central to the poem. This marks a reductive, and indeed pathological, reading of the text—one which finds an echo in Robert they represent the only contemporary overviews of the genre (American commentary emerging through shorter reviews, or at a rather later date) and made a significant contribution to the debate. Sexton refers frequently to *Critical Quarterly*, suggesting at one point that 'the English seem to read . . . The English seem to take me seriously. U. States [sic] is too big or something,' Letter to Fred Morgan, 12 Aug. 1965, HRHRC. Linda Wagner-Martin comments on the importance of these early English readings of Sexton's work in 'Anne Sexton, Poet', in Wagner-Martin (ed.), *Critical Essays on Anne Sexton* (Boston, 1989), 1–18: 4, 5, 14. Such is the influence of the journal that Ian Hamilton accuses 'the salaaming *Critical Quarterly* of turning Sexton into a 'cult figure of neurotic breakdown': 'On All My Pretty Ones', in McClatchy (ed.), *Anne Sexton*, 127–9: 127.


9 Ibid. Similar definitions persist in recent 'confessional' memoirists' descriptions of their work. Robert McCrum, author of *My Year Off: Rediscovering Life After a Stroke* (London, 1999), conflates Rosenthal's notions of therapy and autobiography, designating his work 'autotherapeutic': e-mail to the author, 2 Nov. 1999.

10 Ibid.

Phillips's claim that confessional poetry represents 'an expression of personality'. Such readings reach their apotheosis in the work of Neil Myers, who argues that 'what distinguishes Sexton's work from most of the genre is that she has survived'. Myers proposes an unworkable critical practice, one which suffers from the refusal to separate lived experience from text, and which begs the question: when Sexton dies, do the poems come to seem less distinguished?

As Rosenthal's explanation of how he chose the term 'confessional' indicates ('the term “confessional poetry” came naturally to my mind when I reviewed Robert Lowell's Life Studies'), the work is thought to arise irrepressibly and spontaneously from a fount of subjective experience and thence to the page. Such rhetoric is pervasive in confessional criticism. It is contiguous with the rhetoric of 'compulsion' which similarly informs contemporary readings of the mode. C. B. Cox and A. R. Jones applaud Sylvia Plath's 'compulsive intensity' in their 1964 Critical Quarterly essay, 'After the Tranquillized Fifties'. Jones subsequently elaborated on these themes in his article 'Necessity and Freedom', proposing that confessional writing is characterized by an 'intolerable compulsion to confess'. Of the poetry of Lowell, Plath, and Sexton, he argues that 'the experience of the work is inevitable and necessary suffering'. Indeed, the very title of his essay plays 'necessity' (something compelling, unavoidable, and coercive) against 'freedom' (release, 'break-through'). Even T. S. Eliot, writing slightly earlier, and describing what he calls 'meditative verse', speaks in terms of an 'obscure impulse' and suggests that the author of such poetry suffers under an enervating 'burden which he must bring to birth in order to obtain relief'. May Swenson goes so far as to offer the tautological notion of an 'impelling impulse behind all [Sexton's] poetry so far'.

This concept of the inevitable release of unbearable experience finds its modern-day expression in Erica Wagner's description of Ted Hughes's Birthday Letters as 'the artistic flowering of more than thirty years of pent-

14 The New Poets, 25 (my emphasis). That the term came 'naturally' to Rosenthal invokes Keats's 'if poetry comes not as naturally as the leaves to a tree it had better not come at all'. So, too, the notion of spontaneity recalls Wordsworth's 'spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings'. Both signal the debt to Romanticism which several critics have identified.
up emotion: this is the tidal force that gives the poems their power’.\textsuperscript{19} We find it, too, with an explicitly gendered inflection, in Alicia Ostriker’s \textit{Stealing the Language}: ‘A moment arrives when the volcano erupts, the simmering blood boils over, the fire breaks out . . . the imperative of this moment has almost become an axiom in feminist poetry and criticism’ (a process which Ostriker calls ‘expressive-purgative’).\textsuperscript{20} Metaphors of tidal waves, volcanoes, and earthquakes (Rosenthal describes the confessional poet as a ‘uniquely seismographic instrument’)\textsuperscript{21} only confirm the apparently natural, organic, and inadvertent nature of the confession, with the unfortunate consequence that the poet is figured as the passive victim of some unpredictable and irrepressible force. Thus, defining accounts of the mode, and indeed many subsequent readings, informed as they are by these early critiques, are predicated on a kind of biological reductionism, one which regards the text as a reaction to—or, more generously, the product or expression of—the lived experience of the subject. Yet Sexton herself demurs, redirecting critical attention from the biography to the text (the process of writing, the choice of ‘word’): ‘Not a “compulsion.” I hate to use the word because there might be a better one. But could I say “a seizure of inspiration”? Compulsion puts it on the level of neurosis.’\textsuperscript{22}

Such priorities signify an underlying critical anxiety about the subject’s possible failure to control her overwhelming emotions, to stem the flood, or cap the volcano, thereby placing the auditor at risk. It is the auditor’s fear of being overwhelmed by somebody else’s uncontrollable emissions—physical or psychological; the two are conflated—which stimulates the desire to impose strict barriers and forms of constraint. Louise Bogan complains of the risk of infection: ‘one poem, by Anne Sexton, made me positively ill’.\textsuperscript{23} James Dickey’s choice of metaphor in his vitriolic and notorious review of Sexton’s \textit{To Bedlam and Part Way Back} reveals his fear of contamination by her effusions: ‘Anne Sexton’s poems so obviously come out of deep, painful sections of the author’s life that one’s literary opinions scarcely seem to matter; one feels tempted to drop them furtively into the nearest ashcan, rather than be caught with them in the presence of so much naked suffering.’\textsuperscript{24}


\textsuperscript{20} Ostriker, \textit{Stealing the Language: The Emergence of Women’s Poetry in America} (London, 1987), 126.

\textsuperscript{21} The New Poets, 130.

\textsuperscript{22} Interview with Gregory Fitz Gerald, in Colburn (ed.), \textit{No Evil Star}, 180–206: 190.


\textsuperscript{24} Dickey, ‘Five First Books’, \textit{Poetry}, 97 (1961), 316–20: 318. Sexton’s daughter recalls that ‘the most poignant image I have of the difficulties she endured as an artist was my discovery, on the evening of her suicide, that she still carried in her wallet a clipping of the ax-job James Dickey
Similarly, of Sexton’s next volume (*All My Pretty Ones*), he complains: ‘It would be hard to find a writer who dwells more insistently on the pathetic and disgusting aspects of bodily experience.’ Dickey expresses many of the misgivings which characterize contemporary readings of confessional poetry: the sense of shame, the fear of becoming voyeuristic, the anxiety about taboo, the nervousness about being contaminated by the object of the gaze, and the uncertainty about how, exactly, to *read* (how to bring one’s ‘literary opinions’ to bear).

Patricia Meyer Spacks, too, reveals an anxiety about voyeurism. In her review of Sexton’s *45 Mercy Street*, she asks how the reader can ‘properly respond to lines as grotesquely uncontrolled as these’. What is the ‘proper’ (the etymological connection with the French *propre* ‘neat, orderly, clean’, should be noted) way to read these poems? How can one witness somebody else’s breakdown without being tarnished, defiled, or shamed by what one sees? Is it possible to read and respond to the text while retaining a *cordon sanitaire*? Spacks proceeds to lament Sexton’s ‘increasing slovenliness’ before admonishing her to strengthen her control over her mental—and physical—excesses: ‘art requires more than emotional indulgence, requires a saving respect for disciplines and realities beyond the crying needs, the unrelenting appetites, of the self’.

Such anxieties, I would argue, are not only experienced by Sexton’s readers, but also inform Sexton’s own ambivalence about her work, emerging in her poems in scatological and visceral metaphors, and in images of the self as poisoner.

The consensus that confessional writing originates in extremes of experience generates a judgemental, even authoritarian, critical approach, such that the poems which are considered most successful are those which can best contain or assuage the fiercest of emotions. Hayden Carruth, for example—here ‘damn[ing] with faint praise’—says of the poems in Sexton’s *Live or Die*: ‘They are the work of a gifted, intelligent woman almost in control of her material.’ A. R. Jones complains that, in some of Sexton’s poems, ‘it is as if the subject has got out of control, become indeed almost hysterical.’ Rosenthal finds in the epigraphs to Sexton’s first two volumes (‘the slogans of the confessional movement’, as he labels them) ‘force of character’, ‘a hard yet sensitive simplicity’ and ‘clarity of line’. However, it is arguable that her
epigraphs emphasize uncertainty, indeterminacy, and disorientation rather than decisiveness and determination. When Sexton cites the story of Oedipus at the beginning of To Bedlam and Part Way Back, it is Jocasta’s fear and indecision which are emphasized. When she quotes Franz Kafka at the beginning of All My Pretty Ones (‘a book should serve as the ax for the frozen sea within us’), it is the condition of despair, isolation, and disorientation to which the ‘ax’ (writing) gives access that intrigues her: ‘the books we need are the kind that act upon us like a misfortune . . . that make us feel as though we were . . . lost in a forest’. Rosenthal and his contemporaries—in their privileging of this new poetry’s ‘force’ and ‘clarity’ over its evasiveness and indeterminacy—show signs of a persistent fealty to the standards and practices of the dominant pre-confessional, or formalist, tradition.

A. Alvarez’s highly influential Times Literary Supplement article ‘Beyond All This Fiddle’ (later reprinted as the lead essay in his book of the same name) recapitulates many of the—at times contradictory—conceptualizations of confessionalism discussed thus far. For Alvarez, as for Rosenthal and Cox and Jones, confessional—or ‘extremist’—poetry is simultaneously a poetry of its particular time and place and an expression of alienated individuality. It is a poetry in which content or subject matter (‘psychic exploration . . . the artist’s identity’) are more important than structure or form (‘not a question of form’). In this respect, Alvarez anticipates Phillips’s opening gambit: ‘I felt that what a poet has to say is more important than how he says it.’ These are, of course, difficult readings to square with Sexton’s profoundly self-conscious, purposive, and complex poetics. Moreover, they are contradicted by Alvarez’s subsequent declaration: ‘clearly it takes a highly disciplined and informed art to probe dispassionately and successfully into the extremes of inner space’. The reductio ad absurdum of such views is reached in Alvarez’s assertion that ‘a major test of originality is not a question of form but of psychic exploration, not of artifact but of the artist’s identity’.

As Alvarez’s own argument demonstrates, these are problematic distinctions either to draw or to maintain. How can we distinguish between the text and the ‘identity’ which allegedly lies behind it? How can we know this identity without first encountering the ‘form’ or ‘artifact’—that is, the text? The

31 ‘Beyond All This Fiddle’, Times Literary Supplement, 23 Mar. 1967, pp. 229–32; repr. in Beyond All This Fiddle (London, 1968). Alvarez’s relationship with Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath and his championing of Plath’s early work is well documented, although his enthusiasm for the mode waned over time. In a 1966 postscript to his 1963 essay about Plath, Alvarez qualifies his earlier comments about the relationship between breakdown and ‘what I now call Extremist poetry’ (Beyond All This Fiddle, 57). More recently, he has declared that ‘“confessional poetry” was a mindless, loose-lipped style . . . of inward exploration [that] has now gone out of fashion’: Where Did It All Go Right (London, 1999), 197.

32 Alvarez, however, is less specific than Phillips, who was later to identify confessional poetry as the product of ‘post-Christian, post-Kennedy, post-Pill America’ with a confidence which belied the inaccuracy of his chronology: The Confessional Poets, p. xiii.

33 Ibid., p. xiv.

34 ‘Beyond All This Fiddle’, 230, 229.
attempt is, finally, self-defeating, descending into circularity and self-contra-
diction, and it generates an impossible reading practice: ‘A poem succeeds or
fails by virtue of the balance and subtlety of the man himself.’ This latent faith
in the innate superiority or special gifts of the creative author is made explicit
in Alvarez’s speculative profile of the ‘Extremist’ artist: ‘He is what he is
because his inner world is more substantial, variable and self-renewing than
that of ordinary people.’ Thus we are asked, ultimately, not to read and
evaluate the poetic text, but to peer beyond it to the living subject. Of the
poems in Lowell’s Life Studies, Alvarez enthuses: ‘you look through them to
see the man as he is’.

Notwithstanding Alvarez’s initial assertion that the ‘movement towards
Extremism’ is either a product of the vicissitudes of the modern age or a
symptom of the intensity of the poet’s experience (or possibly both), he
proposes, finally, that the extremist poem is produced in response to the
demands of its audience for deeper and darker insights:

The more ruthless [the poet] is with himself, the more unshockable the audience
becomes. This pushes the artist into what I would call Extremism. He pursues his
insights to the edge of breakdown and then beyond it, until mania, depression, paranoia
and the hallucinations that come with psychosis or are induced by drugs become as
urgent and as commonplace as Beauty, Truth, Nature and the Soul were to the
Romantics.

Here, perhaps unwittingly, Alvarez has lighted on one of the most striking and
fruitful of the more recent theorizations of confession. His comments antici-
pate Michel Foucault’s understanding of the importance for the completion of
the confession of the relationship between subject and reader, penitent and
confessor.

Foucault’s understanding of confessional process offers a valuable means of
repudiating the critiques discussed thus far, and provides a source of insight
into Sexton’s own complex and sophisticated poetics. It is thus necessary to
quote him at length:

The confession is a ritual of discourse in which the speaking subject is also the subject
of the statement; it is also a ritual that unfolds within a power relationship, for one does
not confess without the presence (or virtual presence) of a partner who is not simply
the interlocutor but the authority who requires the confession, prescribes and
appreciates it, and intervenes in order to judge, punish, forgive, console, and reconcile;
a ritual in which the truth is corroborated by the obstacles and resistances it has had to
surmount in order to be formulated; and finally, a ritual in which the expression alone,
indeed of its external consequences, produces intrinsic modifications in the
person who articulates it: it exonerates, redeems, and purifies him; it unburdens him of
his wrongs, liberates him, and promises him salvation.

For Foucault, as for Sexton, confession is not a means of expressing the
irrepressible truth of prior, lived experience, but rather a ‘technique . . . for

35 ‘Beyond All This Fiddle’, 231.
36 Ibid. 230.
producing truth'.\textsuperscript{37} Confession is not an unpredictable symptom of unbearable emotions, it is a ‘ritual’. The confession is generated and sustained not by the profundity of need or strength of compulsion of the author, but by the discursive relationship between speaker, text, and reader—penitent, confession, and confessor.

Sexton’s early poem, ‘Kind Sir: These Woods’ (written in February 1959, and published in her first volume To Bedlam and Part Way Back in 1960), is a deceptively playful text which offers a suggestive engagement with some of the practices and problems of confession, exemplifying Foucault’s understanding that the confession is ‘a ritual’. In its emphasis on ‘games’, ‘tricks’, and voluntary participation, it indicates that the confession may be willed, sought out, and constructed, rather than spontaneous, reactive, and compulsive. The poem cites as its epigraph a line from Thoreau’s Walden: ‘For a man needs only to be turned around once with his eyes shut in this world to be lost . . . Not til we are lost . . . do we begin to find ourselves.’ This refers the reader back to a line from the final stanza of Sexton’s ‘You, Dr. Martin’, the previous poem in the volume, in which the speaker plaintively asks: ‘Am I still lost?’.

‘You, Dr. Martin’ depicts the speaker’s stay in a mental asylum, or ‘summer hotel’; a seasonal retreat which finds an echo in the ‘late August’ games of ‘Kind Sir’. In the context of ‘You, Dr. Martin’, the metaphor of being ‘lost’—the passive mode is significant—represents psychological disturbance and vulnerability. ‘Kind Sir’ dramatizes this disorientation and, more importantly, renders the verb ‘to lose’ in its active form, thus transforming being lost into the rather more purposive act of losing oneself. We recall, from the epigraph to Sexton’s second collection, All My Pretty Ones, that the ‘books we need’ are precisely those which offer this experience.

‘Kind Sir, These Woods’ renders explicit the presence of the auditor/confessor (here, a ‘Kind Sir’) whose acceptance of the confession is necessary for its success. This is Foucault’s ‘partner who is not simply the interlocutor but the authority who requires the confession, prescribes and appreciates it’. The formality of ‘Sir’ denotes authority, while ‘kind’ connotes the penitent’s desire to please. ‘Kind Sir’ presents us with what is, in archetypal terms, a nightmare scene, yet this literal and metaphorical loss of self is also, and paradoxically, a ‘technique’ for finding oneself. Foucault’s ‘ritual’ is here dramatized as a childhood game: ‘It was a trick I to turn round once and know you were lost.’ The poem emphasizes not the horror of being lost, nor the bravery of the search for the way out, but the process by which one might activate this crisis. The references to the literal or metaphorical loss of self as a ‘game’ and a ‘trick’, and the idiom of the nursery rhyme (‘the forest between Dingley Dell | and grandfather’s cottage’) undermine the alleged inevitability and necessity of the trauma and show the speaker to be an active and willing participant in the game.

Becoming lost is a strategy, not an accident. Indeed, Sexton’s speaker, rather than seeking the way out of the wood of mental collapse, is looking for the way in. She seeks not therapy or an ‘expressive-purgative’ release (as Ostriker terms it), but an attenuation of her condition. As Jacqueline Rose has commented, here confirming Thoreau’s understanding: ‘you can only start seeing—this was Freud’s basic insight—when you know that your vision is troubled, fallible, off-key. The only viable way of reading is not to find, but to disorientate, oneself.’ Contra the views of Rosenthal about the ‘force of clarity’ which is intrinsic to the confession, in ‘Kind Sir’ it is immersion in chaos and confusion which is necessary and fruitful. Here, as in Macbeth (an intertextual reference which adds to the dramatic and magical resonance of the woods; Sexton’s second volume, All My Pretty Ones, takes its title from Shakespeare’s play), day and night are inverted or have become indistinguishable, leaving the speaker without any landmarks by which to determine her position. In the words of a subsequent poem in To Bedlam and Part Way Back, ‘Music Swims Back to Me’, ‘there are no signposts to tell the way’.

‘Kind Sir’ moves from these recollections of a childhood game (‘It was a trick to turn round once’) to a more insistent and self-reflexive commentary on the processes and techniques which should, I would argue, be regarded as central to Sexton’s poetics. First, we have the embracing of excess and abundance, itself marking a disregard for rules and prohibitions. Sexton’s speaker has gone one stage further than the epigraph from Walden advocates—she has ‘turned round twice’:

Kind Sir: Lost and of your same kind
I have turned round twice with my eyes sealed
and the woods were white and my night mind
saw such strange happenings, untold and unreal.

Second, we have the process of introspection. Although her eyes are sealed, she has gained insight from the technique of looking inward (a confirmation of the literal and metaphorical relationships between sight, insight, and foresight, and truth and soothsaying, which emerge repeatedly in Sexton’s poems). Finally, Sexton’s speaker acknowledges—albeit only to belittle them—contemporary readings of the courage and bravery of the confessional search:

And opening my eyes, I am afraid of course
to look—this inward look that society scorns –
Still, I search in these woods and find nothing worse
than myself, caught between the grapes and the thorns.

This rhetoric of courage and bravery is typical of readings of confessionalism, even to this day. ‘Courage’ is the only quality which James Dickey concedes

38 Rose, States of Fantasy (Oxford, 1996), 144.
39 John Diamond’s C: Because Cowards Get Cancer Too (London, 1998), for example, is praised as a ‘brave and brilliant book’ (TLS, 9 Oct. 1998, p. 29). Such epithets are parodied to brilliant
in his review of Sexton’s work: ‘Mrs. Sexton’s candor, her courage, and her story are worth anyone’s three dollars.’\(^{40}\) Robert Phillips posits, as one of the identifying marks of confessional poetry, that ‘it displays moral courage’.\(^{41}\) And central to Laurence Lerner’s 1987 *Critical Quarterly* essay, ‘What Is Confessional Poetry?’, is the view that ‘the writing of a confessional poem is an act of courage’.\(^{42}\) As this indicates, the epithet ‘courageous’ is a moral judgement. It implicitly accepts the value of the act of confession, and credits its putative honesty and sincerity—if it were not believed, it would not be called ‘brave’ but rather deceitful or self-justifying. It is a credulous reading which would accept as a sign of courage that which might, in fact, be a successful act of deceit or subterfuge. Thus Sexton’s long poem ‘The Double Image’, which reflects on a mother’s self-imposed separation from her infant daughter, is typically approved as a supreme act of bravery rather than an impressive and effective obfuscation. Such readings suggest that, notwithstanding the difficulties entailed, there is something worthy and beneficial about the confession. For Foucault, of course, it is precisely these barriers and difficulties which construct and validate what we take to be ‘courage’ (or what we take to be truthful; a quality to which it is related, hence Dickey’s yoking of ‘candor’ and ‘courage’). As Foucault suggests in the comments cited earlier, confession is ‘a ritual in which the truth [or the subject’s bravery] is corroborated by the obstacles and resistances it has had to surmount in order to be formulated’.

In ‘Kind Sir’, Sexton’s speaker claims to be ‘afraid’, although the weakness of the adjective, and the dismissive rider, ‘of course’, belie any real sense of terror. Further, ‘of course’ reads as a concession to the expectations of her audience rather than a credible statement of her own position. Indeed, she indicates that such fear as exists is not a consequence of her own encounter with the anticipated object of her search, but a product of her anxiety about the audience’s condemnation (society’s ‘scorn’). If we are to understand the confessional text not as the compulsive expression of the prior experience of the author, but as a gesture which achieves its meaning and status as confession only in the process of being received or read, then it is arguable that it is the audience, and not the experience, which induces fear.\(^{43}\)


40 ‘Five First Books’, 319.
41 *The Confessional Poets*, 17.
42 p. 56. Lerner proceeds to distinguish between ‘narrative’, ‘pronoun’, and ‘emotional courage’.
disorientation, ‘Kind Sir: These Woods’ shows that the speaker is able to ascertain her place on the map—metaphorically, to find herself—by a process of triangulation, by situating herself in relation to two other points; the grapes and the thorns, connoting salvation or crucifixion, contentment or suffering. Her identity is to be conceived as being defined by these two poles. Moreover, the metaphor of triangulation may be read as signifying the speaker’s sense of her own identity as confessional poet, which is understood as an effect of her relationship with writing (the fruitful and productive ‘grapes’) and audience (the ‘thorns’: representing suffering and condemnation).

The difficult relationship between confessional speaker and reader is also at the heart of one of Sexton’s best-known works. In ‘Her Kind’—the poem which she read at the beginning of every public performance of her work, and which consequently became ineluctably identified with her particular confessional poetics—Sexton explores the perceptions, or more properly misperceptions, held by her audience. Crucial to the poem and its depiction, in Sexton’s words, of ‘what kind of poet I am’, is the line ‘A woman like that is misunderstood. I I have been her kind’. The poem invokes, in order to refute, orthodox readings of her peculiar (I use the word advisedly) kind of poetry. ‘Her Kind’ opens flamboyantly, defiantly, with the ‘I’ so disdained by critics of the mode: ‘I have gone out, a possessed witch | haunting the black air, braver at night.’ Typically accused of introspection, the speaker here explicitly reaches outwards (‘I have gone out’) and takes the wider view. She is proud of the madness or possession which seizes her, yet refuses to specify the source of her inspiration or, perhaps, compulsion. Is she ‘possessed’ by madness? Or by poetry? Is her motivation the desire to write, to share, to go ‘out’ of herself? Or, in the context of the very public, and repeated, performance of the poem, is she ‘possessed’—in the sense of controlled—by the expectations of her audience?

Here, Sexton’s speaker explicitly claims the bravery so valorized in confessional poetry, yet her claim is undermined by the fact that she makes it only at night, under cover of darkness (perhaps a self-reflexive allusion to the courage fostered by evening performances of her work). Of course, the claim to be ‘braver at night, | dreaming evil’ is a warning that Sexton and persona should be dissociated. The life of the imagination, the adoption of different personae, and the role of the witch belong to the realm of fantasy. They are to be played out at night and in dreams and should not be confused with the real life of the poet. A similar ambivalence underpins the speaker’s record of her night-time flight over the ‘plain houses, light by light’. Is the witch obliterating the lights as she flies over the houses, or is she bringing light, illumination, insight as she passes? It is clear, however, from the metaphor ‘twelve-fingered’ (which, arguably, connotes the writing hands) that the speaker embraces her
distinctive role as poet of disorder, extremity, and excess—we recall the speaker's turning round 'twice' in contrast to the necessary 'once', in 'Kind Sir: These Woods'.

Stanza 2 proffers a further defence of Sexton's idiosyncratic and specifically female poetics. Her speaker defiantly embraces her place as an outsider, celebrating a peculiar kind of creative endeavour which is beyond or outside the recognition of the dominant poetic tradition—yet no less valuable for this. Her milieu is the caves and woods—a secret domain away from the civilized, public world—and her achievement is the production of naive, 'primitive' (a label which Sexton was proud to accept) craft objects (the 'skillets' and 'carvings'). Pointedly, however, this is a craft which is artful (there is no functionality to 'carvings'). Equally, Sexton's is an art which is finely crafted, skilled, deliberate, and in its own way profoundly productive—the 'disaligned' are comforted, or realigned, by her endeavours:

I have found the warm caves in the woods,
filled them with skillets, carvings, shelves,
closets, silks, innumerable goods;
fixed the supper for the worms and the elves:
whining, rearranging the disaligned.

Indeed, 'Her Kind' concedes the vital role played by the confessional audience, or 'disaligned'. If there is a compulsion or imperative behind confessional poetry, might it not be the imperative to respond to, and alleviate, the demands and needs of this audience? That the beneficiaries of this confession (the 'worms and the elves') are 'whining' (the syntax is ambiguous, rendering 'whining' applicable to subject and object alike) indicates that the relationship between the speaker and audience is viewed with some ambivalence.

In the final stanza, the speaker proclaims—and the emphatic use of the past tense confirms—her transcendence of the prohibition against confessional poetry:

I have ridden in your cart, driver,
waved my nude arms at villages going by,
learning the last bright routes, survivor
where your flames still bite my thigh
and my ribs crack where your wheels wind.

The punctuation and enjambment of 'routes, survivor | where' (addressed either to the witness/survivor who survives her or, self-referentially declaring herself as the 'survivor | where . . . ') confirm that she has weathered public ridicule and condemnation and lives to tell the tale, hence the shift to the present tense in the last lines. The word 'ridden', with its aural pun on 'written', indicates that it is the writing which invites

45 In her interview with Heyen and Poulin Sexton explains: 'I was just what one would call a primitive' (p. 141), and, to Fitz Gerald, 'I'm what they call a "primitive," because I don't know much' (p. 180).
punishment. That she waves her ‘nude arms’ is, again, a provocative and
defiant gesture, invoking the metaphors of nakedness, self-revelation, and
shame which are typical of confessional criticism (Jones, for example, argues
that ‘the persona is naked ego’, and Phillips suggests that confession ‘gives
the naked emotion direct’46). Yet as the circular, perpetual, and repetitive
nature of these metaphors suggests (‘still bite’ and ‘wheels wind’ are
significantly given in the present tense), the risk of punishment is persistent.
The penalty for writing in a new and distinctive way, for being ‘twelve-
fingered’, for writing about inner or psychological experience (‘out of mind’),
for being ‘a woman like that’, is played out, finally, on the woman’s body in
images of torturous violence.

‘Her Kind’ is, I would suggest, an entirely characteristic Sexton poem. It
problematises the process of writing, showing it to be subject to particular, and
persistent, pressures. Although it evokes freedom, liberation, spirit, and
independence, it is predicated on images of containment, circumscription,
and punishment.

A later poem, ‘Cripples and Other Stories’, returns, this time with more
confidence, to similar themes. Again, the text is preoccupied with under-
standing and refuting traditional perceptions of confessional writing. How-
ever, where ‘Her Kind’ depicts the speaker’s wily evasion of the confines of
convention, ‘Cripples and Other Stories’ represents her frank confrontation
with—and rejection of—such restrictions. The poem acknowledges, and
defiantly takes as its subject matter, the misgivings about poetic subject
matter shared by the critics mentioned earlier (exemplified by James Dickey’s
complaint that ‘it would be hard to find a writer who dwells more insistently on
the pathetic and disgusting aspects of bodily experience’). It offers itself as a
provocative pastiche of the confessional text, exaggerating the penitent’s
position to rhetorical and transgressive effect.

‘Cripples and Other Stories’ opens with a mocking appeal to the speaker’s
Doctor: ‘my doctor, the comedian | I called you every time.’ This recalls the
first lines of Sexton’s ‘You, Doctor Martin’ (mentioned earlier): ‘You, Doctor
Martin, walk | from breakfast to madness’ and instantly confirms hostile
critics’ views of the pathological fixation of confessional poets. In the first
stanza alone we have the essential ingredients of confessionalism as con-
ventionally received: Doctor, self, and text (here labelled self-deprecatingly
‘this silly rhyme’). The ‘silly rhyme’ also refers, specifically, to the refrain
which punctuates the poem:

\[
\text{Each time I give lectures} \\
\text{or gather in the grants} \\
\text{you send me off to boarding school} \\
\text{in training pants.}
\]

46 ‘Necessity and Freedom’, 14; The Confessional Poets, 8.
Here, we see the relationship of control between doctor and patient, confessor and penitent; a relationship which is predicated on the desire to please and on the withholding of pleasure. The confessing subject wishes to swap roles, to gratify or amuse the confessor (doctor/comedian), instead of being the recipient of his favours: 'I called you every time | and made you laugh yourself.' The subject, in 'calling' the doctor 'every time', indicates a desire to wrest back control, a desire which is thwarted because it is the doctor/confessor (the person spoken to) who retains authority, who has the ultimate power to call the shots: 'you send me off to boarding school in training pants'. As Leigh Gilmore argues (here confirming Foucault's point about the authority of the confessor):

The vow, 'So help me God,' seals the courtroom and the confessional account in the presence of a witness authorized to return a verdict, to determine veracity or perjury, to judge innocence or guilt, to decide on absolution or damnation. Some higher authority or recourse to its function is a fixture in scenes where truth is at issue, for it is necessary in this construction of truth telling to speak to someone.47

Such a requirement is conceded in a rhetorical question which Sexton poses in the last of the series of Crawshaw Lectures which she delivered in 1972: 'How did I come to writing about myself? How did I come to be a confessional poet who vomits up her past every ugly detail onto the page?' The answers which she offers are tentative and ambiguous: 'I started to write about myself because it was something I knew well . . . With every poem it is as if I were on trial, pleading my case before the court of angels and hoping for a pardon . . . Mind you, I really have no idea why I do what I do.'48 By claiming and then denying authority over her experience, Sexton implies that she does not, after all, know herself 'well'. As the reference to the penitent's arraignment before the 'court of angels' intimates, instrumental to the success of this confession is the 'court', or confessor, or audience.

In 'Cripples and Other Stories', the scatological metaphor (of the 'training pants') infantilizes the speaker, rendering her—as is typical of the confessing subject—powerless and abject. The 'ballad-like nursery rhyme-like tech-

47 Autobiographics, 121.
48 Crawshaw Lectures (10), p. 1, HRHRC.
49 Crawshaw Lectures (4), p. 1, HRHRC.
confession. The final incestuous horror of the poem is rapidly realized, and brought to a clanging conclusion by the end rhymes:

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

Doctor, father, and first man (Adam) are here synthesized into one dominant, controlling, and, most importantly, surveillant figure. The pun on ‘lie here in your crib’, with its latent allusion to the truths—or ‘lie[s]’—which emerge on the doctor’s couch (‘the crib’; itself offering a punning allusion to plagiarism), and the sense that self-scrutiny will lead to rebirth, a fresh start in life, form a knowing, and critical, commentary on confessional and psychiatric therapy.

The cast of characters in ‘Cripples and Other Stories’, in addition to the doctor and the disappointed and disappointing parents (‘Disgusted, Mother’, ‘father was fat on scotch’), features a mutilated self harbouring an awful secret (‘Would the cripple inside of me I be a cripple that would show?’). The speaker is full of self-loathing, and her self-portrait offers a striking metaphor for the figure of the confessional poet:

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

We find the suffering, vilified, abject self relentlessly scrutinizing that self, and therein finding emotional and material rewards (‘pearls’ of wisdom and wealth). The subject, in scratching away at her psychic wounds, leaves the scars perpetually open; constantly the focus of attention. The image of masking the ‘maggots’ with ‘pancake’ invokes the speaker’s application of masks, of the persona ‘I’, which may or may not disguise unpalatable truths. The final reference to hair wound in curls suggests, perhaps, a Shirley Temple-like performance, an overly sexualized attempt by a child to appeal to an adult (recalling the speaker’s relentless desire to please the doctor/father, and the infantilization of the mature woman in the incest scene of the poem’s final stanza). It also connotes the awful power of Medusa, threatening the audience with the dreadful consequences of their persistent gaze.

These multiple horrors read, as I have suggested, as a gross parody of confessionalism. In its extreme appropriation of excess, manipulation of disgust, and flamboyant disregard of aesthetic convention, ‘Cripples and Other Stories’ dramatizes the point which Sexton, in a rather more restrained tone, puts to a class of students: ‘Do you think out-houses and enemas are fit

50 To refer again to Leigh Gilmore: ‘The power of confession persists primarily through the psychoanalytic interest in the “self,” the construction of that self through a specific discourse, and the power relationship between analyst and analysand which produces “truth”’ (Autobiographics, 124).
subjects for poetry? We all go to the bathroom. Is it an experience that should be written about? Of course, by entitling her poem ‘and Other Stories’ and mentioning within the text that ’those are just two stories | and I have more to tell’, Sexton is also acknowledging the fictive nature of confession. As Sexton enquires of her students later in the same lecture: ‘What would you think the poem would be like from that title? How does “Other Stories” change it?’ The point here is that, however harrowing the subject matter (in this case, ‘the enemas of childhood | reeking of outhouses and shame’) and however expressive—in terms of offering relief or release—the poem seems, it is at heart, a narrative, a construction, one of many made-up ‘stories’. To return to Foucault’s point, the confession is a ‘technique . . . for producing truth’.

Sexton’s Crawshaw Lectures give an important insight into her development of a range of specific ‘technique[s] . . . for producing truth’. More generally, these lectures offer an insight into Sexton’s understanding of confessionalism as a mode and of her place in it. The lectures were delivered at Colgate University in 1972, where Sexton briefly held the Crawshaw Chair in Literature. Coming towards the end of her career, some thirteen years and five books after her first publication, these lectures (grouped under the title ‘Anne on Anne’) provide a retrospective summary of what, to Sexton, was either significant or ‘misunderstood’—or possibly both—about her work.

It is apparent, from the first of the lectures alone, that Sexton is keen to dispel the view that her poetry is autobiographical, that it is the spontaneous expression of her own prior lived experience. Thus she implicitly takes issue with many of the founding definitions of confessionalism. From the tone of her ‘Prefatory Remarks’ at the beginning of the lecture series, it is evident that Sexton is acutely aware of, and determined to confound, her audience’s reading of her and her work: ‘today we meet only for a few minutes, and in those few minutes I will give you warnings and intimations. You might wonder what an Anne on Anne class could be about.’ Thus, with Sexton, what you see may not be what you get. With a note of tension and watchfulness, Sexton alerts her audience to be on its guard, to tread carefully. There is something simultaneously playful, self-dramatizing, and deceitful about such an introduction: a depiction of the self as elusive, enigmatic, uncontainable, requiring concentration and attentiveness but promising no sureties.

Such comments also make apparent Sexton’s own sense of her writing self as constructed or artificial. The assignment which she sets for the course involves the students ‘reading the various critiques of my work as well as my

51 Crawshaw Lectures (4), p. 1, HRHRC.
52 Sexton’s notes for these lectures remain unpublished. Manuscript material is drawn from the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, University of Texas at Austin. Although the value of these lectures has been noted (Diane Wood Middlebrook, Anne Sexton: A Biography (London, 1991), 358, suggests that they ‘provide unique access to her view of contemporary poetry and her place in it’) they have not, hitherto, been studied by Sexton’s critics.
53 Crawshaw Lectures (1), p. 1, HRHRC.
five books'. Thereafter, they are required to formulate questions for Sexton but, before asking them, to anticipate her likely responses: 'You will bring questions to class each week and I will answer them. But not until you have already given your answer. In other words, you are to fabricate my reply.' So 'Anne on Anne' is asking the students to write 'Anne', to authorize her, in a process which mimics that by which the confessional persona is constructed by her audience. Sexton develops this idea further by suggesting that the 'Anne' who is both the subject and the object of these lectures is not only a construction of her present audience, but also a product of her previous and potential audiences. Admitting to her own doubts and uncertainties about how to introduce the lectures, she depicts herself as subject to the ideas and initiatives of others: 'Bruce [the lecture organizer] reasoned that . . .'; 'my students at Boston University persuaded me . . .'; 'they reasoned . . .'. Thus the final format of the lectures represents a consensus of views on 'Anne' rather than Anne on 'Anne'. As Sexton concludes: 'I hope from this class to learn as much about myself that startles as you will learn about me.' In so privileging the dramatic, fictive, or fabricated nature of the experience typically identified as biographically accurate, Sexton sounds an important note of caution. Her lecture reminds us that there is not necessarily or always an identification between the 'I' of the poem and the 'I' of the writer.

This theme is developed in the first lecture where, significantly, Sexton takes issue with one of the most important of the critical essays which defined 'confessionalism' (A. R. Jones's 'Necessity and Freedom'). Literally the first thing which Anne says about Anne is in refutation of orthodox views of her writing. She quotes Jones's view of the 'unmistakably autobiographical impact' of her work and his contention that 'the "I" of Sexton's poems [which Sexton, incidentally, misquotes as 'eye'] is clearly related intimately and painfully to the poet's autobiography', and then disdainfully comments 'I would like for a moment to disagree'. She proceeds by emphasizing the fictionality and the artifice of autobiography which, it emerges, is a simulation: 'It is true that I am an autobiographical poet most of the time, or at least so I lead my readers to believe.' It is clear that the techniques of autobiographical writing are easily assimilated, transposing the impression of autobiographical truth (a cornerstone, according to Jones and others, of confession) to the entirely fictional. Thus, far more important in Sexton's writing than the autobiographical 'I' is what she calls the persona 'I'.

The figures employed to describe the appropriation of this persona 'I' help to establish the reasons for Sexton's earlier warnings and intimations. The
metaphors are of disguise (‘I use the persona “I” when I am applying a mask to
my face’), of malicious deceit (‘a rubber mask that the robber wears’), and of
dramatic evasion (Sexton twice mentions a clown putting on his face for the
show). The use of the persona ‘I’ is crucial to the imaginative process, offering
a screen behind which to hide, and a blank canvas on which to project new
identities. Sexton’s discussion of her work demonstrates that different masks,
or different ‘I’s, may be slipped on and taken off at will: ‘I like to put on my
cLOWN FACE and become an old, old woman as in “Old Woman on the College
Tavern Wall”.’57 As she confirms in the second of her lectures: ‘It was an early
part of my development to adopt a persona and it is not one that I have quit. It
is intriguing to me to become another person.’58 As her earlier ‘warnings and
intimations’ should have alerted us, any search for the real ‘Anne’—in these
lectures and the poems alike—is futile.

In the final Crawshaw lecture, as in the first, Sexton explicitly refutes one of
her major critics. She questions Robert Boyers’s reading of her work (and
implicitly, his view that ‘her one true subject [is] herself and her emotions’):

I would like to make a few comments about Robert Boyers’s article in Salmagundi
entitled ‘The Achievement of Anne Sexton’ . . . In the poem ‘Two Sons’ I am taking on
a persona of an old woman whose 2 sons have married. He seems to think I’m speaking
in my own confessional voice. Likewise in ‘The Legend of the One-Eyed Man,’
although I admit I identify with him. In ‘Protestant Easter’ the persona is an eight-
year-old. He thinks it is me.

It is interesting that Sexton qualifies the reference to ‘my own . . . voice’ by
specifying that this is her ‘confessional voice’, as though this were just one of
many voices available to her. The distinction which Sexton makes between ‘I’
and ‘persona’ is an important one. It replicates John Berryman’s disclaimer at
the beginning of The Dream Songs:

Many opinions and errors in the Songs are to be referred not to the character Henry,
still less to the author, but to the title of the work . . . The poem then, whatever its wide
cast of characters, is essentially about an imaginary character (not the poet, not me)
named Henry . . . [who] talks about himself sometimes in the first person, sometimes in
the third, sometimes even in the second; he has a friend, never named, who addresses
him as Mr Bones and variants thereof.59

In an interview with Lois Ames, discussing the process and rewards of writing
her play, Mercy Street (produced off Broadway in 1969), Sexton indicates that
her use of disparate personae beguiles rather than reveals:

With the play, I became each person—I love doing this. I think it’s something I can do,
too. I do it pretty well. I become someone else. I tell their story. I love to write in the
first person, even when it isn’t about me, and it’s quite confusing to my readers,

57 Crawshaw Lectures (1), pp. 2, 3, HRHRC.
58 Crawshaw Lectures (2), p. 23, HRHRC.
because they think everything I write—sometimes I am talking about myself and sometimes not.60

The implication here is that there is no ‘true’ autobiographical ‘I’ beyond a succession of personae or masks. Sexton’s manipulation of these personae, her assumption and disposal, at will, of these myriad identities, while somehow imparting an impression of authenticity, indicates that identity is altogether more fluid and more impenetrable than, say, A. R. Jones’s search for a persistent autobiographical ‘I’ would suggest.

As we have seen, it is a commonplace of Sexton criticism to describe the writing of confessional poetry as ‘an imperative’, as an ‘intolerable compulsion’, and as the product of ‘uninhibited autobiographical impulses’. Implicit in such readings is the belief that at the bottom of the pit or reservoir which is being dredged, or beneath the layers of experience or memory which are being laid bare, there is an ‘original’ or ‘true’ Anne Sexton trying to get out, a self-present subject simply awaiting her moment of release or revelation. As Candace Lang summarizes conventional readings of autobiographical writing:

Traditional criticism has been primarily preoccupied with the ‘man-behind-the-work,’ yet insofar as it has proceeded on the assumption that the literary work is the expression (however inadequate) of an anterior idea originating in the writing subject and for which that subject was the sole authority, to discern what the writer ‘really meant to say’ has been tantamount to approaching the ‘core’ of the author’s being to grasp the truth of the writing subject.61

I would contend that subjectivity, instead of being understood as the source or origin of the text must, in Antony Easthope’s words, ‘be approached not as the point of origin but as the effect of a poetic discourse’. By reading confession as discourse, we can ‘explain the author as a product or effect of the text, whereas conventional criticism accepts the notion of the author as unquestionable and pre-given in order to be able to define how the text should be read’.62

Sexton’s manipulation of the persona ‘I’ raises crucial questions about the authenticity and credibility typically regarded as characteristic of confession-alism. It becomes impossible to read her poems in order to identify or evaluate the degree of (particularly biographical) truth implicit in each. Instead, we must acknowledge that, just as there are many ‘I’s, none of which is to be identified with the historical author, there are multiple truths. Sexton offers the example of her poem ‘Unknown Girl in the Maternity Ward’ (in To Bedlam and Part Way Back) in order to demonstrate that it is possible for the writing ‘I’ to identify with the experience of another, to adopt a mask or persona, and thereby to be truthful and false. She is truthful in the sense that, as she explains, the mask offers the opportunity to explore personal feelings of

loss on the abandonment of her own small child, and false in the sense that the narrative of the poem traces a fictional story of illegitimacy: 'It might be noted that after I published “Unknown Girl” people in the town where my husband was brought up said, “Wasn’t he a fine boy to marry Anne after she had had that illegitimate baby?” So much for confession. So much for persona.'

Throughout her Crawshaw Lectures, as indeed in her poetry, Sexton deflects critical emphasis from an evaluation of the putative authenticity of the confessional voice to an understanding of its potential inauthenticity—its tangentiality to the poet’s subjective experience. Yet in a supreme double bluff, having established the equal validity of confessional truth and confessional artifice (the autobiographical and persona ‘I’s), Sexton undercuts the reliability of this distinction, suggesting that, in fact, the whole debate is predicated on uncertainty. Truth and artifice are not so much equally valid as equally equivocal, and her own authority to determine such questions about her own work, her own value as a witness, are thrown into doubt. As Sexton concludes her second lecture: ‘All this was merely my fictions made up out of snatches of my life, lyric instances that I developed, other masks that I pulled over my face and voices who spoke for me. Never, never, never. All a lie.’

Notwithstanding Sexton’s attempt to rationalize her work and to foreground the productive process of exploring new personae, the complexity of the poetry, and its irreducibility to simplistic and schematic evaluations, resists exposition.

*University of Exeter*

---

63 Crawshaw Lectures (1), p. 12, HRHRC.

64 Crawshaw Lectures (2), p. 10, HRHRC.