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3

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Confessional Poetry

Robert Lowell's "Skunk Hour," one of the best-known poems from his epoch-defining collection, *Life Studies* (1959), begins with "Nautilus Island's hermit/heiress" "thirsting for the hierarchic privacy / of Queen Victoria's century."¹ Two stanzas later, the speaker of the poem appears making a furtive trip to lover's lane to spy on teenagers making out in their cars. This latter image is confessional poetry as we have known and sometimes loved it: a mentally unstable poet in an act of self-exposure. We see his perversion ("I watched for love-cars") and his mental anguish ("My mind's not right"). We see his guilt ("I myself am Hell, / Nobody's here -").² If we have come to this last poem in the collection having read Lowell's narrative sketch of his childhood, "91 Revere Street," the unflattering poems about his parents and grandparents, and the even less flattering poems about his mental illness and his marriage, we might be tempted to see this poem as simply one more private moment confessed to the reader. But we would misunderstand something fundamental to confessional poetry and to the period in which it was written if we failed to note the contrast Lowell sets up between the hermit heiress and the speaker in this, the concluding poem in the volume. "Skunk Hour" tells us that even though barely fifty years separate Queen Victoria's century from the moment in which Lowell was writing, some fundamental shifts had taken place in the conception of privacy. There was no single self-evident and self-evidently valuable concept of privacy. Instead there were *privacies* (a "hierarchic" one, for instance) and different relationships to its value (one character thirsts for it, the other gives it - and takes it - away). To call these poems "private," which was the term of choice for critics for several decades, is not to settle a question about confessional poetry, but to identify one of its preoccupations. What is privacy? And for whom?

"Confessional poetry" was first coined by the critic M. L. Rosenthal in 1959 in one of the more influential reviews ever written.³ Lowell was the central figure of his study, but Rosenthal grouped him with Sylvia Plath, John Berryman, and Anne Sexton. W. D. Snodgrass would round out the

cohort of those poets thought to be *the* Confessional Poets, who are now routinely said to be part of a "confessional movement" but only loosely so. Compared to other poetic or artistic movements of this period – the Black Mountain or Beat poets, for instance – no confessional poet imagined him- or herself to be part of a movement. The poets never congregated as the confessional poets; they almost universally disliked the term as it applied to their own work.⁴ The idea of a poetic movement is to some degree the useful fiction that has organized the study of late-twentieth-century poetry since the publication of Donald Allen's tremendously influential anthology, *The New American Poetry, 1945–1960*.⁵ While "movement" applies only as an analogy to this group, it is true that the confessional poets knew one another, often – though not always – through Lowell, who taught Sexton, Plath, and Snodgrass; they met in his classes at Boston University and Harvard, at his home, and more generally in Boston, where confessional poetry can properly be said to find its roots.

To the extent that we want to consider it a movement, confessional poetry ends in the mid-1970s. In 1973, Lowell published the last and most controversial of his confessional works, *The Dolphin*, which incorporated letters from his soon-to-be ex-wife, the highly regarded writer and editor Elizabeth Hardwick, in sonnets written for his soon-to-be next wife, heiress to the Guinness fortune, Lady Caroline Blackwood.⁶ By 1975, when Sexton's last collection, *The Awful Rowing Toward God*, was published posthumously, she, Berryman, and Plath were all dead and by their own hand.⁷ Snodgrass had moved away from the signature personal poems of his 1959 collection, *Heart's Needle*, and new forms of anti-confessional and even anti-lyric poetry were in the ascendance.⁸ Nonetheless, confessional poetry had an unparalleled impact on poetry writing of the late twentieth century, and by the mid-1970s it had achieved a kind of dominance, deeply influencing creative writing schools across the country and later generations of confessional writers, producing a set of conventions for personal self-revelation, and most importantly retraining our appetite for and expectations of personal revelation in poetry. A poet like T. S. Eliot, who had formulated the modernist theory of poetic impersonality that so shaped poetic output until the publication of *Life Studies*, could now be read as confessional because confession was no longer just a writing practice; it was a paradigm for reading as well.⁹

The turn toward confession in poetry startled many contemporary readers because the reigning orthodoxy of the mid-century was impersonality. Eliot's famous declaration of the impersonality of the poet, along with William Carlos Williams's dictum, "no ideas but in things," put the psyche of the poet firmly out of view, irrelevant to the poetic project.¹⁰ This theory

of impersonality was taken up and elaborated not only by the generation of poets that followed them, but also by the most important critics of the day, the so-called New Critics, whose theories of poetic autonomy were imbibed by many readers new to the form, who were attending college courtesy of the G.I. Bill. By the mid-1950s, those strictures against the personal were felt to be arid by poets with many different aesthetic theories and practices. Lowell called his own refusal of the impersonal, *Life Studies*, his "break-through back to life."¹¹

But this term – "confessional" – represented, of course, a far longer history and a much broader reach within the period when confessional poetry emerged. Confessional writing is part of a religious tradition that dates back to Augustine and became part of a therapeutic tradition even before the advent of psychotherapy, which certainly shaped and accelerated the outpouring of personal self-revelation in the twentieth century. Moreover, in confessional poetry, both religious belief and Freudian psychotherapy play very important roles. Confession, with or without the motivation of penance or psychic pain relief, also represents one of the most varied and intense forms of artistic experimentation in the latter half of the twentieth century. It is impossible to imagine this period without considering the popularity of the memoir and the autobiographical novel, the exhibitionism of performance art, the subjective viewpoint of the New Journalism, and self-portraiture in photography and the fine arts more generally, to say nothing of the personal revelations of talk shows, tabloids, and, in the twenty-first century, personal blogs and social media. Likewise in the political realm, most importantly in the feminist movement but also the civil rights and gay liberation movements, speaking personally was considered a crucial form of intervention into the public sphere and the political process. In many of these cases, the personal voice was a rebuke to what was increasingly viewed as a fraudulent objectivity or a false universality.

Poetry, quite naturally, participated in this general cultural trend, and what we term confessional poetry could be understood, in these broader terms, to have considerably larger membership than the so-called confessional poets. Two of their contemporaries, Allen Ginsberg and Frank O'Hara, for instance, experimented in sometimes similar ways with their personal experience. Ginsberg, a notable influence on Lowell, felt called to witness the exploits, sexual and otherwise, of the "best minds of [his] generation."¹² "Howl" (1956) was easily as scandalous as anything the confessional poets ever wrote and was put on trial in one of the era's most famous obscenity cases. O'Hara also used the material of his everyday life, his lunch-hour strolls, in his best-known collection, *Lunch Poems* (1964), which also casually mentioned his circle of friends and their social gatherings.¹³ This is to

say that autobiographical poetry more generally, and sometimes even what we might call confessional, was quite widespread.

What made confessional poetry confessional, as opposed to just personal or autobiographical, was the nature and context of its revelations. There is, first of all, the urgency and "rawness" of the revelations. This is, in key respects, a distinction of form, not content. In accepting the National Book Award for *Life Studies*, Lowell made a contrast between the "raw and the cooked," by which he meant to signal the difference between a more relaxed and conversational style in *Life Studies* and his previous, syntactically overwrought, often opaque lines. The directness – the relaxation of iambic pentameter or the loosening of the rhyme scheme (without its abandonment) – created an impression of casual and intimate conversation. Lowell also meant to mark the difference between this more informal style and the technically expert poems that filled the magazines and journals of the 1950s. Rawness could also describe Sylvia Plath, albeit in a different way. One of Plath's most original contributions to the history of poetry is the emotional force of her poetry, particularly the intensity of rage in *Ariel* (1965), which was conveyed by an alternation in tone between fury and detachment.¹⁴ The mixed ferocity and coldness of Plath's work in poems such as "Lady Lazarus" or "Lesbos" is the aspect of her work least dulled by time and the conventionalization of confession. Berryman's antic, sometimes scatological humor, and the polyvocality of his 77 *Dream Songs* (1964) speaker (the shifting between rhetorical modes like dialect, ad-speak, poetic high tradition) might also be thought to be raw.¹⁵ It was certainly not decorous in either the social or the poetic meaning of that term.

If the form of these poems can be thought raw, so, too, can the content, the "shameful" material the poems discussed. The revelations of confessional poetry were extreme and transgressive, particularly with respect to norms of white, middle-class, heterosexual society. Sexton, Lowell, Plath, Berryman, and Snodgrass made poems about marital failure and infidelity (hetero) sexual transgression, abortion, rage, mental illness, and drug and alcohol abuse. They wrote about the body, often in its most degraded or vulnerable states. Sexton is arguably the most important voice in this respect. Her poem, "Menstruation at Forty" (1966), would hardly raise eyebrows now, but many critics of the time were shocked and repelled.¹⁶ Perhaps most importantly, however, it was their depiction of the emotional violence of the middle-class family that disrupted their readers' expectations. Taken together, a directness of address, which produced the impression of candor and intimacy with the reader, and the shameful, dishonorable (Rosenthal's term), or merely private nature of the content were a potent mix. It is thus important to keep both the form and content innovations of confessional poetry in mind. Critics mistook the informal address and the private content

for a kind of transparency and artlessness, which made the poems appear to be mere outpourings of feeling and information unmediated by craft. In other words, the poems were initially viewed more as confession than poetry. In the past twenty years or so, critics began to examine the poems not so much for their content but for the artistry that creates the pose or performance of sincerity, the theatricalization of intimacy.¹⁷

Following closely on the charge that confessional poetry – shameful, artless, shocking – was not poetry at all came the criticism that it was merely private. Unlike the politically engaged poetry that also began to flourish in the 1960s, confessional poetry reported the conflicts internal to the family and to the self, which suggested to many readers that it had nothing to tell them about the tumultuous and rapidly changing world in which it existed. In this line of criticism, it was not the sordidness of its revelations that mattered, as it had been upon initial publication, but their triviality and banality. In the face of the Vietnam War or the civil rights movements, who cared that Lowell's father was a failure? That Sexton was unfaithful to her husband? That Plath had an Electra complex? That Berryman was an alcoholic? That Snodgrass was on his third (or was it fourth?) marriage? Nonetheless, this complaint overlooks the extreme political importance of privacy and private life in the high period of the Cold War.

There is a great deal more to say about the emergence of confessional poetry at this moment than how it reflected a generational swing of the pendulum from impersonality to emotionally intense revelations of shameful and mostly personal and familial dramas. Why should transgressing the boundaries of private life have been so stimulating to so many writers and so many readers? These poets were, as some critics have emphasized, celebrities, with all the attendant issues of publicity. *Life Studies* sold in pharmacies; during readings, Anne Sexton's fans yelled encouragement at her like groupies; Sylvia Plath's brief life occasioned at least six biographies and a major motion picture starring Gwyneth Paltrow. The point is not that they ushered in an era of extreme self-exhibitionism; rather they were caught up in the wave that made their revelations part of a larger aesthetic and political impulse. As Americans everywhere began to think about their privacy, few had as much insight into its paradoxes as the confessional poets.

The Kitchen Debates

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...

and sometimes in private,
my kitchen, your kitchen,
my face, your face.¹⁸

Anne Sexton, "For John Who Begs Me
Not to Inquire Further" (1959)

Two "kitchen debates" from 1959 help us understand how confessional poetry participated in a wider examination of the meaning and value of privacy in the Cold War. By extension, we can also think about what it means to look at poetry historically without either exaggerating its influence on or diminishing its relevance to the concerns of its time. In what is considered her poetic manifesto, "For John Who Begs Me Not to Inquire Further," Anne Sexton set her side of a debate over the limits of poetic self-disclosure in a kitchen. And in an actual kitchen, part of a model home built by U.S. contractors for a Moscow exhibition, leaders of the two Cold War superpowers, Vice President Richard Nixon and Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev, debated the comparative value of capitalism and communism. Pairing these debates should not be taken to mean that Sexton had Nixon on her mind, nor Nixon Sexton. The first is improbable and the second unimaginable. Thinking historically about poetry does not require the poet's intimate connection to public figures or events, but instead takes stock of their sensitivity to the charged concepts and metaphors of their moment. In 1959, kitchens – and the homes that enclosed them – were visible in U.S. public discourse in a variety of contradictory ways. We do not ordinarily imagine either the poetic tradition or the fate of the free world to rest on kitchens. But the common backdrop clearly warrants some investigation.

A much-recounted episode in the Cold War, perhaps because it is as unlikely as it is illuminating, the "Kitchen debate" between Nixon and Khrushchev was broadcast on all three networks in the United States (ergo there was nothing else to watch) and several days later in Moscow. The model home, touted as affordable to any American, was stocked with entertainment and labor-saving devices, a display of the technical wizardry and material plentitude of American capitalism. But the home was a significant symbolic choice for other reasons as well. Cold War discourse had long enshrined the home as the centerpiece of U.S. democracy, the site of the citizen's autonomy, liberty, and sovereignty. The home was where citizens retreated from the public world, the place where they could be themselves, think their own thoughts, make decisions about their own lives, and enact their own projects. It was also the space of the nuclear family, whose idealization in the Cold War is difficult to overstate. Elaine Tyler May, the first historian to link the foreign policy of Cold War containment to the domestic politics of postwar

rebuilding, uses the bomb shelter beneath the suburban home to explain the ambiguity of the home's symbolic promise in the 1950s.¹⁹ A *Life Magazine* photograph of a smiling newlywed couple descending into a bomb shelter filled with canned goods for their honeymoon epitomized for May contradictory impulses in the large-scale retreat from public life into the privacy and security of the home. Celebrated as the quintessential site of liberty and autonomy, the home was less conspicuously a space of fear and anxiety.

The doubleness of the home lies at the heart of the Cold War privacy paradox: at the same time that more Americans than ever were living in single-family homes and presumably enjoying their privacy, these same citizens experienced conspicuously, even surprisingly, high levels of exposure and invasion. If the "enemy within" – a term for communists in the United States – could reside untouched and unremarked in the protected space of privacy, and if that enemy could annihilate American freedoms along with American lives, the space of privacy would have to be invaded. Cold War security anxieties justified the forced confessions of the House Un-American Activities Hearings and those of Senator Joseph McCarthy just as it did the FBI's massive collection of dossiers on suspected subversives. These files included dossiers on public figures like Albert Einstein and Frank Sinatra; private citizens like public school teachers and Hollywood filmmakers; and writers and poets like Lowell, Ginsberg, Faulkner, Hemingway, Steinbeck, Auden, and many more.

In the shadow of these politically motivated intrusions, myriad threats to privacy seemed to be emerging on all fronts, and countless books and articles reported them from the end of the 1950s to the late 1960s. Among the things counted as a threat or a source of anxiety were surveillance equipment like "spike mikes" and telescopes, job testing, psychological surveys, government dossiers, closed-circuit television, peep holes in men's rooms, Fourth Amendment violations by law enforcement, consumer polls, educational records, databases and computers more generally, satellites and television, psychoanalysis, suburban neighborhoods, celebrity profiles, news reporting, and more. This list, drawn from this explosion of writing and from a 1966 Senate subcommittee hearing on privacy cited by Supreme Court Justice William Douglas in a legal opinion,²⁰ shows how varied and far-reaching the death of privacy seemed to be. Some of this list could be described broadly as technological and some of it as organizational, some of it experiential and some of it abstract, but as nearly every commentator noted, it was not any single invasion but the totality of them that seemed to suggest there was no realm of privacy for the U.S. citizen. One feature of this debate, but only a minor one at the time, was the willing abandonment of personal privacy by writers, celebrities, politicians, and ordinary citizens. Myron Brenton in

The Privacy Invaders (1964), for instance, noted that this willingness was alarming because then people would not object to intrusions on their privacy in nearly every area of their lives. Privacy was not only being invaded from without; it was eroding from within. Moreover, the Cold War provided a narrative to this experience: the end of privacy was the end of the free world.²¹ As privacy violations mounted, the United States was beginning to resemble its ideological enemy, the Soviet Union, which was routinely characterized as a totalitarian state, one hallmark of which, in U.S. popular discourse, was the lack of a private sphere.

These battles over privacy – what it was, whom it protected, and under what conditions – were fought before the Supreme Court many times between the late 1950s and the mid-1970s. Two kinds of cases, in particular, focused directly on the issue: one was Fourth Amendment cases that sought protection for the home from invasive search techniques enabled by new technologies, and the other was birth control cases that adjudicated the state's interest in the individual's decisions about bearing children. They came together momentarily in 1965 in a case called *Griswold v. Connecticut* in which the court declared the home a "zone" of privacy. In naming a legal right to privacy, which did not exist before this ruling, *Griswold v. Connecticut* seemed to answer American anxieties about the death of privacy. "Would we allow the police to search the sacred precincts of marital bedrooms for telltale signs of the use of contraceptives?" asked Justice Douglas in the most memorable image of this landmark case. The specter of policemen searching bedrooms epitomized the Cold War anxieties of the police state, which the Justice had worried about since the McCarthy era.²² His image was all the more striking, however, because no policeman had ever entered a marital bedroom on such a search; instead, Lee Buxton, a doctor and provider of medical services at Planned Parenthood, and Estelle Griswold, its executive director, had provided information about birth control to women at a clinic. Various incarnations of this case had been argued before the Supreme Court between 1959 and 1965 when the Court declared that the constitution implied a right to privacy in the "penumbra" the Bill of Rights.²³ It may be no surprise that *Griswold* was a controversial decision in the legal community; privacy was a right inferred, but not explicitly stated anywhere in the Constitution. It will be far less surprising, however, that this right met with immediate and widespread popular acceptance.

Keeping in mind Douglas's phrase, "the sacred precincts of the marital bedroom," let's return to Anne Sexton's "For John Who Begs Me Not to Inquire Further." Confessional poetry represents a counter-discourse of privacy, one that undermined the sanctity of the home and deflated the value of privacy by attending to its deprivations. Written after her teacher and

mentor, John Holmes, objected to the "the source and subject" of the poems in her first book – her stay in a mental hospital – Sexton defended her choices by elaborating the transpersonal nature of her private distress.²⁴ The poem's simple but profound intuition is that Sexton's poetry made Holmes uncomfortable not because its subject was so alien to him, but because it mirrored something in his private life ("my kitchen, your kitchen, / my face, your face"). He had objected to the "selfishness" of "forcing others to listen to you" and giving them nothing.²⁵ Sexton interpreted his resistance otherwise. Having voiced her experiences of mental breakdown, emotional violence, and secret humiliation in the public realm of poetry, Sexton believed her listener could no longer deny such things in his own home. In so doing, the sanctity of the home, its freedom and its pleasures, gets turned upside down. The home becomes isolated instead of private, secret instead of merely withdrawn from scrutiny, defined by loneliness and coercion rather than sovereignty and autonomy.

While confessional poets produced a great number of poems that echo the paranoia of the privacy discourse, they consistently imagined the home as a place that was defined by its *lack* of privacy.²⁶ Sexton's "Self in 1958" (1966) elaborates this story. In the poem, the speaker describes herself as a "plaster doll" who ends the poem by asking:

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?²⁷

The expectation of being watched necessitates a carefully crafted scene of authentic private life; "wholesome disorder" creates a fiction of authenticity because it is not too perfect, but neither is it imperfect enough to invite further inspection. Because the door "*should* spring" open, the self is always prepared for exposure, having subjected itself to an ongoing surveillance that anticipates that exposure. Similarly, Plath frequently makes the home, and especially the kitchen, into a kind of stage. "Lesbos," for instance, depicts the home as neither private nor public: inside it is "all Hollywood," with "stage curtains" and "coy paper strips" for a door, but it is also "windowless," so lacking a view to the outside world.²⁸ The kitchen is paradoxically a theatrical space of performance rather than a private space of self-making.

The universality of private experience, perhaps especially in its darkest moments, animates these postwar experiments with the autobiographical, and most certainly those of the confessional poets, particularly the poetry of women, whose access to universality was considerably less certain. Plath

would come to this conclusion in the pages of her journal. She understood as one of the grounds of her writing that "[her] problems are universal enough to be made meaningful."²⁹ Note that Plath does not take for granted this universality; by saying the problems can be "made meaningful" she presupposes the private self as a work of art, something that requires aesthetic fashioning to be recognizable. Sexton's and Plath's bids to enter the public sphere from the space of the private, the domestic, the marginal, the embodied, and the enraged made them generational icons for speaking of the stunted possibilities of women confined to, not protected by, the home. When Betty Friedan's *Feminine Mystique* was published in 1963, launching second-wave feminism, Sexton and Plath were already exploding the myth of happy suburban home and pointing to the enforced silence among and between women that sustained that myth.³⁰

The Privacy of the Body

As soon as *Griswold v. Connecticut* established a constitutional right to privacy in the zone of the home, a series of cases challenged that limit. What happened to a citizen's privacy outside of the home? Were only married couples and their bedrooms entitled to protection from policing? Among others, two cases clarified these issues: *Katz v. US*, which established that citizens had expectations of privacy outside the home (in this case on public telephones) and *Eisenstadt v. Baird*, which allowed that individuals, not just married couples, had rights to self-determination in their decisions to use birth control. As privacy law evolved, then, privacy became mobile, contextual, and embodied. Once this happened, the gendered dimensions of privacy were set to manifest themselves, and did so with the court's decision that privacy lay "between a woman and her doctor" in *Roe v. Wade* (1973). We will return to that shortly.

By the time *Roe* was handed down in 1973, confessional poetry was all but finished. Nevertheless, in numerous poems written throughout the privacy debate that began in the late 1950s, confessional poets had explored the body and used it to comment on and define the nature of privacy for men and women. One of the most important ways they did so was in what I have called "operation poems," a small but distinct subgenre in which the issues of inside and outside, surface and depth, power and coercion are explored in relation to the confessional project.³¹ Looking back at this work, it is astonishing to see how well these poets understood the conditions under which men and women could claim or relinquish their privacy. Some of these operation poems were obviously metaphors for the confessional project. John Berryman, for instance, in his "67th Dream Song," writes:

Confessional Poetry

I don't operate often. When I do,
persons take note.
Nurses look amazed. They pale.
The patient is brought back to life, or so.

The poem ends:

I am obliged to perform in complete darkness
operations of great delicacy
on my self.³²

Berryman is talking about a medical procedure, invoking nurses and patients, but we are not in much doubt that the "operations of great delicacy / on my self" are the 77 *Dream Songs*. His sly humor works on several levels. It is not clear that the patient who survives this operation actually lives; perhaps the surgeon can only mummify – that is, preserve – a lifeless form. Confessional poetry, because it exposed the poets' intimate others, was always in danger of destroying someone else, or at the very least wounding them. What we are sure of, however, is that in this poem, the poet is the surgeon, whether cutting into someone else or himself. The surgery on the self is especially risky, on the one hand, because it takes place in unlit places – that is, where the poet has no sight, much less insight – but on the other hand, the darkened arena reduces risk as well because the poet/surgeon cannot be seen.

If Berryman's is the most obviously metaphorical, it has been somewhat less clear to readers that the many other operation poems allegorize the confessional act as well. What does it mean that so many confessional poets wrote poetry about surgery? Surgery is an act of penetration, one that troubles the inside/outside dichotomy of the self in the most literal way. Unless the confessional poets had an unusual number of surgical procedures, it seems obvious that the operation poem is meant to reveal something about the poetry of private life. While the exposure of the body is primarily associated with Sexton and Plath, male poets also exposed their bodies, but critics either failed to notice or perhaps could not see it, and for good reason. When male poets cut into the body, something happens that limits or even eliminates their exposure. For one, they tend to keep the scalpel in their own hands; for another, the act of exposure transposes their gender.

Snodgrass's "The Operation" (1959), for example, turns the operation into an act of castration.³³ As his body is shaved in preparation for surgery, the razor moves ominously from his abdomen to his groin. As he is rendered hairless, exposed, Snodgrass is slowly transformed: "White as a child, not frightened. I was not / ashamed. They clothed me, then, / in the thin, loose, light, white garments, / The delicate sandals of poor Pierrot, / A schoolgirl first offering her sacrament." He is first "a child" and then no longer himself

(the line breaks on "I was not"); he is then "poor Pierrot," a liminal figure that is neither male nor female, and last he is a "schoolgirl" whose first sacrament is confession.³⁴ Masculinity seems unable to withstand or remain intact in the act of exposure. To lose one's privacy is to become a woman or a child. In recovery from the operation, which he has performed on himself (he is the "blank hero" who "enacts [his] deed" in the operating arena even if he is also "shackled and spellbound"), he "wakens into women," thus restoring his masculinity by implying the restoration of his virility.

In contrast, Sexton's "The Operation" (1962), which responded to Snodgrass's, opens with powerful and coercive doctor. Beginning with the moment of diagnosis, Sexton submits with a paradoxical willingness to the doctor's invasion: "while I, who must, allow the glove its oily rape, / to hear the almost doctor over me equate / my ills with hers / and decide to operate."³⁵ The verb is the tell here: "must allow." Allowing appears to suggest consent, but the imperative of "must" makes that consent dubious, and "oily rape" renders it nonsensical. When her body is shaved for surgery, the result is also to lose herself, not to infantilization or feminization, but to genericization: "All that was special, all that was rare / is common here. Fact: death too is in the egg. / Fact: the body is dumb, the body is meat..."³⁶ Sexton, no longer an individual, is identifiable only as a member of a species, a body that is information, readable but not capable of telling its own story. The problem of being read rather than speaking forms the center of Sexton's doctor/patient poems more generally. "Unknown Girl in a Maternity Ward" (1960) revolves around the complicated refusal the girl makes to the "enamel" (that is impenetrable) doctor's unceasing efforts to force her to confess the name of the father of her newborn child.³⁷ Addressing the child, she finally answers the doctor's questions: "I speak. It is you my silence harms"; and yet, her answer is nothing. She will announce her resistance: "name of father - none" and therefore "name you bastard."³⁸ She has given everything away in this poem, including her child, by answering with no answer. Refusing to submit to the doctor's coercion of confession, her poem shows that to give nothing away is to lose everything.

If Snodgrass and Berryman kept the scalpel in their own hands, for Plath and Sexton, the condition of self-expression is always mediated by powerful doctors. One of Plath's most famous poems, "Lady Lazarus," also works through this dilemma of speaking in the context of coercion. The speaker refuses to be "Herr Doktor's" "opus" or "valuable" and so "melts into a shriek," thus garbling her speech to make it unreadable and unusable to him.³⁹ Thinking of confessional poetry's interest in doctors and surgeons, it is perhaps not difficult to imagine how they might have responded to Justice

Blackmun's compromise in *Roe v. Wade*. Arguing for a right to abortion under the rubric of privacy meant placing that right "between a woman and her doctor." She could, indeed had to, confess her story as a condition of her autonomy. It was he, the doctor, who would ultimately decide what she did with her body. As *Doe v. Bolton* (1973), which followed *Roe*, made clear, it was the doctor's judgment being upheld, not the woman's: "Medical judgment may be exercised in light of all factors - physical, emotional, psychological, familial, the woman's age - relevant to the well-being of the patient ... this allows the attending physician the room he needs to make his best medical judgment" (192). The presumptively male doctor's reason and compassion undergird the woman's right, thus avoiding, as Justice White complained in his dissent, the woman's "convenience, whim, or caprice." Confession, therefore, is mandated in the enactment of female rights to privacy.

Conclusion

Should it surprise us that lyric poetry provided an ideal form in which to consider and elaborate the conditions and the costs of privacy? If we remember that the lyric has been defined since the nineteenth century as a "self overheard speaking to itself," the anxieties of privacy in the Cold War - of being overheard anywhere and at any time - make the lyric a suitable and even necessary place to think about privacy and self-exposure. Withdrawing into privacy to conduct a conversation with oneself is one of the most powerful images of autonomy that we have. The freedom of expression of the lyric - where the speaker has no obligations to others because there are no listeners other than self - translates into the freedom of self-creation where the speaker can - indeed, by the New Critical standards of that historical moment, must - transcend the constraints of time, place, and social location. The confessional poets, by exploring the realms of the not merely private, but *too* private aspects of selfhood, submerged themselves in those aspects of domestic life that curb autonomy and limit self-making. In an era when so many worried so deeply about incursions into privacy, their example helps us understand why others would relinquish it and interrogate its fictions and its promises. As privacy became suddenly visible in U.S. culture at the end of the 1950s, it quickly became clear that we no longer knew what it was. Privacy would be defined and redefined, exalted and protested, violated and protected in ever-changing ways as the twentieth century came to an end. We still imagine that we have privacy, even though it has died a thousand deaths, and we still cannot agree on its uses and its value.

NOTES

1. Robert Lowell, *Life Studies* (New York: Vintage Books, 1959), 83.
2. *Ibid.*, 84.
3. Originally published as "Poetry as Confession" in the November 19, 1959 issue of *The Nation*, this article also formed the basis of *The Modern Poets: A Critical Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1960) and was later collected in *Our Life in Poetry: Selected Essays and Reviews* (New York: Persea Books, 1991).
4. Anne Sexton both denied being a confessional poet and declared herself the only one. See Jo Gill, "Anne Sexton and Confessional Poetics," *The Review of English Studies* 55.220 (June 2004): 425-445, 425.
5. Donald Allen, ed., *The New American Poetry, 1945-1960* (New York: Grove Press, 1960).
6. Robert Lowell, *The Dolphin* (London: Faber, 1973).
7. Anne Sexton, *The Awful Rowing Toward God* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1975).
8. W. D. Snodgrass, *Heart's Needle* (New York: Knopf, 1959).
9. T. S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," in *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism* (London: Methuen, 1920), 47-59.
10. This line first appeared in a poem called "A Sort of Song," published in *The Wedge* (Cummington, MA: The Cummington Press, 1944); it appeared again in *Paterson. Book One* (New York: New Directions, 1946).
11. Frederick Seidel, "Robert Lowell: The Art of Poetry 3," *Paris Review* 7 (Winter-Spring 1961): 59-65, 64.
12. Allen Ginsberg, *Howl and Other Poems* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1956), 9.
13. Frank O'Hara, *Lunch Poems* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1964).
14. Sylvia Plath, *Ariel* (1966; New York: Harper Perennial, 1999).
15. John Berryman, *77 Dreamsongs* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1964).
16. Anne Sexton, *The Complete Poems* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1981), 137-138.
17. See, for instance, Christina Britzolakis, *Sylvia Plath and the Theatre of Mourning* (Oxford and New York: Clarendon Press, 1999).
18. Sexton, *The Complete Poems*, 35.
19. Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1988).
20. Douglas dissenting in *Osborne v. U.S.*, *Lewis v. U.S.*, *Hoffa v. U.S.*, U.S. 323, 87 S. Ct. 439 (1966).
21. Myron Brenton, *The Privacy Invaders* (New York: Coward-McGann, 1964).
22. In lectures delivered at Franklin and Marshall Law School, published as *The Right of the People* (New York: Doubleday, 1958), Douglas laid out a rationale for a right to privacy in relation to Cold War-era McCarthyism, and much of its reasoning finds its way into his *Griswold* opinion.
23. The "penumbra," which means "shadow," was composed of "emanations" from the First, Fourth, Fifth, and Ninth Amendments.
24. See Diane Middlebrook's account of this episode in "Housewife into Poet: The Apprenticeship of Anne Sexton," *The New England Quarterly* 56.4 (December 1983): 483-503.

25. *Ibid.*, 493.
26. In 1962 alone, Plath wrote no fewer than eight poems that registered the pervasiveness of surveillance: "Eavesdropper," "The Detective," "Purdah," "The Other," "Words heard, by accident, over the phone," "The Courage of Shutting Up," "A Secret," and "The Jailer." These poems were originally marked for inclusion in *Ariel* but were cut by her husband and literary executor, Ted Hughes, in the original edition.
27. Sexton, *The Complete Poems*, 155.
28. Plath, *Ariel*, 33.
29. Sylvia Plath, *The Journals of Sylvia Plath: 1950-1962*, ed. Karen V. Kukil (London: Faber and Faber, 2000), 569.
30. Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (1963; New York: W. W. Norton, 1983).
31. Deborah Nelson, *Pursuing Privacy in Cold War America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002).
32. Berryman, *77 Dreamsongs*, 74.
33. Snodgrass, *Heart's Needle*, 16-17.
34. *Ibid.*, 16.
35. Sexton, *The Complete Poems*, 56.
36. *Ibid.*, 57.
37. *Ibid.*, 24-25.
38. *Ibid.*, 25.
39. Plath, *Ariel*, 9.

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