The Coagulate

and

‘Not Simply a Case’: Frank Bidart’s Post-Confessional Framing of Mental Illness, Typography, the Dramatic Monologue and Feint in ‘Herbert White’ and ‘Ellen West’

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Abstract
This doctoral thesis involves two components, a book length collection of poems and a critical study of ‘Herbert White’ and ‘Ellen West’ by Frank Bidart.

The collection of poems, *The Coagulate*, consists of four parts:

1) Semi-personal poems focusing on nature both in a general sense and in specific reference to the natural British landscape.
2) Poems that explore the nature-based myths and contemporary social idiosyncrasies of Japan.
3) Poems that explore the social perception of mental illness and the individual voices that exist in spite psychological classification.
4) Poems by an alter-ego and pseudonym named Lee Cole, a completely foreign perspective to my own. These poems were written with the intent to adhere to Frank Bidart’s concept of Herbert White as ‘all that I was not.’ However, unlike Bidart, these poems attempt to remove the presence of the poet and forgo the use of a feint.

The collection is organised with contexture in mind rather than chronology. Poems build upon one another and one section flows into the next causing the book to have a fluid quality.

The critical component examines Bidart’s treatment of two mentally ill characters in respect to the establishment of the form, style, and voice that would become a hallmark of his poetry. Chapter 1 looks at the first poem of Bidart’s first book, ‘Herbert White.’ This chapter examines how Bidart’s unique use of typography, voice, Freudian theory, and the sharing of the poet’s history contributed to the crafting of a mentally ill character and the contexture of *Golden State*. It suggests that the inclusion of the poet, a stable presence in comparison to White, allows the reader to recognise certain universal human personality traits in a character that seems inhuman. Chapter 2 examines how Bidart crafted ‘Ellen West,’ a character just as unlike Bidart as ‘Herbert White.’ Central to this analysis is the examination of how to construct a character struggling with identity. It also examines the use of dramatic monologues and how ‘Ellen West’ fits into a form with a flexible definition. As with Chapter 1, Chapter 2 examines how Bidart uses the poet’s self to add to a fictional narrative and how that reflects upon his personal poetry, indicating that Bidart’s use of the self is a redirection from how the Confessional poets used first-person.
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To

my daughter,

Nienna Leigh Sleight
The Coagulate
Part I
When Words are on the tip of a Tongue

Two miles out so silent but for birds, aves formes as safe as the immediate wind. Scant rain has come with this storm and something larger - violently kinetic. The softness in the dove-coloured cone feels palpable at this far distance; Clouds, cast out to the perimeter of the cyclone, lumber round, tracing reluctant, purposeful circles – not unlike a seen whooping crane, hunted and counted each year after breeding season.

Eventually the up and down drafts stall, the pipe shape thins out to a straw, a spindling weakling compared to itself not long ago. The unexpressed flows in, now, to the point of departure. on the other side.

Out here, birds’ wings never completely give up their lift force when the too-cutting winds come in close. They out-fly the bearing down of the anvil, the force of their air flying unencumbered, bringing their language.
Heron’s Rest Mass Energy

Heron downloaded,
splayed a crest
of lakeskin.
The action was indicative
of a command
when the bird stood still
on a rock, poised for its quarry.

This coruscation
of back-building potential energy
positioned to enliven all that moved
underneath.
Its black eye
spilled out
calculated filaments of bird speech
without ever parting its beak.

A fish transferred by –
then disappeared
as information often does.
No crackling of bones transpired.
Inertia began
with gulps and water spray.
Roosting

It’s tourism where the sky peppers
during the technicolor gloaming in Austin,
the bat capital positioned under a bridge.
This bridge arcs over cruise boat parades;
vessels floating by, popping
with camera flashes. Even here,
in this bastion, the bugs are thinning out,
the necessary fodder required
when the bats whip out of Mexico.
And from the east, the fungus advances,
coming to whiten their snouts,
break upon their masses
with incurable sporal force.

Along the English Channel, tucked away
in minute pockets, the bats
have already learned to lay low.
Their bulk scarcely weathers suppression,
hemmed in by the dwindling marshes
where humans think to build a new Tenochtitlán –
as if these homes would not die out, too,
capsizing into the spongy sod.

If there is a gradual race
of reclamation, their grey ears manage.
They don wings with long fingers.
But still, the evening highlights
fewer and fewer of their spastic silhouettes
each season. Their assassins conceal themselves
by masking their own echoes. Homes
to come back to are harder to keep.
Narrowboat Positives

I.
Like the three broken televisions blocking up the house,
this burned out narrowboat just south of Marple,
gutted and a defeated orange, moored up
on the side of the canal and discarded.
A hipster’s photography paradise,
all angles and bubbled surfaces catching
the last rays of sun for the day,
the month. This husk and its shivery edges
wouldn’t make it to a boat graveyard,
not that anyone waits or expects
removal. Even if we’re hoodwinked
into believing in the boat’s beauty,
endearing abandoned charm;
there are sooted parts and surfaces
that accuse a human of giving up.

II.
The horses, now absent from their tunnels,
retired long before engines gunned.
Because for a time, the canals all but died
when the accelerated world approached.
With tamed, equine patience, the thin waters
waited for those who would crawl
towards their recovery at drowsy speeds
and play at canal captains.

III.
For all the helpful, black grease,
lock cranks and gears oppose the brittle,
the small, the pre-prime,
and those hardy peoples, saturated
with know-how yet worn
with muscular decline. Even with keys,
the metals are the most difficult of wives
when physically coaxed, rattled,
into letting the water succeed
into new, brown territory.

IV.
The Welsh accent trimmed his speech,
and with it, the instructor guided a newbie.
“Use your butt,” he said while prying
open the tall lock doors.
At the end of the first burn,
the first instance of dominating the water’s position,
the boat is caught,
then released.
Then the burn lights up again, 
streaking over the extremities as bright angles 
stretch from cloud to cloud. The door shutters 
in response. Swans join in the train, 
tracking the cuts in the slow black skin 
as a heron’s keen beak 
of light froth, peeling backwards. 
If not for the hoary engine, the parade 
would slip by, equally as placid 
as the muted cows, stoic and sidelined.
In Absentia of Cancer

The body buckles into a butterfly pose
on a cold, padded table. Latex fingers make contact.
The pinch –

not the same as the twinge felt walking around Yorkshire Dales
during lambing season,
    when they are just learning that they have small, new voices
    and many bales of hay to leap upon.

But at the moment, I’m being asked about contraception methods.
I don’t want to say that you and I make half-hearted attempts to protect our bodies.

What would we do if the vomiting meant something?

I don’t think I have it in me for more pills that quell,
    line up my organs and frame –
    shut up, shut me
    up. Our plans conceive themselves
    so fast. I worry,
    not about dealing with childlessness alone,
    or about growing cute, babbling cancers,
    but about there being too many hands,
    other hands, loosening the patterns
    we hiked into. I wouldn’t want to share
    a child of ours with another female.

The nurse seems trained to ignore stammering. Data, checked boxes,
both like lambs growing into a loss of spryness.

How many more years do I have until the pinching means something?
At That Age and Single

At meal times, I’ve taken to sipping latte
from a pieced-back-together mug and peeping
at wedding websites; lingering over dismissible tulle clouds
drawing upon the little bit of Elpis that resides within me;

but cottonball gowns make for bottomed-out brides;
these finely pixilated images are airy in comparison
to the scraping of my eyes over a man,
and then another – as if choice were mine to choose.

A friend of mine argues that love is a chemical urge,
triggered by genetics so that organisms will pass on genes.
But he’s also against marriage
for anyone. It all seems so flat and arid,

even the mannequins wearing floofy dresses
real enough for me to touch.
Then there is my bubble-thin image in the store window:
vertically stubby, edges too wide,
my bust not able to hold up strapless anythings.
The effect is not much different that the gooey longing
I experience when passing by a store’s infant clothing section.

 Luck found me, in a way.
My mother’s hopes and disappointments
have stayed in her head
and I’ve saved a lot of money.
Marple

*Like in The Full Monty*, I think you said though it has been over a week.
*Sheffield is shit*; therefore we did not ride a fancy train.
We shared a padded bench and the blonde haired, brown-eyed toddler in front of us smiled but remained quiet (for a child). He wanted to look.
I was careful not to say I wanted a child like that.

I began to think about you as a narrator on the trip where we spied on frogs mating in a pool.
“Tadpole spawning,” printed somewhere on my imaginary “Random Facts I Know” list made me blush, as eyeballing other sex tends to.
I’ve learned that biology’s intimacy does not bother you.

At the Roman Lakes, the names of birds escaped me; I had never cared about coots or tufted ducks. They waded just offshore, away from visiting children. I saw and knew the male peacock, his brightness reined in while he tolerated the pitchy human squeals that tagged along with released breadcrumbs. Despite the sunglasses dimming your expression, I saw you set your jaw against that youthful energy like the geese carefully sidestepping the annoyance to peck crumbs out of the mud.
We stopped short of those hungry birds, hands empty but for gloves, and made for a vacant strip of wet shoreline.
This happiness reminded me of our hike to the Bollin River, where the sheep held their breath as we glopped by.
I proved how quietly I could walk through this boot-sucking paste.
Learning to Wait

I. Green

The plastic tyre hung from the red-bud tree. When the bee season was over, the wheel and I would spin. The air whooshed loudly, fast; the hedges rimming the yard smeared into green streaks. I enjoyed the moments of separation from my backyard surroundings.

Even now, I whisper “Wheee!” when seated in a swivel chair, the kind of public play swallowed by age as when a child outgrows corduroy overalls or matures out of saddle shoes.

My actions, often interpreted as peculiar, draw pinched expressions from the public. It's as if the plains of their faces crinkled with electricity. Perhaps a jaw or two drops, nearly imperceptible but it reminds me of mussels who signal their death by quietly parting their shells. I'm filling a need of my own and I wonder if this audience has forgotten what it felt like to fly without flying.

II. Amber

Legs working like hummingbird wings. They are short. They are mine. Hills are the hardest – up makes for thigh-burn and when going down, I end up on my back, bouncing my head off winter-wet grass and mud. I can suck in biting breath and laugh as fast as two wing beats. My vision becomes like my childhood tyre. You are somehow behind and in front all the while your footfalls settle print by print, steady as soaring.
III. Red

At the Crushing Stone, the ewe held up a front hoof as if in pain. With measured steps on the three remaining limbs, it kept its distance from the site’s many visitors.

You said she might be put down.
We’ll never know.
Both are causes for grief.

We found the farm after the rain tapered off; wanted to let the owners in on their injured animal. Our only greeter was a black cat in the empty yard.
Aquarium

My impression of aquariums as contained and shaped water started in Boston. Galvanised blue and when you stand back from the whole menagerie, you can’t even see the fish inside. But in Chester, the lights are dimmer, the water not glowing when you walk in and watch the tufted ducks dive in their tank. Some things are the same: children pressing in, sometimes slapping the glass; the fish safe from stubby hands by child-secreted film and clear thickness. My wonder behaves as young as a toddler’s, instinctual as the fluttering of gills.

Children do not recognise the boundaries cutting space, or understand the mooming of fish lips. Why do their aquatic mouths open and close without sound? I still ask the questions of a child that the ordinary person cannot answer. We could make up our own explanation: I could tell them that fish have their own language outside of vocal-chord sound, but I am too shy.

Sightseers catch and nick each other in the transparent tunnel. Many stand, the flow of footfalls a trickle on the electric walkway. Unanimously, we’ve arched our necks and opened our faces to the fish that water-fly over and around like slow commuters. Sharks put on a mimicking show of movement. Standing there, not alone, I wonder where their gaze looks to.

In this water sanctuary, as with all places, my lover wishes for the children to be but shadows and less than whispers. Perhaps he will feel closer to the swimming life around him if there is an absence of his own kind. Three years ago, he was my muse – the kind that you could grasp like water. He was still photos and text. I tried to fit my idea of him into rigid, glass form.

He’s no longer that which I do not know. No – his face is animate – a school of fish before the camera shutter snaps. Bundled up in a black wool coat and ski hat, his eyes blue and full, trying to break with the human swarm. I can reach out and touch his coated roughness, unplanned as it is real. I think of the manta rays while positioned in that crush of people. You wait, wait, and wait for them to present their white undersides. That is when they reveal their faces.
Mam Tor I

A triangulation pillar, worn like a fez atop a head belonging to a sheer-faced hill. The scant number of surrounding eskers paled – the Peak’s wallflowers. Conceivably, Blue John matched the tor for people even at a cost. His seat became just as affected for its banded rocks as the Mother for her hackles, arced as if she might vault off the valley rim despite having such fragile shale bones.

She’s trusted to spawn mounds of flaking self; shale layers shivering off man’s road and attempts at macadamisation; even rejecting the fort of metal aged men. But at least she’s let the humans try. She’s more accepting of the step spine cobbled up her back. We can share her view, from the top of her dark, scarped face.
Mam Tor II

We followed the rainbow to its end
beyond the Crushing Stone,
and found the tor lit up in a sun shower.

The easy scramble to the summit and into the light gale,
the decision not to jump – the hill bore these and more.
The day and the holes in the cloud-cover were not just about me.

We wandered around the hairline, surveying the landslides.
I tried to descend more elegantly than the cast-offs,
but I’m not a sure-footed goat. I slipped,

a feeble attempt to barrel down with finesse.
I’ve a habit of meeting the ground on its terms,
my cleatless boots giving up the earth for air.

My lover, with the slate surname, pulled me farther
along the hill-back – an unsuccessful cleaning –
the wet sod did not reclaim the mud,
it entrenched itself further into the ribs of my pants,
and I carried it with us as we toodled, ant-like,
around the minor hills and their suspended caves.

By the road, he lightly whipped me
with tufts of long grass. The tor’s cliff
was partially secreted behind the brush.

I stood there, humiliated and aroused,
unsure as to the view my ambush
provided those armed with binoculars.

But the effect shrunk me;
was I three or thirty
while standing there feeling

like he was a she, my mother
facing off against the soil;
armed with sprigs of green nature

in an assault on what grass needs to grow.
He would be better off playing the man;
I’d ride home, bare legs having saved the seats.
Stickle Ghyll

An attempt at six again -
hopscotching between wet boulders,
scrabbling up the centre stream-
rather than relenting
to the routine
steps dug into the hill’s slope.
I am so many decades beyond
what I order my limbs to achieve.

Grown sheep
avoid the whole rocky mess;
they’ve learned to live
with realities like shearing
and lambs that disappear.
They’ve installed themselves
amongst hardy vegetation.

Save for one – detached -
somehow having ensconced itself
amidst the thickest of brush
and green on the steepest of inclines
there. It saw me
when I tried to spy,
conveyed an expressionless
acknowledgement
as I crouched in the ferns
during the descent,
feet already chilled
from the tarn and hush.
Dafad

The stippling of Ynys Môn:
shades of earthy white on green breakers.
Neighbourhoods of sheep sounding off
with uncoordinated bleating. So many ruminators
digesting the lancing green of this island.

In early April, the off-shoots, lambs,
slip from between woolly legs
and try to find their own. Their slight bays
indicate all of their discoveries.
They will run and run and run
before it is time to still,
stand and graze with maturity.

These full children burst
into existence and energy, flaring
every year before dimming,
ripening to slow, sombre shocks
where nothing changes in their pastures.

They grow out of their season
and then stare warily towards hikers
slogging away on public footpaths.
The start and end of sheep breath-
sharp, defining a void like the space
just outside the Kármán line; then waiting
until the next heavenly body blooms
into sight; the slow exhale of breath
realised in cold air.
Lyme Park

Two figures have left the crowds, crafted their own footpath that parallels the remains of The Lantern, an old belvedere devoid of its second floor. This is usual for them – this breaking away, peeling off from the hulk and noise.

And then she’s halfway up a hillock, its cranium and nape carved out where she can’t see. She’s bent over and breathing so showily, trying to retrieve the air that the English winters tend to extract from wet lungs. Meanwhile, he’s conquered the apex, short as it is but he’s there anyway and proud, pointing towards the spectre of Snowdonia. She’s got to wait until the top, then heaped over and sweaty. It’s not Wales that pulls her attention – rather, the little, mysterious fires in the woods just beyond the manor- (below them like nearly everything it seems); errant and wispy, unlike the sudden puffs of wind that clout ears in the outdoors until mid-spring. She’s seeing the world second. It’s now that she notices that this miniature moor is missing the back of its head – goes a step further.

They fictionalise the rock theft, surmise that its rough dismantling was similar to the ravaging of Whitby Abbey. The stone was plucked out of the earth, as from those holy walls, and used to build the house, now relegated to a visitor’s centre – a place where one can’t touch the old walls, can’t leave invisible traces of flesh behind, add to the slow dismantling. It’s the difference between reflexive breathing and wheezing with purpose. Pillaging the hills that would have only stayed to be eroded later on – then set the bricks up, fancy and chiselled. Where is the best place to expire? He says they should ask the deer.
Box

This is where I try to convince you that I saw my soul reflected in a box of food sent by my great aunt.

In reality, the box framed the guts of her long-standing feud with my mother.

Bits of their melodrama in oatmeal packets she’s mailed –

In England, they call these packets sachets and sell porridge instead of oatmeal. I don’t trust it. It seems wrong, out of place, even though I’m in their place.

Porridge is a mess in the mouth –

like their relationship,

bit of their grainy phone conversations

rolling around on my tongue.

If I was a toddler,

their words would clot up,

come drooling out

onto my chin, a bib, a high-chair tray.

But I’m grown.

These relative issues stick to the spoon and my teeth.

Even milk cannot soften these women up.

I struggle to find the words of a meaningful reply.

Other contents of the box that represent my supposed self:

Texas Style Yellow Cornbread mix / yellow rose pollen from Nana’s favorite flower
real Campbell’s Tomato Soup / baby bush of pink flowers tended by Papa for me
Keebler Club House Crackers / bee time of year for the red-bud tree
Jiffy Buttermilk Biscuit mix / whitened-over cow pies used in throwing competitions
McCormick’s Mild Taco Seasoning/ summer cicadas at dusk
tortillas / Tang drinker while sitting in the St. Augustine

and then the letter.

Here is the part where I let you know I’m really a reverse Chinese finger trap; wild, colourful straw crackling. My great-aunt and mother dig in on opposite sides as if they were passionate ping-pong Olympians.

This letter, as with all familial letters, serves as evidence for my stint as a chronic, long distance runner.

Escapism solves my dilemmas.

Rolled up
into borderline otaku solitude,
I play “solve the murder”
before the detective cartoon show
gives the answer away.

On this day,
I’m mistaken.

The murderer was not

the fortune-teller sister, short on money and needing to inherit all of the family fortune /

the blackmailed lover and a long time friend of the victim’s husband /

the antique store manager suffering from sleepwalking - who carved the mysterious Red Hare horse figurines found at each arson site.

It was the psychiatrist husband, copying Christie’s ABC murders. Only the 4th block counted: the burning of his own home, his own adulterous wife. He wanted to build a clinic; she wanted a divorce.

I could use a divorce.
Perhaps it is not so bad
that my phone cannot call home.

The box of non-perishables
contained the letter
recounting the old feud
between these two fuming women.
This is why Texans can chew the air,
the heat is thick with steaming humidity.
Tea I

Jarred water - browning, warmed, matutinal
in its preparation. Afterwards, my grandmother
set this glass vessel for tea out
into the summer afternoon for steeping;
balance its bulky glass frame on the splintered plank
of one of my grandfather's make-shift benches.

The heat billowed, endless and heavy
as most Texan seasons are,
when a forecast isn't necessary
and the cicadas whir with certainty of drought.

And when the tea was brought back in,
it was modulated into something achingly sweet.
The refrigerator furthered its transformation,
made it a symbol of the South.

At the age of three, I missed out on the caring,
the understanding of place.
Years later and in California, I drank
corporate green tea; bagged and flavoured
with imitation blueberry. That warmth
served as a kind of coping mechanism
but only during winter. Hot tea in a valley summer
was too much equilibrium.

I kept these teas apart
as if they were rooted in state dirt,
the heats somehow seeming different.
But in both places, the sun blanched the vegetation
and allowed for frying eggs on pavement.
Iced, sweet tea stayed behind
in forty-four ounce mugs from Bill Miller's BBQ.

This altered green tea let me pretend
I understood ceremony.
This was the artificiality I carried
with me to England where sun-tea fails.
My tea had no planted place,
no weight as an offering where coldness
prevailed. A scarf couldn't exclude
this country's chill any more than their snow.
Tea was already here, strong
and Yorkshire; a synonym as peated whiskey
is to Scotland. Someone here, a Northerner,
said, "Tea is magic."
I'm using it,
hounding after the balance
I'd only had in the place
where I could stand on toddler legs,
looking out of her backdoor
when I had no use for tea.
Tea II

The tea room, built apart from a main structure, has a short door that forces the body down onto its hands and knees. Then through and the human form has been injected into a room arranged and accented so particularly that it is at once Japan and not.

The people, often imports that pierce through the borders for ephemeral weeks, sit in seiza, practice bowing, converse in an exact order: ceremony centred within rice-paper walls. Iemoto rules and the importance of expensive bowls are far removed from the samurai way of bushidō. These people are not warriors congregating over the wafting scent of matcha.

A master’s fluidity: a practice in brittle movement, the whipping of leaf fragments into a froth. Most will never benefit from the learning of tea hospitality. Perhaps the need is little because the march of the everyday is so full. The impression is as weighty as sakura snow in spring.
Shiori

A pause during the reading of a book
so that I may know your face,
trace a pudgy cheek
with fingers that have been indented
by spans of time spent writing.

I found your name
in an anime
exploding with sword fighting,
youkai, hanyou, humans.
The word fits so perfectly
in my mouth. I hide your syllables
from potential mates, preserving
a reverie that scares men,
scares me.

It is always too soon, never the right time.
After a relationship has run out,
wretched and spent,
I’m glad you did not spring forth
from that coupling. My body wishes
for better and I’m already doting on
this wilful design as if one day
she will pop into being and become
all that I am not.
Kintai-kyo Bridge

I. Nishiki

Wooden slats,  
  puzzled together,  
formed  
  the bridge’s five swells.
The belly was vulnerable,  
  weak  
to the unignorable arashi  
that roiled in  
  sending rain down  
    like shuriken.
The bridge could not cope.

It gave,  
  overwhelmed;

the in-between-the-shores dismantled  
by the froth and boil –  
  needle-working  
the boards loose,  
  wood falling into the watery brocade.

This was not the time of year  
for florid calm  
or sakura celebrations.

II. Iwakuni

The castle, giving frame to the hillside,  
gulped the sun  
and bayed back at the thievish wind  
which brought the rainy bands.

When the bridge washed out each year,  
the side of opulence,  
housed in white layers,  
fared better that its gutter counterpart  
across the river.

Rice screen walls, unfurling eaves, tea rooms  
were not watered away in a keen tide,
but gently dismantled, humiliated
by human capability
succeeding where the storms failed.

III. Nowaki

Across the Kintai-kyo,
those low to the stony earth
treaded through the winds,
tidal waters
parts of Susanoo’s sword.
The quotidian weighted bodies
as if dense stones pulled chests to the ground.
The village still maintained breath,
below the surface.
Watercraft stayed close to home,
that which might rise when
commoner homes sank a little further
the mud sucking on scant foundations.

These costs were customary,
even in the trawling dark.

IV. Amaterasu

The sunny sister, daughter of the left eye;
the landscape righted itself beneath her paintbrush.

The bridge,
its dragon curves
pleated up again,
poised and ready to snap back with stony supports.

Months after, sakura would bud,
bloom,
wing,
swaying swardward
as when dancing
a bon odori.
Recollection of footfalls
ghosting over the floating path.
Old Persimmon Leaf

The cypress broom winnows the remnants
of shimmied-off petals and leafy bits.
A woman of venerable years
manages the sweeping,
navigating amongst the puffs of debris
that springs towards the edges of a walkway.

The husband pads onto the veranda,
having patched the rice-screen walls
of his bought house.
It proved he had lived
as a proper and productive Japanese man.
Later, he will play shōgi with rusty friends
in the park. His wife will pack him a bento lunch.

Their wind-chime pipes brush against each other,
reverberations gesturing at the approach of a warmer season.

People happen by the gate:
policemen on bicycles, schoolgirls wearing knee-high socks
held up by glue, mothers with bags
of groceries. Their little children wave
to the woman, call her Oba-chan
because she is old. But she enjoys no grandchildren.

There are the unkind, casting grief at her
like senbon (needling reminders
that no names pulsated forth from her womb,
slick and loud).

If the husband owns a piece of earth,
there is a lack of sons to shadow him.
The hulk of the shame is not his;
the share of improvidence he shoulders
is lighter in life. He is not 'The Old Persimmon Leaf,'
pressed down under an offering of rice.

The waifu stands for the dish
meant to sate the hungry spirits
who visit at Bon; the dish prepared first,
set before a grave last, the plate
whose rice is thrown away.

But his and her ignominy will acquire a symmetry
when their family monument goes unwashed
and the strokes of their name remain
un-whetted by plates of mochi
and cups of warm sake.
He will join her under a carpet
of spring blooms, then autumn leaves -
over and over. In the cold, the air above them
will be vacant with a lack of incense wisps
and rice to refuse.
Love – In Anime

Eyes blued, drawn into motion
to mimic the trembling of a young heart.
The drama of revelation literally displays itself.

If the world’s background disappears
into pink, tufted haze, this love
will possibly go on unrequited,

lost in a series of unlikely fantasies:
changing of the personality, dress,
automobile, conjuring up a wedding reverie -

Not what the object of these sentiments has in mind,
until a rival appears, a comical and failing foil.
The confusion allows us at least 5 more episodes,

the tension between the besotted and target condensing,
keening, hastening towards that shocking, realizing
moment. They’ve desired each other all along.

Love! It is then that we laugh while shaking our heads,
forgetting that these animations
represent the firsts we already lived through.

Impatient as I am to fast forward,
cut through their games, misconceptions,
lose the third wheels, I’m made to wait
too long for the kiss where lips pose, unmoving.

Everything is purposefully paused,
the spooled-out plot reaching the climax,
giving release. But not for me.

If I played a part, I would act
as the jaded, past-her-prime mentor,
the cautionary tale.

My eyes, though blue and white flecked, trembled
when I could feel as open and artless as they. Then my own
story arc ponged up and down too often.

I am sorry.
I cannot fit into these frames
right now.
Kaidan: A Story for a Night of 100 Lamps

Nightly, the wife’s half of the bed persisted with chill. The blankets remained unwrinkled, unadulterated. The samurai felt it was ruined as a katana missing a sliver of itself.

His stomach reacted with less relish for food. Often, he used these leavings to replenish a bowl in his garden. A tanuki fed on these scraps.

It began to pine after him.

Its wish:

a body of smooth skin,
tamed life,
intricately knotted obi bound about a soft waist;
to pass the scant number of decades the samurai would last as his wife, content with brooming and tea ceremonies.

The tanuki changed, pushed back from the forest, that provided leaves and cover.

It cast aside its stripped tail, shape-shifted into a woman –

one dead and drying, whose outline had sprouted, stayed rooted like camellias stippling the boundaries of the garden.

Magic painted its robber face.

It ensconced itself in her life’s image.

This gamble dared disturb the cold sheets, the samurai’s heated failure.

The returned form materialized, substantial while disregarding the mind's insistence that the female form before him must contain
This eidolon, so petite and tactile within the circumference of his arms.

But his disbelief in figments prevailed, stronger than what he missed.

There was a knowing about the dead – this dead – who rested permanently under his garden.

His grip and katana – always unforgiving – sliced through simple aspiration that wasn’t his own.

The tanuki’s femininity dissolved. Not even its body could be found until dawn.

A raccoon settled yet gone, having joined the ethereal she in the garden; rejoining the landscape.
Kokkuri: Phenomenon

"Kokkuri-sama,
Kokkuri-sama,
please descend,
please descend.
Come now,
please descend
quickly."

-Kokkuri invocation

I. Inoue Enryō

Table-tilting meant very little to a scholar
unable to attend a pandemonium.
He pried into a Japan beginning to doubt spirits,
slipping silk from off the shams as one folding back
the silk panels of an illustrated byōbu.
Their manifestation in the game's wooden pyramid
seemed unlikely, groundless.

He suspected that the fox and its prayers
to the Big Dipper were fictions.
The changeling raccoon and hose-nosed dead priest,
as with all yōkai, perdured
outside of tested reasons. Yōkai survived
as a result of the Kokurri players'
festive desires; sets of hands applying pressure
to the teetering edges that balanced
on the stand. When the wood leaned,
as a response, the venerable believed.

The playful wooden lifts and nods
provoked captivation. Inoue pieced together
the puzzle. He saw this as a Western endeavour
to shape mystery as a trick best left for parties;
the possible magic in nature became a possession
controlled by the everyday fingertips.

Japan no longer benefitted
from sutras and chanted invocations.
To exorcise was to backslide
into a kappa’s pond. The desire for priests
undulated out to sea. The coming

of the solar calendar was science.
The scholar helped cancel the moon
and its magic. The parade
went on unseen.

But still,
students gather and play
all night,
sing songs
while dancing
along with the Kokkuri.

II. Tengu

Ku:
a character
meaning dog but not dog.
The transference of meaning
shifted the word and its strokes
to the tengu.

Sometimes the tengu was a crow-
the black karasu.

Sometimes a big-nosed monk:
a hōshi
void of divinity after death,
having abandoned perceptible utterance
or lost it.

Tengu sound-  distinct
only in the mountains
and in one’s head.

Tengu as a battle crow;
found cackling in a tree,
on a road, always untethered from the kami.

Warlike perfection subsisting as art.

Students of combat hunted,
stalked the forests,
the edges
of belief for this animated mystery –

yōkai.

Its value as a sensei-
worth the danger
of being stripped
of one’s earned magical coat
and second sight
if the bird pecked out pretension
in the learner’s nature.

More to their taste: winging in and out
of materiality through the whims of children;
chaperones of a mystic vacation.
Village myth imagined the child’s escape
chasing a magical kite.

* 

The cusp of science and some white-skinned sailors
nudged this highland force
into the game frame: a Ouija board’s kin.

Inoue's yōkaigaku,
catalogue of his certainty,
inscribed the tengu onto his book's pages;
his attempt at exorcism -
to release a nation from umbrae.

The flimsy wooden pyramid:
capable of being possessed
by the bound birdmonk,
incapable of significant shadow.

A tengu and its extensive reach come down from the mountains
to answer silly questions.
Nyotaimori

Artful, scrubbed clean plate:
she wears sushi and fruit.
Prone on her back, so still
in the cold, becoming the hard chill.
The rolls of food serve as her only armour
against the curious and peckish.

Crowd mood permitting,
she might keep the Y of her body
nestled under a banana leaf.
But perhaps she wants them
to drink, perform the wakamezake.
More tips
to the body
some say can make the fish sick.

She is rare –
   no –
    This is rare.

The salaryman will not eat in
this place, her dress both too much and too little -
    the food lightly stuck to her skin,
    peeling it away until her torso is bare.

She, this, cannot be clean enough
for the everyday. The idea of human salvers
causes this string of eastern islands to blush.
Kuchi-sake-onna: Slit-Mouthed Woman

"By the summer of 1979, Kuchi-sake-onna's rapid diffusion throughout the country, and the fear she instilled among children, had become an important news story..."

-Michael Dylan Foster, from "Pandemonium and Parade"

The woman hunts;
asks,
“Am I pretty?”

And a cram-school boy is caught.
He hears,
“Watashi kirei?”

But the true question, not audibly poised,
lays stretched out in her hands:
a scythe.

The murk of nightfall
highlights her surgical mask.
She has positioned herself
between school and school.

Hopefully he remembers the stories,
the magic
in the recitation of the word “pomade.”
A professedly random defence
lobbed out of the panic that levitates from his throat
if his response to her trick question
invokes the mask’s removal,
the beginning of a chase
and the parabolic motion of her weapon
which embodies
her mouth's frightening alteration.

He has the option to run,
but the magazines print factoids that pinpoint a problem:
she is fast like an athlete.
If he could just make it to a place of numbers and halogen lights,
a store
with a crowd,
the demon would shrink back into the landscaped park.
He would be safe from her self-exposing.
The slit extensions of her too-wide mouth
   make her
   ready to eat
   more than he has.

She would cow the boy
just like his kyoiku mother:

   the woman gripping already sharpened pencils
   when he slouches home. With a gentle
   "Tadaima," he greets her before turning
   and mounting the stairs. Then more learning,
   grinding ahead of his classmates. She follows,
   carries too much tea and he wonders if she causes
   the leaf stem hovering in the cup
   into the vertical as if forcing good luck
   upon him. This sentiment seems steeped into
   the perfectly prepared and packed bentō
   the mother gives him as he leaves.
   He understands her efforts through the sausages, cleaved
   into little red octopi limbs.
   Her shrill cry of “Bansai!” tails him.

When either woman approaches
   with a locked-on smile,
foreign expectation hitches his breath.

A third option,
   to do nothing,
is as absent in his adrenaline accented head
as the correct answers he's always assumed to have.
N.E.E.T.

A soda drinker downs sweet, bubbling liquid -
a gurgle flagging his attention to the on-coming
end of the can, some remains
    beading inside the straw.
The icebox next to his desk means he can linger,

affixed in front of a computer screen,
imbibing webpages;

One of the net’s many philosopher gods.

If the apartment is well lit,
    perhaps furnished with an S.A.D. lamp,
enough Vitamin D is produced,
    the outside becomes unnecessary.

Even groceries can be brought to the door,
    left by the delivery service on the doorstep.

Inside, choices abound –
no need to shave his uneven scruff daily,
a shirt can be worn two days in a row,
time in spades to brush teeth after every drink,
and he can breathe. Inside means
he avoids breath-holding
    as when in a crowd
        and armpits go into overdrive.
In an anime, his face would dribble water like rain.

It is better to stay in the one bedroom apartment
    with its tatami mat flooring,
        sacred collection of cartoon witch dolls,
            cosplay costumes,
                miso ramen cartons,
                    a stack of bishojo video games.

Better to stay here and wait for the mail,
for a monthly allowance from his parents.

Sometimes, the socially nervous otaku confuses the computer screen for a window,
as if it were a barrier keeping them from the immediacy of the city air,
women on cell phones,
children in school jackets,
dogs on leashes,
globs of skin at summer music festivals,
the mixed smells of food and car exhaust on the main streets.

During these moments, he has a habit of gently smacking a hand against the lit-up barricade, beaming himself out through a webcam isn’t quite enough:

```
    ....
    .
    ' - ..'
    ' - _ '
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The sound sinks in to the receiving object, goes nowhere.

This is enough.
Inari: Fox in an Asylum

I.

Rice always arrived in bowls
and the wards deemed it a blessing.
The patients expressed certainty:
a golden kitsune deity resided in room eight.
Said the kept,
"What else turns the earth fertile
but a fox?"

Nurses in modern uniforms
tread along the line of belief
on the subject of the mystery
that rose above the dashes of steam
during tea. On occasion, the stalk
in their cups hovered in the vertical
and their superstitions tumbled
from dusty shelves, the possibilities
unfurling, wavering.

“It” being an ethereal nine-tails,
a spirit housing itself within a woman.
When the vessel was lucid,
she professed that the fur inside
was not quite so metallic and royal;
just an ordinary ermine trickster.

Still, infantile whines clanged on
in her head when the fox was sad.
Doctors treated possession,
sequestered those false mysteries
sheltered in the heads of their patients.

II.

In times before science, hōshi challenged kitsune
with the possibility of exorcism.
Then villages grew past their borders.
There were no foxes to sift out of bodies.
Hōshi, still dressed in their monk robes,
played greeters for tourists
who rang the bells then clapped once
for good fortune after an offering.

Curiously, foxes like to ride newness –
like trains; gain a new tail as a modern emperor setting at dusk,
wonder at the immigrating eyes
of different colours, shapes; the whiter
skin, transforming the katana into museum art.
The era was without a fox
needing to lift an artful claw.
Kitsune lived for millennia,
was that victory enough?

III.

A want to consume innovation
surfaced in the patient when her mother visited.
The elder was free but hemmed in by the transformation
growing around her. She was a connection to news,
events she had trouble abiding by.

The mother prayed and perched at the bedside
of her daughter. The mother birthed
a bitter exhale. Translated, it meant nostalgic desire.
Her own okaa-san would have called
a hoshi, a miko, someone divine.
The robed ones would have performed
a jangling shujaku assault.
Chants could pull the pelt from her daughter’s soul.
But these miracles only worked
when fushigi and magic were possible.
These became the nails
that walls and beds hammered flat.

In the room, the fox had cached its ornaments,
parcels of stolen and offered trinkets.
These gifts only hinted
at manifestation. Real touch
met skin, black hair, brow sweat,
absence of animal fur.
The daughter said the spirit crouched underneath
what could be felt and tested.
The novelty of these rooms contained the mischief –
though many days, only a barren chimatsu doll
littered the bed. Tricky,
this tailed daughter,
this imaginary hime,
porcelain in her nobility,
but vulgar if playing with her trappings.

The deteriorating onna wore no fur,
fear no dogs. Her kitsune just bellowed
an unsurprising stench. It proved
only that these progressive men
remembered their folklore
and half believed it.
Released

Somehow I was relieved, felt less
lonely when my mind was defined and organised
as a book entry; wonderful to have the company
of people I’d never meet. We shared a title, a label.

We have the kind of mackled brain
that tunes in too often to bad weather,
 snagging the ink ribbon on cyclone warnings.
But to actually wait-out such storms,
remain behind in your battened-down shelter
when everyone else evacuated;
you realise that the debris and clouds just compose the shell.
What everyone thinks is the storm isn’t the storm.
You can’t see the wind.

When the doctors humoured me with my own metaphors,
they proposed a trip. I should journey to the Equator,
a place of perfectly divided days and orderly weather;
perhaps locate a patch of ocean in the doldrums.
Even that palmaceous stillness
is a heaven compared to the poles.

I don’t know how to recognise normal
human responses
or construct sound judgments in social situations.
When someone buys you a drink, it’s an understood contract-
in a language I can’t quite grasp.

People like me
avoid smiling at everyone on the street.
Don’t greet them either. The general
public likes its personal-space-bubble,
I’m lost on allowed rule-breaking.

When my social worker knocked on my new door,
came rooting around,
in her smart, professional togs,
clicking her pens,
like a serious otter focused
on opening a shell -
she toured the inside of me,

I trusted
that she knew
what she was looking for
to draw her learned illations;

something that let on
all was well in my loft,
the couch cushions covered only the usual treasure,
and the tanked fish were thriving.

After that interview,
I was completely let go;
a rehabbed marine mammal,
the otter,
back swimming in the open,
paws folded.
Bipole

White light run through a prism; the outer edges were sharp. But if you got a good look at the in-between, the colours melded together. We decided that you couldn’t pinpoint exactly where one colour stopped and the other started. This was an apt comparison with how he shifted between his acute facets, he was a visible spectrum you couldn’t help but see.

He said, “A rainbow, even one created through a prism wasn’t really crisp, vivid enough.”

The clarity in him, or of him, was akin to an exposed tooth nerve.
I told him that Colgate made a mouthwash for sensitive teeth.

He mentioned teeth often.

Years after getting a filling, the porcelain wears down, uncovering surfaces not drilled that time in the chair
with the bright light pinning you down because your mouth is on display.

“They’re just bones, you know. But they are bones with feelings and they behave all finicky and become riled up easily, all opened-up like that.”

He would develop headaches that spread into his eyes.

Sometimes he was more than angry, like indigestion and an over-stimulated cat balled up.

Then, he couldn’t help growling to himself, punish his pillows with fists and blades, but on a bad day, like he needed to castigate his skin for the guilt, his blustering and spasms.

Later, the shame spread over him, sudden like the sweat on bread when heated.

When he could joke about the fury,

I’d tease him and say his outbursts popped-out like the farts and belches caused by beans.

He knew the coping-mechanism recitations: Good to have schedules and good to have a pet. Seek out
wake up and roll out of bed at a set time each day. Go outside.

The problem was that, “Everything rushes in at me even when I have a coat and scarf on.” But still, the doctors direct him to go, go, go – engross him in motion.

He can’t say why he cries for hours after watching a sad TV show. “My logical side, it knows. My eyes pee anyway.”

The best times occur between awake and sleep, when the dark and cosy warmth of his favourite bed-sheets help him achieve that slow-down, slide in to a stop but less cool than Tom Cruise in *Risky Business.* The nearness of his cat, the dim features of his room, neat happy lights, the worn out and in of it all – his mind becomes the pouring of molasses, his brain can take a stroll in the quiet.
The Often Nuisances

Dons paper crowns,
traces energetic circles
with non-toxic paint.
This illustrated autograph asserts,
“I am here.”

Brain teeth
all nerves exposed.
Seventeen years of body lock-in
memories. She feels over-
extended,
all these teeth carried for too long.

Kind twig picker,
hunter and keeper of bugs
and imaginary Gila monsters.
Web worm enemy.
These forays were subdued
in comparison to his lawn mower
theft. The church was baffled,
the neighbourhood’s flower-beds
snipped close.

Nine cigarette mares;
twenty-nine filled-in skin-canyons
now unsalvable but
still, happy lights
help shush chiasmic spooks.
The skin never hurt.

Ground jumping like lightning
takes time unless
you are a ninja
Bollywood dancer.

Still tinkering away
in Lou’s Garage during the year
of 1932. The trucks disappeared
and cars are now made like beds.
Easier to fix.

I’m convinced my cat reads my
mind;
when I wake at night, he’s staring
and plotting in French. He tells
others
to be afraid of my warnings.

His living room scattered
with profuse numbers of flayed dogs.
Just dogs. Animals and people held
no beauty, he said. The news-article
nearly wrote itself.

Brain teeth
all nerves exposed.
Seventeen years of body lock-in
memories. She feels over-
extended,
all these teeth carried for too long.
Little Hurricanes

I.

Childhood bath-time began with puckered swirls

I drew a line in the water with my pointer finger

where the curiosity dimpled made offshoots

II.

I use my pinkie, because it’s the smallest, to draw a familiar line. The not-quite churning dimples do not let me down.

One hand lays palm up on the sink floor. It feels the barest of murmurs as I make another pass. Halfway up I know the sensation is real.

Storms can draw lines in more than air and earth. In this tiled hallway, I wonder if fish prefer the underwater violence initiated by maelstroms to nets that bar them from the intensity of the sea. But fish cannot make speech just as my finger only makes outlines in water, not hurricanes or true vortices.
Stigma

And now –
how is it
that these physicians with their tablets
and dictionaries
know me
better than I do;
say I have nothing
when there is not enough air
and I’m so swollen inside?

My definition is like skin colour
or social class you can’t scrap off
like dish grease,
all hardened on
even after a hot soak.

A physician may try
to convince me the snow didn’t fall
then disappear from the sidewalks
scant hours afterwards
dissolved by the rains
that make people here forget
all of the stars.
Perhaps the patient remains a sceptic,
but still unheard, ignored like livestock –
once grown
their bleats and bays
blend in to the notion of country.

My special number
sprayed into my side,
my history solves my present
before I am in line.
Next, they will tag my ears.

Less encumbered when I faced my only opponent,
just the other shapeless, breaking
like seaweed out of water. When only I knew
it was there, secret filaments
guiding my hands and eyes.

I was at my most free
when I could privately
choose to die.
In The Muir

We both chose the path of nonbelieving, 
but I’m the only one who doesn’t appreciate 
her skin. I tell you this and the first time 
you cry. The second time, you lean away 
not stroking your blondewhite beard, 
not biting my light bandying. 
Harden up. The wounds my skin has witnessed 
will be there long after you find your forever.

I bit your shoulder. It hurt 
me badly. I’ve come to dream of a bear 
that would take me instead. 
You should back away over the limen 
and run. I’m left there. With the bear. 
We two killers, she and I, sniff, nudge, pet; 
all of our understanding that we kept 
within the confines of our grinding teeth 
pass between us. Awake, your bites 
strike me soft. The bear and I wished for more.

I was there in the green bevy, 
pretending as always: the bear, her cubs, 
two sets of prints 
when there were really only redwoods, 
prehistoric ferns, and me. I carried 
the guilt like a quiet old woman, built lines 
you can’t understand. Check me for them, 
they will be there in the roar I share 
with myself, with my skin.

The woods smothered my breath. 
I did not come out the same. You’ve 
trucked up to my edges, slicing away 
unbandaged trails. The bear 
wanders off and I’m there 
with another non-believer. Facts pass 
between us, brick-like and even then, 
chunks are lost. Measure me 
in lumens 
as I am still here, 
shining 
in degrees of waiting, 
bareness.
The Coagulate

“Gave me loneliness. 
Feelings I could not put into words.”
“Swallow the Lake” by Clarence Major

I.

Waiting horizontal for the white
to coagulate, to turn transparent;
a feeling of too long a time
when a man clutch his penis
while shaking with laughter,
fingers still wet
and unsuccessful.

The woman stalls
though housing a burning sternum
and rocky throat.

The white comes on warm
and humiliating. A screen in the room
washes their bodies
in TV blue. These figures tremble for different reasons.

They smile and how
can one type of facial expression translate
into so many antonyms.

This moment’s hypothetical chorus sings,
We all knew the sternum would fall
if freed. Chests need gentle hands.

II.

And of course, you are
fantastic.

I didn’t come here for a chat.
The petals of the flowers
were calling,
asking for meaning
outside of tea-cups and squirrel maws.

Memorise my name,
our heads
as lettuce peaking out of a dirt
where the water has been stolen
from the south and east
to irrigate a city.

Had I been able to replace the lost water, like switching a baby from breast to breast, we'd all have our sapling gardens, moon flowers, yellow rose bushes, whatever you could haul around in your truck.

If I was half the Terra Mother I am in my mind, my throat wouldn't close against you open for you plant life for you and lose.

So I do what I can for my failing morning glories. I watch the leaves spear up looking bitten, wait for the petals. If born, they are purple like you in the dawn.

III.

I've just sort of flopped down and donned a slight smile with lips like a red space-saucer. The mulberry tree from next door seems to hover though it's been caught by the grappling-hook jasmine.

Most of the year, this spot is home to a welcoming, green canopy. I’m prone here, on the brown lattice formed from last year’s cast-off leaves.

Earlier today I paced the train-tracks
and decided markedly
that they would not do.
The tearing off of parts
writes well on paper
but is still a different kind of tearing.
The body parts may fly solo
but someone has to clean the mess.
And then there are those amberous moments...
It is not fair to scare conductors
even if the rail-side rocks lay hot and aloof.

It will be an indeterminate date
I always assume
unless it ever pulls up
as if I should have expected company
and made tea.
But if I can't watch
my yellow rosebush as I catapult
to the moon
it's wrong, wrong, wrong.

If it's summer I'll sweat,
flat on my back and pretend
I'm in a kelp forest,
having just decided
not to indelibly matter. Just
land where I am.
Part II

Poems by Lee Cole
Three

I.

The night after my seizure –
a nasty, tongue-choking business-
an angel materialised from out of the nothing
of a dream. No resonating light
rimming its form, no halo, no harp.

It resembled my neighbour;
just standing there,
the edges of his body keen
against the dimness.

I wasn’t convinced
that this was a true emissary.
His smile was tacked on too artfully
to the curves of his face, he wasn’t in action:
not watering his crisped lawn
as he does every Tuesday and Friday evening.

In this region, we have nearly given up
on saving the grass.
But when I imagine my neighbour,
this scene darts forward before anything else.

An angel would know this.
A devil would know this.

My neighbour settled himself
on two slouched legs, planted himself
into some floor I couldn’t see,
his hands tucked into the pockets of his blue jeans.
“Christ is God and will come again as He has before.”
This is true enough,
but then he asked me to become
a holy assassin – the kind you see
in the movies or comics. Ridiculous.

I had nursed expectations about what an angel would say.
Leaving Christ’s side wasn’t it.
Christ is love, charity, humility,
and all sorts of good things you can't find
in today's churches. Following the bodily trail of Judges wasn’t. Here this angel was instructing me with those teeth and hidden hands.

When the day recalled me, I read my reasoning; unequivocal in its demand. “Keep the commandments,” “Thou shalt do no murder.” I wanted Him to recognise me.

II.

The soft thump behind me changed the sound of flowing hose water. My dream neighbour’s disruption had overwritten the files I stored inside myself, reserved for people worth thinking of.

My own hellos, delivered with barely polite quickness, drew an absurd sense anxiety into my core as he slouched around his front yard. I was grappling with one knob or the other by the time he grunted in return.

When the water tone below the metal whine muted, I knew I had to turn around, square myself to him. The fires, earthquakes, seals, and trumpets that announce angels were missing from the space around us. More enemy than agent of goodness.

I see inside souls now; observe the private life. My smallness had to be shed. The nice, neat life I'd constructed in the aftermath of childhood-smudged. The angel made me revisit this uncomfortable state of self.

My neighbour gathered up his hose. I saw him, the human, understood
the decency in his humanity.
He volunteered in a soup kitchen
and never hit his wife or children.

I tell myself that He is more capable
and that this sight whispers
as temptation. Coaxing
without the nature of ministry.
Are we so past conversion
that this intrusion
is all that remains as a solution?

This new work operates in ways
more covert than atoms.

III.

This was seeing at its worst;
so much that I waited for a burning bush
because that is the how of an angel.

A woman stood beside me
in front of the mangos.
A window voluntarily opened.
Somewhere inside her I saw sex
with someone who wasn’t the someone
who had carefully slipped the ring
on a left finger.
I did not care.
She and the first had no children;
only feelings that would nettle.
It wasn’t the kind of trespass that inspired me.

When a bum shoved a coin cup in my direction,
I slid into him, as one shimmies down a rope.
The fragrance of burning in oil drums conveyed itself.
In this scene, the bum cuffs his hands another’s neck.
He’s focused on wheezing in and out
substantial urges to end the life of the man below him.
Afterwards, he thought that nothing could happen;
nobody would miss this guy
because they were the same.

Where I attended university,
the homeless organised themselves,
published a newsletter and sold it
around town. Pockets of them
pooled around eateries
and only trains killed them.

I’m safe because I’m not the same
as the vagrant killer
in ways that extend beyond hygiene and employment.
This violence shouldn’t be in me
and now I have a thing to mask.
My wife would leave and take the dog.
I’d be jailed in a cell without a private toilet
and a mate bearing some intimidating nickname.
Every angle of Western culture dictates
that I not begin this new career;
my pastor would agree.

I returned to the lab,
the paying work,
testing blood alongside the everyday
and mundane co-workers lacking spirits marked
for extermination.

Church holds services twice a week.
She and I go and sit with ordinary persons.
I started visiting for prayer
during my lunch hour.
And then the angel found me.
He sat down beside me in a pew
looking like nothing special,
but a warmth came from him
like a gentle furnace.

In front of the altar with a cross
rising from the plateau,
the instructions to clean-up
my surroundings were the same.
I cannot reach down
into myself and bucket up
any more madness than this.

These limbs, not mechanical,
are willing in their ministry.
But now, a new partition
has buttressed itself up
in these weeks after our first conversation –
short boxwoods seeded between
the shell of my neighbour, the stone
of my movement and the nothing
I’ve done since. Just been Lee.

The angel promised nothing.
There was no covenant
for me. I hope this is a test
like Abraham’s.
Right before the first is complete,
maybe Heaven will announce
the joke.

I think of the bum and his homeless hands
strangling one of his own by the oil-drum fire.
Perhaps the angel meant people like him.
That nobody would miss if he was removed.
We’d lose nothing.
Shearing

Only two genders to choose from in most species and this one assumes the form of a lady. A purple tweed suit-dress, white pumps, wispy red-brown hair sits outside of a coffee shop sipping something when I walk by. A man knows one of his own most of the time. On occasion, someone has had a great doctor. This one has insides tall and dark, mineral-laden spelothems compelling my route in an exact path. At least her soul isn’t an aquifer. The beatings she took as a kid left bruises that remind me of Mike from grade-school. We joined the Chemistry Club at the same time but years before that, we were both dorks corralled into red-metal lockers that sometimes jammed when you tried to open them. You would think that it was Mike’s dad who bruised him up, but no. It was his mom. She was everything a bad father in the movies could be, short of homicidal. This coffee-shop woman dressed up, had her body hacked away, to live as the example of what a female should resemble. There was no father to make this situation worse. He’d died in a war. She grew her hair long and wore women’s underwear until she’d saved up for procedures. Couldn’t stop her hair from falling out, though. The leftover wisps are covered by a wig. The hair on it is real. A maker uses the hair the coffee-shop woman brings her. Coffee-shop woman collects it herself, steals the ponytail directly from the elastic. She does this as a man, as if reverting back gives him the added strength and speed to escape. Her victims have a different set of options, can naturally re-grow what was lopped off. The he-woman owns an array of these wigs, individually draped over white mannequin busts. Each coif evidence; so many careless errors I spot just by spelunking into her interior.
Locusta

I imagine that her presence was loud;
maybe even her footsteps,
feet bound in strips of leather,
clacking against the Roman lanes.
Nero’s pet; she dressed herself in this protection,
his many pardons enabling her craft;
the public career made possible.

Maybe she wasn’t the first,
but she was the beginning
of what we know.

History is an indicator
of how far we’ve come,
what we must not do
and do better, quieter.

There must have been confidence
in shouldering the openness of her life;
the work a gasconade,
poison as social art.

It’s said that we killers find that appealing,
but I find myself
detaching my inner element of self
from the public platform of wanting
to be observed; abnegating, almost to the point
of ethereality, what I leave behind at any place.

Locusta must have enjoyed performing.
Her brews precipitated
convulsions and radical colours of skin;
molecules making themselves dominant
in a body. Removals, their faces, were chalked
to return them to pale,
quickly buried.
Her clients could pretend
the termination was part of nature.

The work was pretty,
trickling down from her,
pupil by pupil. She absorbed her students’ achievements.
We call them “copycats,”
their mimicry bolstering the reputation
of a hand already caught.
A legacy is one of the few positive mementos
a jailed murderer nurtures.
Without Nero, the psychology of the idea of her sickened. Her death mythology fattened with stories of rape by a giraffe, her body dismantled while manacled to sturdy animals.

A quieter voice enumerated the tale of her strangulation and burning; a more plausible version than the smearing of her body with female fluids that excited the dappled bull. These stories – she’s the main character, empirical truths circuiting her name like electrons or moons finding purchase in the gravity of what is most interesting.

What we unequivocally know is the moral. Identity management; every killer must obscure the second self. The everyday in our heads is our hands’ private life. Her security waned when the political buttresses buckled. Her drama was remodelled into the criminal.

I’d rather my justifiable deviancy conceal itself below the canopy of amiable normalcy. Like me – a semblance of what is good.
It’s a good name.

My recent acquisition reminded me of gym class, the sweaty period where we couldn’t wait, but had to wait to get a peek at the girls in their shorts.

Bill’s cubby, slotted above mine, had a magic door with an affinity for the back of my head. It never drew blood, but created television static burst behind my lids, as when I’d press my fingers to my eyes just to see the spackled chroma bloom.

Back then, my fat head absorbed the pangs, better, quieter than the cagey box that briefly rattled after our contact.

At the time, I was thankful to escape the toilet swirls that accompanied my position in school society. Head dents seemed better than lack of air and smelling so rancid, the girls, in their little polyester green P.E. shorts, would notice you and not because they caught you staring as you discovered the things you liked about their bodies for the first time.
Plot

“Not needing a military band
nor an elegant forthcoming
to tease spotlights or a hand
from the public’s thinking

But be  In a defiant land
of its own a real right thing”

~ Frank O’Hara, “To the Poem”

Stiff, scratchy wool sweater –
and like that, there is a wrongness
in reading your actions
within a book of fiction.
Specifically, I can’t stand
to be found within the pages of a crime novel.

Thomas Harris penned books full of ideas;
Hannibal Lecter stood as a genius above
murder-mystery villains. Those paragraphs have buried
the potential acts, never to be realised.

I am no Kevin Spacey playing John Doe,
employing the seven sins as a reason,
a pattern. I’ve no instructions
or lessons to impart.

Trusting the methods of books and movies -
the trusting of an unreliable narrator.
It amounts to cuffing myself,
or writing the front-page article myself.

But the company of their paper entertainment –
it’s rather nice.

They strike a balance
in this ugly work.
I have a face
and both hands in Judges.
I’m not the mother
who ends her children,
but I am a successful,
obedient Abraham
and still quite strong.
Things to Avoid

“My God, we’re in open water
I feel like Jacob with his father’s blessing
set forth to con the world too, only I plan
to do it with simple work & with my ear.”
~ John Berryman, “Away,” 1971

Resting mirrors on the eyes,
removal of teeth,
storing of parts,
use of a single, traceable weapon;

though the tissue dies anyway,
superficial marks give the skin memories
that find their way into photos.
Those images rest in a file,
with other documents – the deposit site,
the body’s past, tox-screens,
DNA. I cannot leave my helix behind.

This last item is the most important.

Make a body a body,
refuse its definition as a clue.
Make it impossible
for the connective tissues between file folders
to assemble a muscle,
a who and a path to me.

And if I’m caught,
if some detective has coupled
what I thought were linkless events
together and come to find me-
What is left to me?
The claim of insanity
denigrates the work.

I reject utilization of an m.o.
This pushes ingenuity
all the while I am kinder
than they were in life.
I make it quick,
or at least quicker.
Removals –
clean, neat, faultless.
Replant

'It’s all a dream,"
I said to myself. ‘I am a grave dreaming
that it is a living man.’
-Randall Jarrell, “Terms”

Chew them cold.

This is something not to do,
like burying;
the carpals shoot up sooner
than the rest of the whole.

Splayed, hand bones are like spokes -
risen up
disturbed –

in need of companions,
additions to a collection.

Then, I have to spend time,
picking away insect squatters,
rehushing the dirt.

Earnest is the field
that holds these graves close.

I cover this old freshness with a pair
of daf
fo
dils.
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‘Not Simply a Case:’ Frank Bidart’s Post-Confessional Framing of Mental Illness, Typography, The Dramatic Monologue and Feint in ‘Herbert White’ and ‘Ellen West’
Introduction

Frank Bidart’s first two books were published in the 1970s; *Golden State* in 1973 and *The Book of the Body* in 1977. Bidart’s poetry achieved a wide audience during a time when a major movement, Confessionalism, was waning and new movements like New Surrealism, New Formalism and L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry were emerging.\(^1\) However, Bidart’s poetry did not adhere to the poetics of any of these movements. Instead, his poetry was classified as Post-Confessional by critics like Jeffrey Gray.\(^2\) This thesis will investigate the nature of Bidart’s Post-Confessionalism and evaluate what differentiates his work from that of his immediate predecessors such as Lowell, Sexton, Berryman and Plath. More importantly, this thesis will explore how he contributes to the literary tradition of the dramatic monologue in respect to character construction, typography, and the feint.

Bidart is most known for poems like ‘Herbert White,’ ‘Ellen West’ and ‘The War of Vaslav Nijinsky,’ dramatic monologues which turn away from the art of confessing and towards fictive displays of experience. In these poems, Bidart inhabits an ‘other,’ usually suffering from some form of crisis or mental disorder. His speaker’s circumstances are simultaneously hyperbolic and ‘commonly human.’ It is usually some aspect of Bidart’s archetype or voice that aids in building a bridge between the reader and understanding a normally impenetrable mind.

This is true of speakers in any of his first-person poems, both those with a personal slant and those as dramatic monologues. Carol Moldaw observes that Bidart’s poems lay bare the mind’s processes while under extreme strain as the speakers struggle within their unique circumstances.\(^3\) But the entirety of an individual book has a function all of its own. Bidart’s

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books coalesce and poems become more than they are when read alone. The contexture, or degree of unity between poems in a book, of both *Golden State* and *Book of the Body* demonstrate what Bidart called an overarching ‘animated’ process. That is to say, the books display a broad process encompassing many smaller ones. The broad concept of the self, then, is treated as dynamic and fluid despite being confined to specific situations, mind-sets, and the very shape of the poem it inhabits. ‘Herbert White’ is revealed to have more complex implications when read as one component of a single work. The combination of a mentally disturbed fictional character and poems that express some aspect of the poet’s subjective autobiography cultivates a sense of universality. The reader can better understand the fictional speakers’ otherwise inaccessible mental state and the fictional speaker lends itself to a projected archetype of the poet. *Golden State*, in particular, progresses to a fictional confrontation between the poet’s self and White in the concluding poem, ‘Another Life.’

What Bidart would have us understand is again expressed in the poem ‘Borges and I’:

--- Sweet fiction, in which bravado and despair beckon from a cold panache, in which the protected essential self suffers flashes of its existence to be immortalized by a writing self that is incapable of performing its actions without mixing our essence with what is false.

The dramatic monologue, a form for invented perspectives, conveys a truth not able to be better expressed in a more directly personal, or confessional, poem. Bidart’s fictional voices, ‘pre-existing forms,’ capture some aspect the ‘chaos of life’ more authentically and accurately than his own autobiography. This is part of what makes Bidart a post-Confessional poet.

Another contributing factor to Bidart’s designation as a post-Confessional poet, Jeffrey Gray writes, is that Bidart not only constructs poems as processes but has a unique

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6 Ibid pp. 9-10, ll. 1 & 37.
manner of doing so; his work, ‘in its melancholy, its sense of loss, and its working out, from beginning to end, of a finally insoluble problem,’ utilises the ‘incorporation of theoretical ruminations within the mostly past-tense recounting.’ The most obvious way these insoluble problems are revealed is through his rendering of various forms of mental illness in his dramatic monologues. ‘Herbert White’ and ‘Ellen West’ are two of the most noted poems when discussing Bidart’s Post-Confessional style and contain characters that reject the ‘realism’ of his contemporaries. White and West’s neuroses are too hyperbolic to be believable and it is in these fictions that Bidart reinforces his separation from the preceding Confessional movement.

It is also in Bidart’s framing of poetry that sets him apart from the Confessional poets. Plath, while as interested in ‘sound pattern, rhythm, and to overall orchestration of effects as she [was] to indicting her father,’ wrote poems that generally adhered to right-alignment and uniform stanza length. The manipulation of white space in free verse, Marjorie Perloff claims, was not ‘utilized’ during the 1950s and 60s. Frank Bidart’s first two books, *Golden State* and *Book of the Body*, were released in the 1970s and were as severe of a departure from traditional white space and punctuation management as his prosody was from confessional content. More than his contemporaries, Bidart’s poetry conducts the reading experience; cadence is replaced by off-beats and syncopation which augment the state of crisis that his characters are suspended in. This is in some measure due to unusual punctuation combinations like the pairing of a dash with a comma and a dash with a semi-colon. Integrated into his uneven use of end-stop, enjambment and indentation of lines, his use of punctuation adds a sense of legitimacy to unreal speakers, their utterance becomes

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7 Gray, pp. 718 & 725.
active rumination. Rosanna Warren remarks that Bidart’s ‘lineation and punctuation
dramatize the impossibilities within which consciousness, and conscience, frame themselves.
[...] Punctuation and lineation act as pivots- period, a colon, or a semi-colon will join [...] unjoinable statements.’\textsuperscript{11} ‘Ellen West’ and ‘Herbert White’ utilize irregular typography on a
more severe scale than do his already uniquely shaped personal poems. It can be argued that
the shapes of Bidart’s dramatic monologues are more erratic than his personal poems as they
inhabit a space of mental illness. In Post-Confessional terms, Bidart’s use of typography is
essential to character construction in the interest of the voice matching the intensity of the
action and mental activity.

Bidart’s speakers are deciphering or arguing some portion of their lives that are in
flux; they are performing ‘hydra-headed analyses of | the motivations, dilemmas’ of a
consciousness as opposed to revealing the nature of things from a fully omniscient
perspective.\textsuperscript{12} They are not discovering a change in their identity, but rather, they are
realising or asserting what they already are and have been historically. Thinking can be
progression toward self-revelation, as in ‘Herbert White,’ or formulating a defensive
argument for an already established identity that is in danger of being obliterated, as in ‘Ellen
West.’ The Post-Confessional speaker is not interested in the linear narrative or fully
explaining their mind or history. Vital to reading Bidart’s poetry is understanding that what is
not said and what is implied in the white space of his poems. Fragmentation of narrative,
syntax, and psychology are also essential features that qualify Bidart as Post-Confessional.

Consequently, if Bidart is to be fully understood in Post-Confessional terms, it is
beneficial to understand the confessional literary tradition that preceded him:

Confessionalism. James Merrill and Robert Phillips wrote that in the 1950’s and 60’s,

\textsuperscript{12} Frank Bidart, ‘First Hour of the Night,’ in \textit{In the Western Night: Collected Poems 1965-1990}, (New York:
Confessionalism surfaced as a movement where the poet redirected the scope of his or her work away from T.S. Eliot’s dictum of the objective correlative. M.L. Rosenthal is credited with using the term ‘confessional’ first when describing Robert Lowell’s Life Studies in 1967. Both Phillips and Rosenthal described Confessionalism as the poet using their literal self as a poem’s driving emphasis. Rosenthal gave credit to the Romantics and their use of the poem as a method of the poet’s self-discovery and the ensuing ‘struggle’ to convey that experience ‘in the face of depressing realizations.’ Both the Romantics and Confessionals spotlighted the use of an authentic voice that was representational of the poet. Steven Hoffman writes that the Confessionalism of the 20th century diverged from the poetry of the 19th century through its use of ‘self-absorption’ to ‘make notable inroads into myth and archetype, as well as social, political, and cultural historiography characteristic of high modernism.’

Where Rosenthal traces Confessionalism to the Romantics, Phillips traces Confessionalism’s origins back to the texts of St. Augustine and Walt Whitman. While Augustine concentrated on the Christian aesthetic, both he and Confessional poetry expressed a ‘sense of eternal torture’ and ‘acute sensitivity to the conflicts and problems of the inner life.’ Bringing the inner life into the public sphere mythologised the poet’s truth and often placed the poet in a cultural and/or historical context. Whitman wrote that ‘attempt, from first to last, to put a Person, a human being, myself in the latter part of the Nineteenth Century, in America, freely, fully and truly on record’ was apparent in his books, Leaves of Grass and

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18Phillips, p. 3.
Augustine and Whitman are especially credited with influencing poet John Berryman’s style, and perhaps this is most apparent in Berryman’s 1970 book *Love and Fame*, with its fusion of his everyday life with public figures:

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I stand ashamed of myself;
yes, but I stand. Take my vices alike
with some my virtues, if you can find any.
I stick up like Coriolanus with my scars
for mob inspection.
Oh, dear, I am not running in any election.
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What is striking about Berryman’s poems is the sense of psychological disturbance embedded within public discourse. Phillips observes that Berryman wrote ‘a great number of poems on death or contemplated suicide.’ In general, various aspects of mental illness tended to be a mainstay topic of Confessionalism.

Like Berryman, wrote Rosenthal, Lowell, too, routinely added a ‘cultural element’ to his confessional poetry ‘that reveal[ed] the poet’s ‘psychological vulnerability and shame [as] an embodiment of his civilization’:

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A car radio bleats,
“Love, O careless Love . . . .” I hear
my ill-spirit sob in each blood cell,
as if my hand were at its throat.
I myself am hell;
nobody’s here ---
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The crux of ‘Skunk Hour’ is that Lowell also abases himself, portraying himself as ‘a voyeur suffering from a sickness of will and spirit that makes him, literally, lower than the skunks that take over the poem at the end.’ Many critics, assert Pamela Gemin and Adam Kirsch,
came to equate this element of Confessional poetry as unabashed, narcissistic discourse on personal mental illness. Charles Molesworth deemed Confessional poetry a ‘degraded’ version of Romanticism.\(^\text{26}\) Of ‘Skunk Hour,’ Frank O’Hara said ‘I don’t think that anyone has to get themselves to go and watch lovers in a parking lot necking in order to write a poem, and I don’t see why it’s admirable if they feel guilty about it. They should feel guilty. Why are they snooping? What’s so wonderful about a Peeping Tom?’\(^\text{27}\) But Lowell’s poem, argues Steven Axelrod, shows the self as alienated from one’s environment; the public life Lowell references is an entity that his Self is cut off from. Therefore, Axelrod adds, Lowell’s speaker cannot be more than a ‘peeping Tom’ because the confessional ‘I’ must ‘undergo descent into abyss of self if he is to find renewed wholeness and authentic.’\(^\text{28}\) J.D. McClatchy writes that the Confessional poet, who acts as a witness to the ‘world’s awful reality, also comes to understand that the personal life can be more immediately oppressive and depressing’ than the public one.\(^\text{29}\)

This eviscerating treatment of the self allowed for the concept of the alienated self as a common and defining element of Confessionalism. Such alienation occurs in the poetry of W.D. Snodgrass. In ‘Heart’s Needle,’ achievement does not enrich life, does not change that Snodgrass had still lost his daughter:

> Like the cold men of Rome,  
> we have won costly fields to sow  
> in salt, out only seed.  
> Nothing but injury will grow.  
> I write you only the bitter poems

\(^\text{26}\) Pamela Gemin, ‘Bless Me, Sisters,’ in After Confession: Poetry as Autobiography, (Saint Paul: Graywolf Press, 2001), pp. 233-234 (p. 240);  
Kirsch, p. 25;  
Charles Molesworth, “‘With Your Own Face On’: The Origins and Consequences of Confessional Poetry,” in Twentieth Century Literature, 22: 2 (May 1976), 163-178 (p. 164);  
Phillips, p. 16.  
that you can’t read.\textsuperscript{30}

The idea of alienation from the public life works as a metaphor for his failed private relationship. Brian Brodhead Glaser says that ‘the men committed to writing about the experience of fathering in post-war America fathering a daughter meant sustaining a relationship that made their own masculinity into an occasion of loneliness.’\textsuperscript{31} And while this placed the masculine, confessional poet at his most vulnerable, Snodgrass wrote that it was also to indicate that the more personal a poem was, the more meaningful the universal element would be.\textsuperscript{32}

Judith Harris argues that the inclusion of the political and public, as an expression of alienation and anxiety, stemmed from the ‘anxieties shared by an entire population shaken by World War II. [...] Civilization itself was suffering a nervous breakdown as intellectuals examined the problem of evil in its grossest form, a systematic destruction of European Jewry and the worldwide destruction to which all warring nations contributed.’\textsuperscript{33} The poets that were being published during this time also saw the rise of the Cold War, what Alan Williamson says was a ‘relative influence [on poetry] of irrational hatreds, fears, and identifications, as against pragmatic interests, in political life [and] seemed more disproportionate than it had, perhaps, for several centuries.’\textsuperscript{34} Poets like Sylvia Plath, M.D. Uroff says, drew upon these public and historical anxieties to write ‘emblematic’ poetry mired in ‘the dark halo of myth and melodrama.’\textsuperscript{35} Plath said that her ‘poems do not turn out


\textsuperscript{35} M.D. Uroff, ‘Sylvia Plath and Confessional Poetry: A Reconsideration,’ in \textit{The Iowa Review}, 8: 1 (Winter 1977), 104-115 (p. 104);

to be about Hiroshima, but about a child forming itself finger by finger in the dark.\textsuperscript{36} Her work often removed the reader from context while retaining the irrationality of the psyche:

\begin{verbatim}
Greasing the bodies of adulterers
Like Hiroshima ash and eating in.
The sin. The sin.\textsuperscript{37}
\end{verbatim}

Williamson says that Plath ‘drew a nexus of themes – sacrifice; purity; scapegoating; depersonalization and counter-depersonalization, and the grandiose archetypalization of the self,’ ‘Fever 103°’ used the image of the annihilation of Hiroshima in association with the ‘courting of death’ so often present in her work as a method of objectifying her mental states.\textsuperscript{38} Kirsch argues that in this poem, ‘The sin’ is representative of a divide in the perception of self: the ‘smiling all-American girl’ and ‘the ferocious blasphemer.’\textsuperscript{39} Berryman and Lowell also used references to the public life to provide a greater sense of context for their sufferings, whereas Plath’s use made her work more contorted and obscure. The friction between the self and the symbolic was also an autobiographical component of her mental crisis.

Themes of isolation and alienation in private were equally effective in conveying a poet’s vulnerabilities. Theodore Roethke almost exclusively projected the self as isolated from man’s past and present:\textsuperscript{40}

\begin{verbatim}
I have known the inexorable sadness of pencils,
Neat in their boxes, dolor of pad and paper-weight,
All the misery of manila folders and mucilage,
desolation in immaculate public places,\textsuperscript{41}
\end{verbatim}

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{38} Williamson, \textit{Introspection}, pp. 62-64.
\bibitem{39} Kirsch, p. 236.
\bibitem{40} McClatchy, \textit{Anne Sexton}, p. 248.
\end{thebibliography}
Roethke also ascribed the private nature of the confessional ‘I’ to the natural world. The Self was set amongst ‘small things’ in nature and his diction devoid of allusion as part of a search ‘for psychic identity and spiritual enlightenment’:\footnote{Phillips, pp. 107-109}

\begin{quote}
This urge, wrestle, resurrection of dry sticks,
Cut stems struggling to put down feet,
What saint strained so much,
Rose on such lopped limbs to a new life?>
\end{quote}

Phillips regards ‘Cuttings (later)’ as Roethke’s ‘struggle toward some sort of resurrection’ and ‘assertion of stubborn existence and will to survive.’\footnote{Theodore Roethke, ‘Cuttings (later)’ in The Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry, 2nd edn. ed. Richard Ellmann & Robert O’Clair, 1988), p. 779 ll.} Roethke’s poems force the poet into greater focus without the cultural element to serve as a counterbalance. The reader understands Roethke’s psyche without the need for the translations of symbols found in the more obscure work of Plath. Ralph J. Mills, Jr. interprets Roethke’s poetic voice as the ‘voice of total self, nothing withheld, moving through and articulating the whole range of the poet’s experience, from his origins to the threshold of death, and touching often terrifyingly, the areas of madness and of mystical perception.’\footnote{Phillips, p. 111.}

With its emphasis on the psychological exploration of mental illness, critics perceived the typical confessional poem as ‘text that seeds psychological details that would allow a reader’s “analysis” to resolve the poem into a symbolic study of a speaker’s psychology.’\footnote{qtd. in Phillips, p. 108.} That is not to say that the confessional poem allows for an accurate and sensible analysis of the poet, but it does indicate that the poet had a considerable degree of personal investment in the psychological motifs that confessional poems were steeped in. McClatchy notes that all of the major confessional poets had ‘undergone extensive psychotherapy’ and that this

\footnotesize
\begin{itemize}
\item \footnote{White, p. 135.}
\end{itemize}
experience must have at least partially accounted for their treatment of neuroses in their poems.  

Moreover, David Haven Blake asserts that Freudian theory as an influence of Confessionalism is also widely accepted. Helen Vendler suggests that the term ‘Freudian lyric’ is a better title for the poems the movement produced. Timothy Materer elucidates Vendler’s claims when he argues that the processes and patterns confessional poems revealed were akin to ‘trac[ing] guilt or madness to its origin in family history, or to its origins in a pathological scrupulosity, or to a repression of one side of the self; it then finds aesthetic means to enact its analysis.’. Lowell’s ‘Skunk Hour’ is then read less as an expression of a Peeping Tom’s guilt, and more of an arrival of self when Life Studies is analysed in total. The self that exists in ‘Skunk Hour’ is able to admit that he is not well, whereas in earlier poems, like ‘To Speak of the Woe That is In Marriage,’ the self is unaware that he is ‘totally irrational and out of control.’ The process the self experiences in Life Studies is a Freudian one, says Axelrod. Through self-examination, the self gains ‘insight, which in turn can yield a self-transformation.’ He adds that the process of ‘relearning what we have become,’ which is integral to confessional poetry, is what Freud referred to as ‘Nacherziehung,’ or ‘after-education.’ That is not to say that ‘Nacherziehung’ equates to catharsis.

Alternatively, Confessional poets used Freud’s theories thematically. Williamson observes that Plath’s poetry about her father is generally regarded as exhibiting an ‘Electra Complex.’ The father-figures in her poetry vacillated between ‘god-like’ and ‘torturer,’

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47 p. 114.  
49 Timothy Materer, ‘Confession and Autobiography in James Merrill’s Early Poetry,’ in Twentieth Century Literature, 48: 2 (Summer 2002), 150-173 (p. 152); Helen Vendler qtd. in White, p. 140.  
51 McClatchy, p. 114.  
52 McClatchy, ‘Anne Sexton,’ p. 250.
indicative of her real-life ‘obsessive mourning’ for her father. ‘Daddy,’ perhaps her most famous poem, expresses the unresolved mental trauma of abandonment:

I was ten when they buried you.
At twenty I tried to die
And get back, back, back to you.
I thought even the bones would do.

Kirsch explains that ‘Daddy’ asserts the idea of ‘forbidden love’ for the father-figure and ‘Electra on Azalea Plath’ argues that because of that love, the father-figure dies.

Confessional poetry also used the idea of the Freudian dreamed-life to convey ‘uncensored consciousness.’ Kirsch also notes the influence of Freud’s ‘The Interpretation of Dreams’ in John Berryman’s *The Dream Songs*; poems that were not based on Berryman’s actual dreams but operated within the scope of Freud’s theory on dreams. *The Dream Songs* ‘intricately constructed’ poems where Berryman only appeared to record uncensored, unsuppressed thought. Henry, ‘often biographically identical’ to Berryman, is capable of speech much more open and, at times, shocking than the voice Berryman uses in more overtly autobiographical poems. Kirsch argues that the character Mr. Bones appears to serve as a counter-point to Henry, the super-ego to the id. *Dream Songs*, if they are to be read as actual dreams, then behave as a Freudian dream that is in fact a ‘substitute’ for ‘thought-processes.’ Berryman essentially uses Freudian theory to create an other, or an alternative self.

Plath and Berryman’s dense poems were sometimes thought of as ‘literary spectacle[s] Blake says. However, a reader rarely forgets that the self, the central figure in their poems, is representative of their subjective biographies, which prevents their poetry

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58 Haven Blake, pp. 719-720.
from being classified as mask lyric. This is largely due to another feature of Confessional poetry: the authentic voice. It is often confused with the concept that Confessional poetry is an accurate portrayal of the poet’s experiences. While the aim to accurately document memory was common, it was not the rule. James Merrill said, ‘It seems to me that confessional poetry, to all but the very naive reader or writer, is a literary convention like any other, the problem being to make it sound as if it were true. One can, of course, tell the truth, but I shouldn’t think that would be necessary to give the illusion of a True Confession.’ In concerns to his own poetry, Merrill said that ‘Now and then it’s been true what I wrote. Often, though, it’s been quite made up or taken from somebody else’s life and put in as if it were mine.’ Materer writes that what Merrill and even Sylvia Plath did was to tell the truth ‘at a slant.’ And even Lowell, whose aim for accuracy involved quoted private letters from his ex-wife in Lizzie and Harriet, abandoned telling the entire truth in The Dolphin. But what Lowell wrote sounded like the absolute truth.

It is important to note that an authentic voice is not necessarily devoid of form and metre. While the authentic voice of the Confessional was full of American idiom and ‘unornamented’ diction, metre could be present when ‘the argument’ of a poem ‘made its own meter.’ Lowell was known to use Williams’ variable foot as in ‘Man and Wife.’ Merrill, who initially resisted writing confessionally, used the form of the sonnet. Of voice, he said in an interview that ‘I notice voice a good deal more in metrical poetry. The line lends itself to shifts of emphasis. If Frost had written free verse, I don’t think we’d have heard as

60 Materer, ‘Confession and Autobiography,’ pp. 150-151;
Sheehan & Merrill, p. 2.
62 Axelrod, p. 93-94;
Phillips, p. 16
63 Axelrod, p. 93
much of the voice in it. His voice, in poems like ‘The Broken Home,’ was influenced by Elizabeth Bishop’s formal poems on childhood and sexuality:

My father, who had flown in World War I,
Might have continued to invest his life
In cloud banks well above Wall Street and wife.
But the race was run below, and the point was to win.

Too late now, I make out in his blue gaze
(Through the smoked glass of being thirty-six)
The soul eclipsed by twin black pupils, sex
And business; time was money in those days.

‘Broken Home’ is as technically stringent as Bishop’s poems, but, as Materer observes, the ‘style’ is ‘as plain as Lowell.’

In addition to using form, Anne Sexton said she crafted her authentic voice based on how the poem ‘looked on the page.’ She added, ‘I don’t give a damn about the beats in a line, unless I want them and need them.’ Sexton’s use of form was so that each stanza was read as an ‘entity.’ The ‘hard thing,’ she said, ‘is to get the true voice of the poem, to make each poem an individual thing, give it the stamp of your own voice, and at the same time to make it singular.’ That is not to say that the authentic voice is identical to the poet’s speaking voice. Jo Gill maintains that Sexton’s lyrical voice is perhaps a more ‘finely crafted’ and ‘deliberate’ version of her ‘everyday’ voice:

Death was simpler than I’d thought.
The day life made you well and whole
I let the witches take away my guilty soul.
I pretended I was dead
until the white men pumped the poison out
putting me armless and washed through the rigmarole

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64 Sheehan & Merrill, p.3.
67 Materer, ‘Confession,’ p. 152.
70 Ibid p. 21.
of taking boxes and the electric bed.\textsuperscript{72}

What is successful about this poem, per Rosenthal, is that the voice is compassionate towards the speaker of this ‘pitiful life.’\textsuperscript{73} Metaphor and rhyme also add a sense of theatrics to her admission of how her suicide attempts affected her daughter.\textsuperscript{74} The witches and exaggeration detract from the objectivity of true experience and the reader is left with an archetype representative of mental illness. Therefore, Sexton’s confessional voice exhibits an authenticity that is not entirely related to her ‘subjective experience.’\textsuperscript{75}

Lowell explained that ‘Almost the whole problem of writing poetry is to bring it back to what you really feel’ and often, prose seemed to achieve a realistic display of feeling as opposed to lyric.\textsuperscript{76} He preferred the realistic prose style of Tolstoy and Chekov observes Marjorie Perloff. This style, according to Robert Louis Jackson expressed ‘our casual everyday appearance, behavior, conversation-in short, our everyday ‘character’ and confrontations-contain, reflect, anticipate the larger shape of our destiny.’\textsuperscript{77} Such casualness is apparent in the closing lines of Lowell’s ‘Waking in the Blue’:

\begin{quote}
I strut in my turtle-necked French sailor’s jersey
before the metal shaving mirrors,
and see the shaky future grow familiar
in the pinched, indigenous faces
of these thoroughbred mental cases,
twice my age and half my weight.
We are all old-timers,
each of us holds a locked razor.\textsuperscript{78}
\end{quote}

In addition to the open language, another method to avoiding gross sentimentality and creating a believable self was to ‘saturate [a poem] with a sense of objective reality while

\textsuperscript{73} \textit{The New Poets}, p. 136.
\textsuperscript{74} Phillips, p. 78; Williamson, p. 15.
\textsuperscript{75} Gill, ‘Anne Sexton and Confessional Poetics,’ p. 445.
\textsuperscript{77} Perloff, ‘Realism and the Confessional,’ p. 476.
making it something more than merely a self-analytical case history. The illusion of objective reality, employed by all of the Confessionals, was another method to achieving the authentic voice.

A central aim of Confessional lyric, Lowell said in an interview, was to candidly record the vulnerable self’s ‘honesty of sentiment’ in tandem with the ‘modern predicament’: the suffering self in a world now prone to unending violences. A more arresting description, Alan Williamson writes, is that:

The Great Work of the personal poet is to give an objective shape to his “I am that I am” --- the atmosphere and phenomenology of his consciousness, the matrix out of which his world is continuously, involuntarily created for him, from which his slightest --- and even his more considered --- actions proceed with a more compelling logic than he can ever entirely grasp.

But the general consensus regarding the ‘Great’ personal poem’s worth evolved into something less noble. By the time Frank Bidart began writing in the late 1960’s, Confessionalism was a ‘damaging’ term associated with ‘psycho-exotic pastie’ and ‘shallow exercise[s] in self expression.’ His take on Confessionalism and what his friend and mentor, Lowell, were about would drive his early work as a main progenitor of Post-Confessionalism. Bidart’s 2000 panel discussion on Robert Lowell refers back to the idea that many think that Confessional poetry should be true and ‘bad’:

Lowell’s audacity lies not in his candor, but in his art. Today I want to talk about how “confessional” poetry is not confession. How his candor is an illusion created by art. Lowell always insisted that his so-called confessional poems were in significant ways invented. The power aimed at in Life Studies is the result not of accuracy but the illusion of accuracy, the result of arrangement and invention.

Life Studies, Heart’s Needle (both 1959), Kaddish (1961), and then Ariel (1965) generated a flood of unvarnished poems about family that M. L. Rosenthal christened “confessional.” Lowell winced at the term. It implies helpless outpouring, secrets whispered with an artlessness that is their badge of authenticity, the uncontrolled admission of guilt

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81 Introspection, p. 12
that attempts to wash away guilt. Or worse: confession of others’ guilt; litanies of victimization. But there is an honorific meaning to the word confession, at least as old as Augustine’s Confessions: the most earnest, serious recital of the events of one’s life crucial in the making of the soul. Candor in the Confessions is not simply self-laceration, not covert self-promotion or complaint. Bad “confessional” poems breathe the air of the Saturday confession box or the rituals of talk therapy, rather than Augustine. 

Ted Kooser contradicts Bidart when writes that ‘When “I” says something happened, I believe it happened, and if something awful has happened to “I,” I feel for the poet.’ But, as Bidart points out, this mind-set is a problem and provides a basis for subpar, melodramatic poetry. What is good about Confessionalism, Bidart suggests, are the fictive elements, that a poet includes to make the autobiographical poem posses a sense of sincerity. The successful Confessional poem can reveal the poet’s self without necessarily revealing an exact history. Confessionalism, as Merrill and Bidart have implied, is an art of illusion.

There are aspects of Confessionalism that Bidart has retained in his prosody. His personal poems are often a practice in catharsis, a means of confronting the issues that obsessed him and then ‘drained those subjects of their obsessive power.’ Like the Confessionals, there were stressors that ‘he must expel from him to live,’ ‘draw out of you to expel from you | the desire to die.’ ‘California Plush,’ one of Bidart’s more autobiographical poems from Golden State, expresses his need for the cathartic process established in Lowell’s Life Studies:

The need for the past
is so much at the center of my life
I write this poem to record my discovery of it.

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85 qtd. in ‘Interview,’ Western Night, p. 238.
Bidart’s references to his past and the crises that arose from it are never absent from his books. He ‘he had written about his mother and father until the poems | saw as much as he saw and saw more and he only saw what he saw | in the act of making them.’ And the end process, ‘disgusted him a little the mirror | the mirror was dirty and cracked.’ Not finding or finding what horrifies you is equally present in Sexton’s ‘Kind Sir: These Woods’:

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.

Sexton’s poem is not so much concerned with autobiographical narrative here as with recording the mind’s process through metaphor. Bidart’s focus on the mind’s processes often takes him to the past mind’s processes; he reveals the thoughts and emotions associated with traumatic events in a poem.

And it is the emotional life, the mental universe, that interests Bidart in his more cerebral poems like ‘Self-Portrait 1969’ and ‘Another Life,’ both from Golden State. Historical autobiography is a device to explain why the mind is the way it is, but emotional autobiography can prove just as effective. ‘Confessional’ is deceptively autobiographical; the opening sequence involving the mother killing the speaker’s cat was an event that Bidart drew upon from not from his own history but from that of Augustus Hare. The title is not a description of genre as the poem itself is not confessional. Instead, the title is in reference to

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89 ‘Borges and I,’ p. 10 ll. 45-47.
90 Ibid p. 10 ll. 54-55.
92 ‘Interview with Mark Halliday,’ p. 229.
the inclusion of a dramatised scene between St. Augustine and his mother. Both scenes represent an emotional and psychological truth for Bidart, not necessarily autobiographical. Poems like ‘Confessional,’ that fuse elements of truth and illusion together, indicate that the poet is creating an archetype for himself. Bidart always intended to redirect his poetry away from Confessional poetics and the Confessionals themselves eventually turned to different approaches. ‘After Life Studies, Lowell found that he had little left to say in the purely personal mode’ and so it follows that his later student would also avoid what had already been perfected and abandoned.

The idea of birth transpiring from death, not unlike the Yeatsian gyre, is essentially a primary goal of art. That is to say, a new genre or form of poetry can spring from or be influenced by an existing genre or form. In addition, elements from existing forms and genres can be added to, changed, so that a sense of fluidity and innovation exists. Then poet, then, is the catalyst in enacting these changes. ‘The poet’s business,’ Snodgrass writes in In Radical Pursuit, ‘is to say something interesting. Something so interesting and so valuable that people should stop whatever it is they are doing and listen.’ Therefore, the poet is continually in need of ‘new ideas,’ a ‘new set of details and facts structured with old ideas,’ and a ‘new style’ or ‘way of talking which symbolizes a new and different person.’ Robert Langbaum writes that the word ‘tradition’ can ‘carry associations of stale orthodoxy.’ Additionally, Williamson notes that the Confessional movement had grown stale and had become ‘the whipping boy of half a dozen new schools [...]’ None of these movements emerging in the

94 Axelrod, p. 177
96 W.D. Snodgrass, In Radical Pursuit, pp. 6 & 8.
1970s, however, promoted styles and form that could develop the voice of a self as Bidart heard them in his head.

Bidart’s most pronounced separation from Confessionalism is in his adoption of the dramatic monologue, of which the two poems discussed in detail in this thesis, ‘Herbert White’ and ‘Ellen White,’ are examples. As it is important to understand the tradition that Bidart’s style emerged from, it is equally important to understand the older tradition that he was appropriating into ‘something new.’ His turning away from using the self as the centre of a poem and towards the dramatic monologue is a response that mirrors the movement of Romantic poetry to the Victorian dramatic monologue.

Many scholars of the dramatic monologue, like Robert Langbaum and Ekbert Faas, credit Robert Browning and Alfred, Lord Tennyson with establishing the form in the mid-1800s by adopting the use of an ‘I’ that was not themselves ‘as a reaction against the confessional style’ used by the Romantics. Ralph Rader says that William Wordsworth, one of Romanticism’s major poets, was speaking as himself in effort to achieve a ‘catharsis’ extending from a ‘real situation.’ Carol Christ writes that after the Romantics, the Victorian monologists turned away from this type of use of the self. However, they also ‘associated Romanticism with a disabling emphasis on subjectivity, which they countered by trying to establish a more objective basis for poetic discourse.’ Where the Romanticists and, as previously discussed, Confessionals placed their personal selves as the centre of their work, the Victorian monologists crafted poems about fictional and historical characters.

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99 Langbaum, Poetry of Experience, p. 75 & 79;  

100 Ralph W. Rader, ‘Notes on Some Structural Varieties and Variations in Dramatic “I” Poems and Their Theoretical Implications,’ Victorian Poetry, 22: 2 (Summer 1984), 103-120 (p. 107);  

However, it must be said that like Confessionalism, there is no agreed upon, exacting definition of a dramatic monologue. That the dramatic monologue is comprehensively defined seems to be as much of a misconception as the idea that Confessional poetry is always true. Of the many critical works present, very few present identical criteria by which their authors examine a poem’s viability as a dramatic monologue. There is, instead, an arc of development that comprises this tradition and Bidart’s monologues tend to occur along its path.

W. David Shaw points out that the first and foremost element of the dramatic monologue is that it is spoken in first-person by a speaker that is not the poet. T.S. Eliot described the form as the poet donning a mask.\textsuperscript{102} S.S. Curry, in perhaps the first book of criticism on the monologue, notes that the Victorians regarded the fictive ‘I’ in the dramatic monologue as an avenue to a wider array of variations on character types and themes.\textsuperscript{103} Browning crafted characters like painters Fra Lippo Lippi and Andrea Del Sarto in their eponymously named poems, murderers like the Duke in ‘My Last Duchess’ and the lover of ‘Porphyria’s Lover,’ and the desolate Roland of ‘Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came.’ Some of Tennyson’s characters included mythical figures like Ulysses and Tithonus as well the obsessed lover of ‘Maud.’

However, it must be argued that an ‘I’ that is not the poet is not enough to qualify a poem as a dramatic monologue.\textsuperscript{104} Otherwise, argues Robert Langbaum, a soliloquy would be classified as a dramatic monologue.\textsuperscript{105} The two forms, though, are not entirely unrelated. According Curry, the dramatic monologue is descended from the play ‘as a new and parallel

\begin{footnotes}
\item[104] Ibid p. 124.
\item[105] Langbaum, \textit{Poetry of Experience}, p. 146.
\end{footnotes}
aspect of dramatic art.’¹⁰⁶ Langbaum and Faas add that the initial dramatic monologues were modelled specifically on the soliloquies of Shakespeare, as the poets of the Victorian age sought to ‘objectify and dramatize their essentially subjective and lyrical impulse.’¹⁰⁷ But most of all, the dramatic monologue took from the soliloquy the use of speech instead of lyric as the basis of communicating meaning. And as dialogue means an exchange of meaning between multiple speakers, explains Curry, the ‘monologue’ is indicative of a single speaker, not narrator, who is conducting one-half of a conversation.¹⁰⁸

Consequently, the reader must be made to experience the poem as speech instead of lyric. The wearing of masks allows the poet to utilize many kinds of speech for each character he or she constructs. Browning’s Fra Lippo Lippi and Andrea del Sarto offer distinctly different voices that pair with their distinct situations. Painter Lippi provides us with fast-paced, exclamatory vocatives:

I am poor brother Lippo, but your leave!
You need not clap your torches to my face.
Zooks, what’s to blame? You think you see a monk!¹⁰⁹

And while Browning uses the same fragmented and interrogative style that pause a poem’s pace in ‘Andrea del Sarto’ that was used in ‘Fra Lippo Lippi,’ del Sarto’s tone is servile and nonaggressive¹¹⁰:

But do not let us quarrel any more,
No, my Lucrezia; bear with me for once:
Sit down and all shall happen as you wish,
You turn your face, but does it bring your heart?¹¹¹

¹⁰⁶ Curry, p. 10.
¹⁰⁷ Poetry of Experience, p. 160; Faas, pp. 105-106.
¹⁰⁸ Curry, p. 7; Shaw, Origins of the Monologue, p 26.
¹¹⁰ Martin, p. 224.
Dramatic monologues from subsequent poetic eras also exhibited varied diction to more fully project believable, potent characters. Eliot’s Gerontion speaks with the heaviness of age and experience exaggerated by the poem’s plodding pace:

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Vacant
shuttles
Weave the wind. I have no ghosts,
An old man in a draughty house
Under a windy knob.  
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In *The Wasteland*, Eliot’s Tiresias is ‘an embodiment if speech beyond communication or displacement’ as his voice, Loy Martin says, is a vocal ‘composite, fusing multiple idioms into subjective unity.’ Alan Sinfield clarifies this point in *Dramatic Monologue* by claiming that the women in the prior sections converge in the prophetic figure of Tiresias. Therefore, Tiresias is capable of both prophetic speech:

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I Tiresias, though blind, throbbing between two lives,
Old man with wrinkled female breasts, can see
At the violent hour, the evening hour that strives
Homeward,  
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and gibberish: ‘Twit twit twit | Jug jug jug jug jug jug.’ The Post-Confessional dramatic monologues of Frank Bidart in the 1970s vary both in gender and how their speakers’ express the notion of mental illness. He uses a jerky style in ‘Herbert White’ to express the speaker’s hesitance to confront his brutal reality. His portrayal of Ellen West as a passionately ranting non-conformist initiates a discourse on how the mentally ill might insist on existence on their own terms instead being subject to assessment of the second speaker’s clinical documentation. White’s speech was often devoid of emotion when relating his violence experiences:

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and saw a little girl ---
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112 Martin, p. 233.
114 Martin, p. 233
117 Ibid p. 71 ll. 203-204.
who I picked up, hit on the head, and
screwed, and screwed, and screwed, and screwed, then

buried,
in the garden of the motel . . .

West’s speech is highly charged and critical:

--- Is it bitter? Does her soul
tell her

that she was an idiot ever to think
anything

material wholly could satisfy? . . .

These examples of Bidart’s use of different dialects also prove how the dramatic monologue differs from the previously mentioned soliloquy.

Langbaum writes that ‘the soliloquist’s subject is himself, while the speaker of the dramatic monologue directs his attention outward. [...] The soliloquist is concerned with truth, [...] while the speaker of the dramatic monologue [...] is not concerned with its truth but with trying to impress it on the outside world.’ For example, Hamlet’s character construction in the ‘To be or not to be’ soliloquy is achieved solely through talking of himself while White and West’s characters are achieved not only by talking of themselves but by unconsciously revealing themselves through their relationships to external objects and people. In these examples, White displays a cold objectification of his victims and West speaks of Maria Callas as metaphor for her self-perception. Shaw observes that Victorian monologists, while reacting against Romanticism, still retained the Romantic notion of revealing the self by talking about an object or person and revealed the nature of objects and other persons by talking about the self, but replaced the use of poet’s self with the fictive self.

120 The Poetry of Experience, p. 146.
121 Shaw, Origins of the Monologue, p. 53.
Additional differences between the use of first person between dramatic monologues and soliloquies involve the forms’ treatment of dramatic action. The ‘I’ of a soliloquy steps outside of the play to speak, essentially halting the action. The before-and-after scenes surrounding the soliloquy behave as bookmarks, or even a prologue and an epilogue, to the lyric.\textsuperscript{122}

The dramatic monologue, instead, is rooted in dramatic action, not having the movement of the play on either side of the poem (soliloquy) to provide context. Making the poem dramatic, says Curry, ‘implies life, and life is shown by movement.’\textsuperscript{123} The poet, then, must do this by inventing bold situations and characters. Browning’s ‘Fra Lippo Lippi’ opens with the eponymous character being held by the throat by the watchmen who have caught him on the streets after curfew. The poem proceeds by way of Lippi talking his way out of his predicament.\textsuperscript{124} Tennyson’s speaker in ‘Maud’ is obsessed with the poem’s namesake and loses her love by killing her brother in a duel.\textsuperscript{125} Randall Jarrell wrote ‘The Christmas Roses’ in which the speaker is a woman dying of cancer and speaking to an absent ex-lover.\textsuperscript{126} But the most common situation and speaker types are based in insanity. Adena Rosmarin writes that, ‘Mad speakers are favorites of the apprentice monologist. The garish outlines of madness are easily sketched, the reader’s superiority easily secured. The early efforts of even Browning and Tennyson concentrate on simulating madness: St. Simeon Stylites, Johannes Agricola, Porphyria’s lover, and, as some have argued, the Duke.’\textsuperscript{127} Bidart has readily adopted this trend with characters like White, West, and Vaslav Nijinksy. Curry and

\textsuperscript{123} p. 172
Langbaum point out that mentally disturbed speakers are ‘highly individualized,’ and often able to provide new perspectives on universal aspects of human emotions, psychology, and history.  

One of the more fluid features of the dramatic monologue is the use of an auditor. A dramatic monologue’s ‘I’ speaks, and thus, something must be present to listen. The initial use of an auditor in many of Browning’s dramatic monologues, Sinfield writes, was not only to receive the speaker’s truth but be a ghostly presence ‘whose influence is felt in the poem.’ The speaker will often acknowledge the auditor by repeating and the answering a question that the auditor has said out of view of the reader. Fra Lippo Lippi is confronted and interrogated by the unseen watchmen, the Duke in ‘My Last Duchess’ speaks to an envoy come to set up a new marriage, Andrea del Sarto is attempting to persuade his wife to spend an evening with him and not go to her lover. In these poems, the auditor is clearly defined and interacts with the speaker. But the auditor need not be alive. In both Pound’s ‘The Tomb at Akh Çaar’ and Lowell’s ‘Mills of the Kavanaugh,’ the auditors are dead. Martin notes that in Browning’s ‘Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came,’ there either is no auditor or the auditor is the speaker. The same is true of Tennyson’s ‘Maud,’ Eliot’s ‘Gerontion,’ Elizabeth Bishop’s ‘Crusoe in England,’ and both of the poems that this thesis addresses: ‘Herbert White’ and ‘Ellen West.’

Shaw argues that the genre is ‘frisky and elusive,’ not always adhering to the rules that critics set for it. That, in turn, creates difficulty in establishing a solid definition. Yet the attempt has been made many times over to set the form’s defining traits. ‘The concept of literary genre is useful,’ Martin says, ‘because it gives a way to see our deceptively static texts as moments in change.’ A critic can set out reasons why a specific poem is one genre

129 Sinfield, p. 7.
130 Martin, p. 167.
over another.\textsuperscript{132} Browning’s original definition set the form as a poem ‘told by some actor in it, not by the poet himself’.\textsuperscript{133} Curry later amended the definition:

The monologue, as Browning has exemplified it, is one end of a conversation. A definite speaker is conceived in a definite, dramatic situation. Usually, we find also a well-defined listener, though his character is understood entirely from the impression he produces upon the speaker. We feel that this listener has said something and that his presence and character influence the speaker’s thought, words, and manner. The conversation does not consist of abstract remarks, but takes place in a definite situation as a part of human life.\textsuperscript{134}

Sinfield argues that such a definition only applies to a handful of Browning poems like ‘Fra Lippo Lippi’ and ‘My Last Duchess’.\textsuperscript{135}

In 1957, Ina Beth Sessions developed a hierarchy from which to evaluate and establish different levels of dramatic monologue. Sessions lists seven characteristics that a ‘perfect dramatic monologue’ would have: ‘speaker, audience, occasion, revelation of character, interplay between speaker and audience, dramatic action, and action which takes place in the present.’\textsuperscript{136} The degree to which a poem adopts these seven characteristics causes it to then be classified as perfect, imperfect, formal, or approximate.\textsuperscript{137} But other critics found fault with this method of classification as well, deeming it too ‘rigid’ and that this hierarchy has a ‘tendency to fault the many monologues that are as highly esteemed as they are consistently perplexing.’\textsuperscript{138}

But Rader finds division useful, though he chooses to include forms that are related to the dramatic monologue as part of his classification system. Most notable is his explanation of the mask lyric, which serves as the ‘poet’s sophisticated attempt to express, while at the same time objectifying and limiting, an aspect of his own subjective situation.’\textsuperscript{139}

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{Martin} Martin, p. 205.
\bibitem{Curry} Curry, p. 7.
\bibitem{Sessions} Ibid p. 7
\bibitem{Rosmarin} Ibid 508
\bibitem{Rosmarin2} Rosmarin, p. 53
\bibitem{Rader} Ralph W. Rader, ‘Notes on Some Structural,’ p. 105.
\end{thebibliography}
However, then poems that have been traditionally regarded as dramatic monologues lose that classification altogether. Tennyson’s ‘Ulysses,’ Browning’s ‘Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came,’ and Eliot’s ‘The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock’ are reassigned to the form of the mask lyric.140 If this is the case, then the dramatic monologue began and ended in the monologues of Browning. Martin and Edward Hirsche argue that if this is the case, all Modernist and Postmodernist dramatic monologues would lose their classification as many poets loosely applied the concepts of the auditor, abandoned the use of narrative, and often allowed some aspect of themselves to appear in their monologues.141 ‘Herbert White’ and ‘Ellen West’ would also cease to be considered as dramatic monologues.

Despite crafting a rigid hierarchy, Sessions offers another avenue of exploration: defining a poem as a dramatic monologue or not is not the only important discussion concerning the form. One must also take into consideration the ‘extent of dramatic effectiveness of a poem.’142 This thesis argues that Bidart’s acceptance and rejection of various traditional guidelines of the dramatic monologue tend to enhance the dramatic effect of his dramatic monologues rather than lessen them. He follows the arc of a literary history that has seen the nuances of form altered many times over.

Bidart defines both ‘Herbert White’ and ‘Ellen West’ as dramatic monologues that work as the ‘Yeatsian “anti-self”’ and through those ‘all that I was not’ characters, Bidart was able to ‘settle those issues for [him]. It drained those subjects of their obsessive power.’143 The ‘anti-self,’ as explained by Langbaum and that Bidart refers to, is the character type ‘who is in conflict with his age and destiny.’144 ‘Those issues’ were the strained relationships

140 Rader, ‘Notes on some Structural,’ p. 105
142 ‘The Dramatic Monologue,’ p. 514.
Bidart had with his parents. By channelling his problematic experiences into the dramatic monologue form, he was able to ‘gain a formal and emotional distance from his preoccupations’ while still exploring the link that Sinfield claims exists between poet and subject.¹⁴⁵ Langbaum writes that a poet wearing a mask was able to ‘penetrate through the ordinary self to remote depth where the real interest lies.’¹⁴⁶ Not only can the poet’s self become the art, but the poet can use the dramatic monologue to make his views or biography more engaging.

This particular type of self-exploration was another reason why the dramatic monologue was often referred to as ‘the poetry of psychology,’ ‘psychological monologues’ and ‘case-history-like studies’ by critics during the Victorian period explains Faas.¹⁴⁷ Ann C. Colley additionally notes that ‘It was not unusual to find Tennyson’s poems borrowing vocabulary and ways of understanding from scientific texts.’ In fact, his approach is ‘almost clinical’ in its identification of ‘distinguishing qualities of mind which determine how each of his subjects perceives the world around her.’ ‘“Mariana” is one example is this poem ‘charts a frustrated woman’s loneliness and despair’ and how it ‘distorts perception.’¹⁴⁸ Later on, the Modernists like Pound and Eliot, Richard J. Giannone writes, employed metaphors to ‘[erect] a symbolic structure to which the psychological observations are fastened.’¹⁴⁹ Pound, for example, uses a ‘central generalized metaphor’ when he writes:

> Your mind and you are our Sargasso Sea,
> London has swept about you this score years
> And bright ships left you this or that in fee:
> Ideas, old gossip, oddments of all things,
> Strange spars of knowledge and dimmed wares of price.¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁵ Sinfield, pp. 17 & 25.
¹⁴⁶ Langbaum, Mysteries of Identity, p. 168.
¹⁴⁸ Colley, pp. 67-68.
The speaker’s perspective is ‘but a “moment of song” which happens to be a description of a lady’s mind.’

Bidart’s monologues also possess qualities that plant him firmly in the history of the dramatic monologue that is interested in mental health. They incorporate the mentally ill into a social fabric as Bidart directs attention towards not what these characters can be defined as, so much as their reactions to the situations he places them in and their histories that substantiate their identities in their poems’ present. For example, while it is largely accurate to describe Herbert White as a paedophiliac necrophile, the poem’s locus rests in the progression of memory that culminates in the realisation of his monstrous actions. With ‘Ellen West,’ the poem focuses on the progression of an identity that is prone to mercurial fluctuations.

Bidart’s Herbert White appears to suffer from a dissociative disorder, or what Shaw describes as a ‘self-divided mind,’ that prevents him from entirely remembering the murders he commits until the end of the poem. White literally has two selves housed in one body. ‘Ellen West’ follows suit as the speaker is drawn to and repulsed by elements like food and people. She claims she wants to put aside her obsessions but at the same time will not and cannot. Essentially, she is ‘pulled two ways at once.’ The two selves within each of these speakers work against each other.

Anxiety is best expressed in the poem as what Sinfield describes as the Modernist method of ‘pick[ing] through a world of shifting images whilst in doubt of the status of the mind through which they appear to be passing.’ Both ‘White’ and ‘West’ are structured as fragmentary memories and introspection. But Bidart does not fully commit to this Modernist principle, as his use of the feint is prominent in his dramatic monologues, particularly as a

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151 Giannone, p. 132.
152 Shaw, p. 191.
153 Ibid, p. 191
154 The Dramatic Monologue, p. 66.
mode of discussing the emotional hazards of kinship. Langbaum explains that Eliot felt that
the poet should remain ‘outside the poem’ and that the dramatic monologue fails in its aim to
‘bring a character to life;’ a dramatic monologue is a poem of mimicry.155 Faas argues that
other forms of lyric are prone to ‘stereotypical speakers’ and ‘stock situations.’156 But this
dissertation argues that the dramatic monologue provides an avenue to for the poet to explore
a high degree of specificity and uniqueness which ‘outweigh its more stereotypical qualities’
which Faas also noted.157

Both poems are created spheres; that kind that Langbaum refers to as another ‘realm’
in which the anti-self is the ‘ultimate self’ which then becomes ‘manifest.’158 Bidart also
creates the voices and landscapes of Herbert White and Ellen West, and these in turn form an
idea as to what the anti-Bidart is so that the image of the poet becomes clearer.

This dissertation, then, proposes to view ‘Herbert White’ and ‘Ellen West’ through Bidart’s
use of what Kate Hamburger has called a ‘feint’ as applied to dramatic monologues.159 The
feint is the aspect of many dramatic monologues that cause Rader to reclassify them as mask
lyrics. But with the vast amount of dramatic monologues that employ this technique,
reclassification only compounds the issue rather than solving it. Browning used Fra Lippo
Lippi as a platform to discuss human individuality, Andrew Marvell’s speakers in
‘Bermudas’ shared the poet’s strong religious views, and Yeats’ poems concerning Crazy
Jane shared the poet’s views on ‘love, life and death.’ Lowell used the speakers in his
dramatic monologues, ‘After the Surprising Conversions’ and ‘Mr. Edwards and the Spider’
to signify his own dissatisfaction with ‘hell-fire theology.’160 The aforementioned Randall

155 Langbaum, Poetry of Experience, p. 30; Eliot, p. 95.
156 Faas, p. 152.
157 Ibid p. 152
158 Langbaum, Mysteries of Identity, p. 203.
159 Sinfield, p. 25.
Jarrell wrote dramatic monologues using female characters; Mary Jarrell labelled this as Jarrell’s ‘semi-self portraits’ which ‘dramatized [Jarrell’s] own sensibility.’

The use of a feint offers Bidart a way to speak of himself by creating someone to speak for him. Langbaum writes that ‘the speaker of the dramatic monologue dramatize[s] a position to which the poet is not ready to commit himself intellectually.’ Both ‘White’ and ‘West’ end in annihilation; Ellen West commits suicide while Herbert White’s fragile, delusional world is stripped from him and he is forced to confront his true, murderous self. The feint allows Bidart to approach the concept of the condemnable self and the annihilation of self without ever truly attributing it to his person.

This concept also allows for an intertextual reading of ‘Herbert White’ and ‘Ellen West.’ Bidart’s use of the dramatic monologue creates an ‘other’ that is resistant to Bidart’s own voice and is, at the same time, inextricably linked though the feint. The dramatic monologue, then, serves as a vehicle for Bidart to separate his poetry from the confessional style of his contemporaries. On one level ‘Herbert White’ functions as a poem about ‘a necrophiliac and serial killer’ and one another, the initial, representational piece in a book about his relationship with his father. Bidart’s next dramatic monologue, ‘Ellen West,’ operates in place of forthright confessional work concerning a number of topics like mental illness, aging, art, the ‘mind-body,’ and the knowing of self. Bidart refers to these characters as ‘shadows’ of his own experience, as they are a product of himself without being his actual self. By using the poet’s interests, views, and/or history as part of his characters’ formulation, Bidart’s lyric exhibits universal qualities that help the reader ‘recognize a psychological feature of the persona’ as described by Faas when discussing Victorian

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162 Poetry of Experience, p. 105.
163 Hix, p. 195;
monologues. That Bidart shares histories with his speakers is also made evident through a number of Bidart's more personal poems like ‘Self Portrait, 1969,’ ‘Golden State,’ and newer poems from *Metaphysical Dog* like ‘Mouth’ and ‘Writing “Ellen West.”’

Bidart’s dramatic monologues contain, at the very least, fractions of the poet’s history, even if he reveals himself by revealing his opposite. Dan Chiasson writes that, 'to encounter a Bidart poem is very much to encounter Bidart’s presence – often contentious – within another, foreign, presence.' Bidart has the ability to make himself known through a serial killer, a man who has sex with the corpses of the children he murders. He appears amongst the suffering, feminine voice of ‘Ellen West,’ not allowing his masculine poet’s voice to override her speech but instead, offer an empathetic reinforcement to her authenticity as a character, as a life.

The previously mentioned ‘anti-self’ allows the poet a sense of freedom not shared by Confessional poetry, where the absence of ‘barriers between the reader and the poet’ limited the intensity of the drama used to craft what Phillips refers to as the poet’s ‘personal mythology.’ Shaw claims that the anti-self:

> stretches the heart and mind wide enough to embrace the truth of opposites: the truths of both modern relativism, which allows for only equivocal understanding, and Victorian perspectivism, which concedes that analogical understanding is in theory possible. Perhaps this is just another way of saying that in releasing the poet from accident and incoherence, the wearing of masks far removed from the natural self allows the poet to become ‘the mysterious one’ invoked by Yeats as his secret double.

Bidart’s monologues contain very little objective truth and characters like Herbert White are made to be the sole providers of information; the truth of the poem derives from the one

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164 Faas, p. 149.
166 Phillips, pp. 16-17.
speaker and it is the only truth the reader can know. In ‘Herbert White,’ there is a clear sense of opposites in the dual-realities of the poem, one reality for each of White’s selves.

There is an exception, though, to Shaw’s argument in ‘Ellen West.’ If Ellen West was the only character present giving the reader information, there would be little choice but to rely on her because she would be the only speaker present, despite recognising the dubious nature of her self-perceptions. Bidart, however, uses two speakers for ‘West,’ which undermines West’s monopoly on truth. With the poem becoming more prone to relativism, what Langbaum terms as ‘sympathy’ or ‘romantic projectiveness’ should be in jeopardy.\textsuperscript{168} There should be a sense of tension between the amount of sympathy the reader gives to the poem and the judgment the reader would pass on the poem in respect to the accuracy of its perspective.\textsuperscript{169} Bidart is able to create an unyielding sense of tension between truth and sympathy in spite of the inclusion of a second speaker, largely due to the method of lineation and punctuation developed in \textit{Golden State}. He also draws from his ability to present a character with a divided mind, creating tension of another kind that adds to the theatrics of the dramatic monologue.

‘Herbert White’ and ‘Ellen West’ produce characters that terrify us, even in this age where desensitisation to murder and shock are common. This thesis explores these two earlier poems because they came to define Bidart’s literary career. His approach to established forms of lyric helped usher in Post-Confessionalism, revealing that lyric could retain those qualities while reinventing what poetry could articulate through punctuative and white space manipulation. He gave voice to estranged voices that would not be heard if expressed in traditional forms and his simultaneous use of the simple and complex unequivocally serves as a reaction to and redirection of the energies of Confessionalism. John Ramazani writes that while Bidart is not the only present-day poet to use the ‘mask lyric and the persona poem,’

\textsuperscript{168} \textit{Poetry of Experience}, preface.
\textsuperscript{169} Ibid preface & pp. 140.
his use of it as more than a ‘counterweight to the novel. This argument presents a great opportunity for discussion about Bidart’s contribution to the evolution of the form in terms of the handling of the characters’ mental illnesses, association of the characters to the poet and the association of the his dramatic monologues to poems that appear to explore some sense of his own physical and mental history.

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Chapter 1: ‘Herbert White’ – Formation of the Post-Confessional Psychopathic ‘Other’

Frank Bidart’s first book, *Golden State*, was one of the first major Post-Confessional books of poetry. It approached autobiography by rendering the poet a shadow actor. Characters that might, in a confessional poem, be treated as satellites were given more significance and personality in Bidart’s poems. They appear to behave and action upon rather than the heavy hand of the poet appearing to compel his characters to act. What is ironic is that Bidart’s work is exacting and every element and feature has been carefully chosen. ‘Herbert White,’ the first and most famous poem of *Golden State*, immediately establishes his originality; it behaves as a dramatic monologue that makes for a greater impression of Bidart’s attempt to break with existing. Opening a book with the idea of ‘not-the-poet’ suggested that Bidart’s poetics were directed away from the Confessional movement. The poem’s unusual style of typography calls attention to the framing of a histrionic narrative through syncopated rhythms and physical arrangement of speech. This gives White a much different feel than the speakers of the Confessional’s poems; White’s presence is more horrific and visceral just through Bidart’s use of typography, let alone the brutal narrative. Moreover, Bidart’s use of punctuation, mingling of opposing speech genres and the sharing of biographies between ‘White’ and the rest of *Golden State* mark the distance he placed between himself and the preceding poetry of the 1950s and 60s. ‘Herbert White’ solidly categorised Bidart as a Post-Confessional poet, which allowed him to draw upon the poetry of his mentors while finding unfamiliar ways to represent common Confessional subjects: sexuality, violence of a mental disorder that can annihilate the fabric of personal identity, and fragments of reciprocal autobiography that operate in the poem’s backdrop.
In addition to manipulating the typography and syntax to craft the psyche of this ‘MONSTER,’ Bidart used contrasting ‘speech genres,’ to use Bakhtin’s term, and built White’s illness around Freud’s theories on neurosis. The result is a character that Dan Chiasson regards as representative of ‘chaos’ and yet is at times, personable.¹ Bidart’s use of informal speech creates sections of the poem that cause the speaker to appear affable. This particular speech genre is what Nick Halpern terms the ‘everyday’ and this thesis argues that Bidart uses this speech genre to make a psychologically dense poem accessible and provide purchase to the reader. However, Bidart creates a sense of imbalance within the use of everyday speech by interspersing a kind of speech that Halpern terms as the ‘prophetic.’² White’s reified voice becomes as variable as his mental stability. How ‘White’ utilizes these variations becomes even more apparent when juxtaposed against personal poems like ‘California Plush,’ which maintain a single type of diction.

‘Herbert White’ centres on one such narrative of a hyperbolic nature where the, eponymous speaker behaves as a paedophiliac necrophile with dissociative disorder. In his 1983 interview with Mark Halliday, Bidart says that when crafting ‘Herbert White,’ he ‘wanted to make a Yeatsian “anti-self”—someone who was “all that I was not,” whose way of “solving problems” was the opposite of that of the son in the middle of the book.’³ We find, however, that evidence of Bidart’s presence appears in ‘Herbert White’ through the adoption of the dramatic monologue’s ‘feint,’ perhaps the most significant method Bidart used to direct his poetry away from Confessionalism. Bidart and White share early life traumas but their reactions to these experiences are antithetical, as indicated when juxtaposed with poems like ‘Golden State,’ ‘California Plush.’ Bidart and White are clearly juxtaposed in the book’s

final poem, ‘Another Life,’ where Bidart makes clear the parallels between their biographical traumas.

Bidart confirms White’s failure and disorder in his 1983 interview as rooted in White’s inability to alter his patterns, psychologically and physically, in a manner that would contribute to his mental health.⁴ He lives out a battle between a constructed ego and id. The conception of this type of character diverges significantly from the confessional use of the ‘I,’ as Bidart uses a speaker that is clearly not the poet but subtly lends itself to Bidart’s autobiography. There is a marked difference between the Confessionals use of Freudian psychology to aid in the revealing of their total psyche. Bidart’s use of it, when applied to White, exposes a fragmented mind where the ego, id, and super-ego are distinct. White has a partially repressed portion of himself from which his neurosis expresses itself via the id.

While White is able to recall most of his past, those said and unsaid, he is generally unaware of how he releases his anger and anxiety. White appears convinced that he is not the architect of events; his mind going as far as dissociating during his violent and perverse acts. Bidart maintains in the that White’s way of working through the problems he has with his family ‘is to give himself to a violent pattern growing out of the dramas of his past, a pattern that consoles him as long as he can feel that someone else has acted within it.’⁵ The poem culminates with White’s belated realisation that he is in fact the killer.⁶ The ending of ‘White,’ the realization of acts of violence, then feeds into the overt emotions of ‘Self-Portrait,’ which does, as this thesis claims, become a motif that enhances the contexture of the book.

The mental illness of White is a disease and failing of memory that accompanies the violent urges. A White without a dissociative aspect to his madness would not have been able

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⁵ ‘Interview with Mark Halliday,’ p. 238.
to convince himself that someone else was acting, and thus, some other outlet for his neurosis
would have been needed. The loss of memory is the subtle yet vital pattern that underlies
*Golden State*. There is a limit to how much the self can remember, can will itself to
remember, which has meaning. Much that could be remembered, should be remembered, can
be inferred in Bidart’s typography. This, too, separates Bidart from confessional poetry;
Robert Lowell, in particular, Roger Bowen writes, was known for ‘impartial and often
ruthless memory, and in translating straight autobiography into poetry.’ Unlike other poets,
Bidart’s additional manipulation of spatial organisation leaves space for the reader ‘to feel
things make sense’ instead of inducing an understanding by laying out all of the details.

The spaces, indentations, punctuation and resulting lack of rhythms make for the
understanding of the narrative and psychological bifurcations that the ‘withheld image’ aims
to convey. However, the lack of form in *Golden State* is an illusion; each word and its
placement is carefully considered. Minor changes to punctuation, spaces between lines and
indentation can have a surprisingly prodigious effect on the voice and personality exhibited.
The poems of *Golden State* appear to be similarly formatted but these small changes clearly
demarcate White’s voice from Bidart’s, which was something not experienced when reading
confessional poetry where the voice is representative of the poet. The narrative similarities
bring Bidart and White’s voices closer together. It can be argued, then, that White and Bidart
have a synergic effect. Bidart lends elements of his biography to White which provides
accessibility and universality to a character so demented that without these elements, White
would be a one-dimensional villain. White adds a sense of rage and unfathomable violence to
an archetype of Bidart that Bidart carefully crafts over the course of *Golden State*. ‘Herbert
White’ serves as the linchpin of *Golden State*’s typographical practices and psychological
narrative.

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8 ‘Herbert White,’ ll. 41.
This chapter argues that ‘Herbert White’ is a key component in establishing Bidart’s position as a Post-Confessional monologist. Through use of a feint, variant typography and speech genres Bidart redirects the Confessional methods on revealing the mental activity of an ‘I.’ The theme of emotional trauma arising from the dysfunctional family extends throughout *Golden State* and ‘White’ exhibits a marked difference in response to this trauma. The behavioural differences stem from difference in intent. White does not wish to understand the past and reconcile his present; whereas Bidart that the very opposite was true when composing the book.  

The emblematic nonconformity of ‘White’ and its speaker is part of the ‘secret pattern’ underlying the book’s active search to harmonise an array of circumstances. These circumstances display the subjective self searching for the objective truth of the past to find a ‘why’ hidden within only to find there isn’t a life-altering ‘why’ available.

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I. White as Freudian Praxis

Sigmund Freud and his theories about how the mind functioned was a literary influence of the confessional poets of the 1950s and 60s writes David Haven Blake. This thesis argues that Freud was also an influence on Frank Bidart and that Freud’s theories were prevalent in ‘Herbert White.’ Of Bidart’s use of Freud, Helen Vendler says that ‘Freud was Bidart’s original mentor in this anatomy of “reality,” with reality, like charity, beginning at home.’

This is one of the reasons why Freudian theory has been chosen as a method to read ‘Herbert White’ over other arenas of psychiatric and philosophical thought. Bidart not only had exposure to the use of Freud in poetry through his studies with Lowell, but by the time Bidart wrote ‘Herbert White,’ he had already read Ludwig Binswanger’s ‘The Case of Ellen West: An Anthropological-Clinical Study.’ Binswanger and Freud mutually admired each other work and exchanged letters for thirty years. It is entirely plausible, as Vendler argues, that Freud’s work had an impact on Bidart which then surfaced in his work.

One motif in ‘Herbert White’ involves the withholding of memory from the created self which then contorts the speaker’s identity. The concepts of the conscious versus unconscious and memory as defence are very much involved in Freud’s works, the Confessionals applied these themes to their personal narratives but Bidart is different because he applies them to an ‘other.’ ‘White’ contains elements of Freud’s ideas even though the poem is not a practice in psychoanalysis. Shoshana Felman writes that, ‘To account for poetry in psychoanalytical terms has traditionally meant to analyse poetry as a symptom of a particular poet.’ But this

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mode of analysis has its drawbacks. There is a ‘danger,’ T.S. Eliot writes, in ‘excessive reliance upon causal explanation […] especially when the biographer supplements his knowledge of external facts with psychological conjectures about inner experience.’

This dissertation forgoes such speculation in regards to the author but does argue that the text exhibits Freudian themes that play out in the development of the speaker. These themes provide Bidart with a platform on which he can play out the drama between the compartments of a disturbed mind.

Some literary critics like Harold Bloom argue that these compartments are representative of a poet’s ‘defense.’ But in ‘Herbert White,’ Bidart has provided White with a defense system that functions as a method of revelation rather than a symptom and explication of Bidart’s ‘poetic will.’ When White separates a portion of his consciousness from the totality of his mind, he is allowed an escape from feelings and actions that he would rather not face. To construct White’s way of behaving, Bidart draws on elements of Freud’s theory of repression. He allows for his speaker to live in a created reality rather than subject the speaker to a reality that he cannot control. This provides for a different kind of dramatic situation than that found within a confessional poem where the setting is largely based on the real.

But Bidart does not only have White repress these memories. He creates another personality within White entirely; a personality that is governed by the id. It is White’s id that drives the character to seek out and commit murder and necrophilia; it is White’s ego that enables White to forget his actions or delude himself into thinking ‘someone else did it.’

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18 Ibid p. 2.
19 Freud, pp. 17-18, Study Freud conducted on ‘nervous disorders’ using hypnosis; helped him develop his ‘theory of repression.’
20 ‘Herbert White,’ p. 5, ll. 61.
White’s main consciousness narrates the poem and his voice, as should any voice of ‘poetic manifestation,’ is the ‘invisible but truth-bearing portrait of a person’ says Allen Grossman.\(^{21}\) However, Bidart includes an aspect of White that seeks to avoid mental distress and reason away culpability. Freud notes similar behaviour in patients suffering from psychoneuroses, where a ‘patient can go on spinning a thread of such associations, till he is brought up against some thought, the relation of which to what is repressed becomes so obvious that he is compelled to repeat his attempt at repression.’ By ‘associations,’ Freud was referring to requiring the patient to discuss ‘derivatives’ of the matter being repressed in order to test what was able to ‘pass the censorship of the conscious.’\(^{22}\) White’s ego is untruthful with itself, or producing ‘distortions’ of reality, until the culmination of the poem. The poem’s actual truth often resides in the white space where Bidart relies on what John Frederick Nims refers to as the ‘withheld image’ so that the information that does not make it past the ‘censorship of the conscious’ can be inferred until White’s repression fails.\(^{23}\)

To arrive at the ending’s truth, Bidart employs the pleasure-unpleasure principle, which dictates that the ego attempts to force the id to function in reality rather than in pleasure.\(^{24}\) There exists a Herbert White that has a family and is able to serve as emotional support when needed (at least for a brief amount of time). Bidart creates a character in White that seeks to function contrary to this principle until the culmination of the poem. White spends the duration of the poem endeavouring to escape the anxiety and the moral judgment against the


\(^{22}\) Freud, pp.571;

On p. 630, Freud explains the ego’s function, which is what the derivatives of the repressed of filtering into. The ego is ‘the idea that in each individual there is a coherent organization of mental processes; and we call this his ego. It is to this ego that consciousness is attached; the ego controls the approaches to motility – that is, to the discharge of excitations into the external world; it is the mental agency which supervises all its own constituent processes […] From this ego proceeds the repressions, too, by means of which it is sought to exclude certain trends in the mind not merely from consciousness but also from other forms of effectiveness and activity.’


\(^{24}\) Freud, p. 636, ‘For the ego, perceptions plays the part which in the id fails to instinct. The ego represents what may be called reason and common sense, in contrast to the id, which contains the passions.’
‘someone else’ that has committed these crimes, all the while, satisfying the id’s unconscious desires. That is to say, Bidart creates fragmented memories that depict White escaping the influence of the super-ego in order to preserve a peace of mind and self-perception as a person moral enough not to behave as a ‘bastard.’ White’s need to ‘feel things make sense,’ causes an entirely different identity to emerge as White’s formerly dominant personality lacks the ability to fill that desire.

The new identity, however, arises not only from White’s perversities but from a need to escape anxieties developed during childhood. White’s method of ‘turning something away’ is what Freud referred to as repression. This specific mode of repression, described by Freud in a 1915 paper, ‘is not a defensive mechanism which is present from the very beginning, and that it cannot arise until a sharp cleavage has occurred between conscious and unconscious mental activity.’ Such a crucial ‘cleavage’ is absent from the narrative, but is implied is the ‘distortion’ of reality because, as Freud surmised, repression was not complete. That is to say, repression was not thought to cloak ‘all the derivatives of what was primally repressed.’ An example arises in the White’s vague complaints about his parents and what they ‘wouldn’t give me.’

This vagueness is at odds with the explicitness of how White’s describes his violence and it can be argued that one cause of White’s psychosis exists in the familial details Bidart withholds. Bidart, then, suggests that the dual natures of White formed from anxiety-ridden childhood relationships. This contributes to the development of abnormal defences perhaps as much as the mind’s need to synchronously appease the super-ego and id. White’s

25 Freud, pp. 37, 775-777; 1) Freud deduced that ‘the domination of the pleasure-unpleasure principle in mental life and to its displacement by what is called the reality principle.’ 2) ‘The super-ego is the heir of the Oedipus complex and represents the ethical standards of mankind.’ 3) On a study concerning anxiety: ‘the generation of anxiety is the earlier and the formation of the symptoms the later of the two, as though the symptoms are created in order to avoid the outbreak of the anxiety state.’ 4) ‘The ego is the sole seat of anxiety – that the ego alone can produce and feel anxiety.’ 5) The ego has ‘three dependent relations – to the external world, to the id, and to the super-ego.’
26 ‘Herbert White,’ p. 5, ll. 61.
27 Ibid p. 4, II. 41.
28 Freud, p. 570
29 Ibid p. 571
30 ‘Herbert White,’ p. 6, ll. 91.
entropic emotional state requires him to deny that the self in the distortions of his repressed memories are not him in order to make sense of his emotional perceptions and establish a working equilibrium, as he appears to have another consciousness in play when he murders and rapes. The ‘blur’ is evidence of Bidart using the idea of an incomplete repression in White.  

The same recollection of the absent father with his new family appears in ‘Golden State’:

--- You believed in neither
but said, “My life is over,”
after you had married Shirley, 
twenty-five years younger, with three 
small children, the youngest 
six months old; 

But where White exists in a state of repression, Bidart’s ‘self-as-myth’ exists in a state of awareness. The goal present in ‘Golden State’ is to ‘unlearn’ the established idea of the father figure and reduce him to ‘merely a man --- | with a character, and a past ---’; One might associate the reduction of the father-figure as one aspect of the Oedipus Complex. However, nowhere in Golden State is the mother figure sexualised nor does the self seek to elevate itself. Bidart’s personal poems explore ‘why things were as they were’ and search for knowledge rather than search to usurp in the face of the father’s natural death. The father-figure of ‘Golden State’ is being stripped of his godlike status. Freud writes that ‘The psychoanalysis of individual human beings, however, teaches us with quite special insistence that the god of each of them is formed in the likeness of the father.’ Or rather, elevating the father-figure to a godlike status is an expression of ‘longing for the father’ and in the poem, a

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34 Freud, p. 640.
36 Freud, p. 504
mourning for the father. Rather than the elevation of the self, ‘Golden State’ seeks a ‘freedom,’ and by doing so, the self seeks to become free from religion, or what Freud theorised as the free from the worship of the father. Consequently, freedom from the father is what White cannot achieve and this inability is ‘the nucleus of all neurosis.’

Sylvia Plath is perhaps the Confessional poet most noted for her use of the Electra Complex, the female version of the Oedipus Complex, as an aspect of neuroses. It is also an apt indicator of how Bidart was not exploring the family affair in *Golden State.* Adam Kirsch writes that Plath’s use of the complex was based in myth, both the myth of Electra and in the construction of her own archetype. ‘Electra on Azalea Path’ says that ‘It was my love that did us both to death.’ What is similar between Bidart and Plath is the way that ‘Electra on Azalea Path’ seems to deify the father figure:

Small as a doll in my dress of innocence  
I lay dreaming of your epic, image by image  
Nobody died or withered on that stage.  
Everything took place in double whiteness.

However, Plath removes the father-figure’s deistic status in a more violent fashion than Bidart. John Ramazani refers to her poems that break off identification with the father figure as ‘elegies of explosive grief and rage.’ Her mourning is purgative:

Perhaps you consider yourself an oracle,  
Mouthpiece of the dead, or of some god or other.  
Thirty years now I have labored  
To dredge the silt from your throat.  
I am none the wiser.

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37 Freud p. 505.  
38 X ll. 7-8.  
39 Freud, p. 510  
42 Ibid ll. 11-14.  
Ramazani adds that Plath approached a violent end alongside the father figure and there was never a total disconnect.\textsuperscript{45} Plath had said her idea of mourning most fit Freud’s idea of melancholic mourning:

Where there is a disposition to obsessional neurosis the conflict due to ambivalence gives a pathological cast to mourning and forces it to express itself in the form of self-reproaches to the effect that the mourner himself is to blame for the loss of the loved object. [...] If the love for the object - a love which cannot be given up though the object itself is given up — takes refuge in the narcissistic identification, then the hate comes into operation of this substitutive object, abusing it, debasing it, making it suffer and deriving sadistic satisfaction from itself suffering.\textsuperscript{46}

Her violence in response to childhood trauma is more like Bidart’s ‘Herbert White’ despite its fictive nature. Bidart’s personal poems do not result in violence whereas Plath’s poems result in violence against herself: ‘At twenty I tried to die.’\textsuperscript{47} Consequently, White’s familial stressors result in violence towards little girls.\textsuperscript{48} His is a response meant to alleviate the hate response to his father’s pseudo-abandonment as he is unable to punish the father. To do this, White must push aside his consciousness of morality, what Freud called the ‘super-ego.’

The super-ego surfaces as an influence on White when he refers to the ‘other’ that ‘hurts a little girl’ as a ‘bastard.’\textsuperscript{49} Roman Lesmeister explains that Freud hypothesised that our morals emanate from a ‘brute act of violence’ and an ‘extraordinarily destructive act […] over the carcass of the dead father.’\textsuperscript{50} Bidart turns slightly away from the Freudian archetype established in previous parts of the poem. The super-ego is ‘dependent’ on ‘aggression’ and contributes to ‘an endless cycle of murder.’\textsuperscript{51} Bidart irrevocably breaks this cycle as once the poem ends, the limits of experience cease. When the poem ends, the speaker’s actions and thoughts cease.

\textsuperscript{45} p. 1152.
\textsuperscript{46} Freud, pp. 587-588.
\textsuperscript{48} ‘Herbert White,’ p. 6 ll. 91-101.
\textsuperscript{49} Ibid p. 5, ll. 60-61.
\textsuperscript{51} Ibid pp. 290-291.
Bidart propels White slowly and painfully to approach the knowledge of his damnation until the moment when White fails see his actions as those of someone else. This moment stops short of what Freud described as the ‘stage’ in a mental illness where, ‘the repressed ideas return, and in which, during the struggle between then and the ego, new symptoms are formed which are those of the illness proper.’ The latter part of this stage is absent in ‘Herbert White.’ The poem ends with the horror of realisation and when the action of the poem ends and any new behaviour White may develop as a result is unknown. The reappearance of a dream-like Herbert White in ‘Another Life,’ the book-end poem of *Golden State*, shows him angrily chewing on his arm. But given the fantastical nature of ‘Another Life,’ the image of White presented would not necessarily be comparable to the White in ‘Herbert White’ in regards to looking at Freudian aspects. The two figures inhabit very different landscapes.

At the apex of the action, White becomes fully aware as the super-ego and ego connect. He can no longer deny reality and his responsibility for events.

--- But then, one night,
nothing worked …

Nothing in the sky
would blur like I wanted it to;
and I couldn’t, couldn’t,

get it to seem to me
that somebody else did it …

As discussed previously, Bidart employs the ‘withheld image’ after White sees himself ‘standing there’ by the body. Jon Sletvold writes that Freud’s idea of the conscious awakening occurs in this way. He says that the, ‘consciousness and self appear first in the form of a nonverbal narrative of feelings and images. Only later will consciousness and the

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52 ‘Herbert White,’ p. 7, ll. 117.
53 Freud, p. 91.
54 ‘Herbert White,’ p. 7, ll. 120-126.
57 Nims, pp.83;
‘Herbert White,’ ll. 119.
self also appear in the form of thoughts connected to memories and words.’ At the point that words would become capable of capturing the extent of White’s acts, the poem has reached its limits. For the poem to succeed, Bidart compels his speaker to realise that he is the epitome of what that very character condemns.

The establishment of White’s dual-personality coincides with the Freudian idea that ‘Neurotics turn away from reality because they find it unbearable – either whole or parts of it.’ The poem veers away from Freudian themes in the construction of a new identity.

Bidart’s apex is violent and sudden, where Freud argues that, ‘the supersession of the pleasure principle by the reality principle [...] is not in fact accomplished all at once; nor does it take place simultaneously all along the line.’ The personal poetry of the Confessionals adhered to this concept; the idea of that the ‘“deep” self was, after all, expressed in a series of grand and haunted archetypal images. [...] It became possible to trace a moment of inner experience back through all the layers of the remembered, the imagined, and even the forgotten past.’ The self in personal poetry was something to be built up over time, rather than erected and suddenly deconstructed as in a dramatic monologue like ‘Herbert White.’

‘Herbert White’ begins as a poem whose language is revealing a horrific id, and ends when id and consciousness collide. White then understands and ‘couldn’t stand what I see …’ The revelation becomes one of morality, instead of a display of psychology. Alan Grossman describes this revelation:

This discovery is a moral component because it is in effect an ethical function which carries the literary function – the immortality function – inside of it. [...] It is the business of the moral person --- the business of consciousness within itself, [...] --- to discover the ethical implications of this moment of consciousness in relationship to the whole career of consciousness; or, stated another way, it is the business

59 Freud, p. 301.
60 Ibid p. 303.
61 Williamson, Introspection, pp. 2-3
62 ‘Herbert White,’ ll. 125-126
of the moral person […] to discover the relationship between thismoment of the story of this person and the whole of the story.\textsuperscript{63}

In this closing moment of the poem, White is not only faced with the horror in front of him, but also the horror of all of the memories in the poem that he never completed explicating to the reader. The reader remains unaware concerning the ‘closure’ of each memory, but White is now forced to address these traumatic events that reside in the white space voids that are formed out the Freudian traumatic events that the reader is never exposed to. Bidart uses these voids as a connection between this dramatic monologue and the personal poems that make up the rest of \textit{Golden State}.

\textsuperscript{63} \textit{The Sighted Singer}, p. 218.
II. Shared Histories

An arresting feature of ‘Herbert White’ resides in the actions and language which create a character living in the present world, attempting to ‘feel things make sense.’ In this case, the poem addresses William Carlos Williams’ idea of idea creation through observation. Bidart says in his 1983 interview that:

His [Williams’] work is full of ideas full of ‘arguments with himself.’ [...] The drive to conceptualize, to understand our lives, is as fundamental and inevitable as any other need. So a poem must include it, make it part of its ‘action.’ The ideas that are articulated in the course of the action done ‘solve’ or eradicate or end it, if the drama is true enough or important enough, any more than they do in the action of our lives.

In addition to interpreting ‘Herbert White’ through its Freudian themes, the poem can be intertextually interpreted as part of the overall conversation that takes place in Golden State.

The various connective elements that unite a book are what Neil Fraistat refers to as a book’s contexture. It is common for contemporary books of poetry to lack contexture and are instead organised by chronology or in another manner that causes each poem to be read and interpreted in isolation. These books, writes Fraistat, contain very little in the way of ‘outside meaning.’ That is to say, the poems in many modern books do not contribute to the unity of the collection or infer a sharing of common ground. Golden State, however, forgoes contemporary organisational tendencies in favour of using a highly purposeful and deliberate contexture. The book is divided into three sections, each containing strong thematic and linguistic similarities that link them. Such unity has been labelled as ‘retrospective patterning’ by Barbara Herrnstein Smith and the reader then, ‘perceives that seemingly gratuitous or random events, details and juxtapositions have been selected in accord with certain principles.’ At first glance, Golden State appears to be the type of book with only a

64 ‘Herbert White,’ p. 7, ll. 41.
65 ‘An Interview -- With Mark Halliday (1983),’ p. 239.
loose cohesion linking the poems; the character of Herbert White could not be further away from the earnest authenticity and studious anger of Bidart’s personal poems. But Jeffrey Gray accurately notes Bidart’s and White’s, ‘conflicts, their reflections on those conflicts, and their locutions have much in common.’\textsuperscript{68} The layering of their concurrent opposing and conjoined myth is what drives the unity of \textit{Golden State}.

Herbert White appears in the first and last poems of the book. This provides a strong book-end effect for the book as well as the ‘meaningful juxtapositions, contrasts, and continuities among the poems’ which Fraistat says are a necessary component of books with a strong contexture. According to him, a reader could as easily read the poems backwards as forwards and/or contain what amounts to a prologue and epilogue as in the poetry ‘book-rolls’ of ancient Libyan-Greek poet Callimachus.\textsuperscript{69} \textit{Golden State} is a book of progression; Bidart has said that ‘White’ is the, ‘chaos [that] everything else in the book struggles to get out of’ when he is juxtaposed with Bidart’s personal poems.\textsuperscript{70} Where \textit{Golden State} ends is with the poem ‘Another Life’ in which White appears again and the two poems together serve as the book’s prologue and epilogue.

Fraistat argues that the first poem establishes our ‘initial expectations’ of the book.\textsuperscript{71} It stands to reason, then, that ‘Herbert White,’ as a dramatic monologue, works to distance Bidart’s relationship with his Confessional contemporaries. The majority of poems that follow ‘White,’ however, are largely personal in nature. The impression that develops is that the poet appearing as himself within the text occurs in degrees. Repeated lines and strong themes from ‘Herbert White’ surface in the personal poetry and the instinct is to say that Bidart is wearing a mask in ‘White’ or that Bidart is lending his autobiography to the poem. This is true enough; Bidart’s presence gives a sense of universality to the character that

\textsuperscript{68} “Necessary Thought,”” p.722.
\textsuperscript{69} \textit{Poem and the Book}, p. 7
\textsuperscript{70} ‘An Interview --- With Mark Halliday (1983),’ p. 238.
allows us to, as Faas frames it, ‘recognize psychological features’ present as were present in Victorian monologues which contained insane characters.\(^{72}\) The reader then finds themselves in the unexpected position of having some degree of understanding of a very sick character whose actions would usually be beyond comprehension.

Since ‘White’ precedes the personal poetry of *Golden State,* it is not unreasonable to argue that the myth of ‘White’ also lends itself to the personal poetry so that the book is unified through Bidart’s approach to the revealing of identity. To more thoroughly perceive White’s identity and role as a Post-Confessional figure, it is critical to determine what the poet and character share. One such shared feature involves a similar father figure, as noted in the section one. The relationship between Bidart’s archetype and White, however, can also be interpreted outside of Freudian concepts. Bidart says, ‘I was someone who has grown up obsessed with his parents. The drama of their lives dominated what, at the deepest level, I thought about.’\(^{73}\) And while White represents a killer, he is still a character at the mercy of the traumas that can arise from kinship, which engenders a sense of universality in ‘White.’ This trauma provides the reader a purchase in which to fathom White’s actions and motivations. The relationship, or lack of, that White shares with his mother and father proves to be a trigger of his psychosis. Confronting parental abandonment and relationship role-reversal becomes something too overwhelming for the character of White to withstand and maintain his mental health.

The relationship White has with his father serves as the embodiment of parent-child role reversal, presenting a type of responsibility and emotional weight that White does not seem to be able to cope with. Rather, White serves as the adult, parental figure while his father takes on a child role. In the poem, White drives to the hotel to visit his father:

--- One time I went to see Dad in a motel where he was


\(^{73}\) ‘An Interview --- With Mark Halliday (1983),’ p. 236.
staying with a woman, but she was gone;
you could smell the wine in the air, and he started,
really embarrassing, to cry …

He was still a little drunk,
and asked me to forgive him for
all he hadn’t done ---; but, What the shit?\textsuperscript{74}

White acts as the emotional support for a father abandoned by a female figure, placing
unendurable emotional weight on White. Following the encounter, he has a psychotic break
and the perverse, second personality emerges, which seems intrinsically Freudian. However,
their relationship can also be interpreted through modern psychological models of behaviour.
It is common for those with dissociative disorder to encounter psychotic episodes after
having come in contact with a ‘trigger’ (in this case, taking on the responsibility of parent
when visiting his father).\textsuperscript{75}

Bidart notes that White observes his father and new family through their window:

--- There he was, a kid

six months old on his lap, laughing
and bouncing the kid, happy in his old age
to play papa after years of sleeping around, \textsuperscript{76}

A replica of this moment and line treatment occurs in ‘Golden State.’

--- You believed in neither

be said, “My life is over,”
after you had married Shirley,
twenty-five years younger, with three
small children, the youngest
six months old;\textsuperscript{77}

White’s response to what he observes is to kidnap and murder a victim; the negative effects
of what he witnessed are understood by the extreme nature of his reactions. The speaker in
‘Golden State’ then shifts the scene to one that discusses how the father figure did not take

\textsuperscript{74} ‘Herbert White,’ p. 4, ll. 26-31.
\textsuperscript{75} Mayo Clinic Staff, ‘Dissociative Disorders,’ in Mayo Clinic <
\url{http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/dissociative-disorders/DS00574} > [accessed on January 9, 2013].
\textsuperscript{76} ‘Herbert White,’ p. 6, ll. 86-89.
\textsuperscript{77} ‘Golden State,’ p. 34, VIII, ll. 4-8.
care of himself.\textsuperscript{78} The two poems largely run parallel in terms of what the speakers experience and that both encounter ensuing emotions that they regarded as negative. Both speakers are even capable of intimating and acknowledging these negative feelings. Herbert says of his father:

\begin{quote}
\textit{it twisted me up . . .
To think that what he would give me,
he \textit{wanted} to give them . . .}

\textit{I could have killed the bastard.}\textsuperscript{79}
\end{quote}

In section VI of ‘Golden State,’ Bidart expresses dismay, albeit muted dismay, concerning his relationship with his father:

\begin{quote}
When I was a child,
you didn’t seem to care if I existed.\textsuperscript{80}
\end{quote}

When Bidart labels White as ‘all that I am not,’ he implies that they share a history and, to some extent, emotion; but not in reaction. In turn, the reader recognises and empathises with a despicable character. The reader does not excuse White’s actions due to mental illness, but comes to understand the state of identity in response to exterior and interior factors.

It follows, then, that the manner or preceding history concerning how the emotional weight of White’s father (and perhaps mother) became traumatic enough to cause episodes of psychosis remain absent from the poem. The ‘family history related to my own,’ Bidart said, but this thesis argues that Bidart sparsely and deliberately uses it so that the strongest connection between Bidart and White is inferred in the white space he employs to speak without speaking.\textsuperscript{81} The totality of \textit{Golden State} becomes more than just about the why a person ends up as they do.

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{78} ‘Golden State,’ p. 34, VIII, ll. 11-14. \\
\textsuperscript{79} ‘Herbert White,’ p. 6, ll. 90-91. \\
\textsuperscript{80} p. 31, ll. 17-18. \\
\textsuperscript{81} ‘An Interview --- With Mark Halliday (1983),’ p. 238.
\end{flushright}
Bidart explains that these poems were composed when he was twenty six and trying to uncover ‘what patterns and powers kept me at its [his past’s] mercy (so I could change, and escape. […] I had to dramatize the moments when I felt like I had learned the terrible wisdom of the past (so I could unlearn it).’\textsuperscript{82} \textit{Golden State}, though, is not just about ‘uncovering’ patterns; it is also about the validation and construction of families employed by earlier poets. \textit{Golden State’s} Part Two begins with ‘California Plush’ and immediately descends into the foray of familial drama, connecting it to the physical landscape in which it all unfolds: a shiny veneer covering the ugliness of Los Angeles. The ‘I,’ unlike in ‘Herbert White,’ sinks into the background of the poem, making way for the gravity of the father-figure and his shortcomings. The poem is meant to create balance, achieve ‘reconciliation’ and be less about documenting the traumas of childhood.\textsuperscript{83}

Poets like Lowell, Snodgrass, Plath, Berryman and Sexton tended to write personal poems that depicted dysfunctional families and their resulting, mentally unstable children writes Robert Phillips.\textsuperscript{84} But Williamson observes that even Plath, with her ‘dark halo of myth,’ never quite convinces the reader that her mentally unstable, first-person speakers are not directly related to the poet.\textsuperscript{85} John Rietz furthers this argument when he says that even when events in poems run in opposition to her autobiography, the ‘force’ of the father figure is interpreted as a fact of her volatile yet dominated emotional state.\textsuperscript{86} The same cannot be said of \textit{Golden State}, as the father-figure and Bidart’s way of addressing him does not appear emblematic.

A clearer contrast between poet and construct surfaces in the comparison of Bidart’s relationship to White and Berryman’s relationship to Henry. Jerome Mazzaro says that

\begin{itemize}
  \item Berryman and Henry were the same age, attended and worked at the same universities, and
\end{itemize}

\textsuperscript{82} ‘An Interview --- With Mark Halliday (1983),’ p. 237.
\textsuperscript{83} ‘Herbert White,’’ p. 3, ll. 20.
\textsuperscript{85} Williamson, p. 28.
travelled to the same Asiatic countries.\(^{87}\) With so much in common, one never forgets that when Berryman writes of Henry, he is writing of himself. The same cannot be said of Bidart’s connection to White. Bidart’s use of the dramatic monologue limits what will be revealed about White as the form generally provides a subset of a character’s life instead of an extensive biography. Alan Sinfield refers to what is revealed about a character as a ‘tease.’\(^{88}\) The voice in ‘Herbert White’ that can be connected to Bidart is subtle and one that displays an attachment between poet and creation. White represents a full fictional version of the maddened children present in poems of Bidart’s predecessors: paralysed in the face of memories that possess extreme emotional weight.

‘Herbert White’ also serves as a pathway to Bidart’s autobiography through a corresponding inability to achieve personal movement forward. White feels most balanced and content when digging in the garden of the Twenty-nine Palms Motel or revisiting the dead (that which cannot move forward); in other words, he is moving downward and forming the resting place of his victim. As part of an emotional need, White says ‘I had spent years trying, and at last, finally finished drawing this huge circle…’\(^{89}\) Perhaps, to White, it seems like he is moving forward, finally able to ‘feel things make sense,’ but journeying in a circle causes one to end up right where they started.\(^{90}\)

In the ostensibly autobiographical ‘California Plush,’ Bidart approaches character resolution in a like manner; for all of the speaker’s discussions with his father, no ground is gained towards ‘reconciliation.’\(^{91}\) Instead, the father of ‘California Plush,’ ‘will not change; he does not want to change.’\(^{92}\) ‘California Plush’ has no less than four scenes where the son and father have conversations about how the father has been a failure. What drives the

\(^{88}\) Sinfield, p. 76.
\(^{89}\) ‘Herbert White,’ p. 5, ll. 57-59.
\(^{90}\) Ibid p. 4, ll. 41.
\(^{91}\) Ibid p. 3, ll. 20
\(^{92}\) Ibid p. 7, ll. 214.
speaker, the poet’s voice, is ‘the need for past.’\textsuperscript{93} This is quite different than the Freudian idea of the father-figure being the ‘“the nucleus of all neurosis” (which then suggests that Eliot was correct when arguing the dangers of applying psychological themes directly to the poet).\textsuperscript{94}

Yet Bidart claimed \textit{Golden State} was a means of achieving catharsis even if the characters, such as the father and mother figures, do not. \textsuperscript{95} The idea of catharsis through writing is most associated with Lowell out of the major Confessional writers, but the paradoxical idea of catharsis being temporary or illusive is most associated with Plath, Sexton, and Berryman. In their attempts, Williamson writes, the Confessionals objectified themselves through divulging explicit experiences ‘seems to be committing a kind of suicide. [...] as the poet approaches success in his narcissistic endeavour of self-creation, he begins paradoxically to experience his self as if it were an external object.’ However, Bidart, despite creating an idea of himself as accumulated through his books, does not objectify himself so much as objectify ‘the psychic predicament at the center of [the] poem.’\textsuperscript{96} In doing so, Bidart avoids the narcissism that Pamela Gemin argues was present in the Confessional movement.\textsuperscript{97} Bidart’s poems’ cathartic qualities are a bi-product rather than a locus.

Inasmuch as catharsis is a bi-product of exploring negatively charged memories, then a second factor that connects ‘White’ to the rest of \textit{Golden State} is that of failed reconciliation. Since none is achieved, understanding suffices:

\begin{quote}
Father, such innocence
surely is a kind of \textit{Eden} ---; but
somehow, I can’t regret that we
are banished from each other’s company ---;
in the awareness, the
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{93} ‘Herbert White,’ p. 3, ll. 17.
\textsuperscript{94} Freud, p. 510;
\textsuperscript{95} ‘An Interview --- With Mark Halliday, p. 237.
\textsuperscript{96} Williamson, \textit{Introspection}, pp. 12, 14-15, & 176.
history of our contradictions and violence.\(^98\)

The father is literally dead and reconciliation must be reconciliation with memory. White’s anger is what the rest of *Golden State* works towards resolving.\(^99\) The dilemmas reconciliation with the father and release of anger remain unresolved and it is the poet’s self who provides the most closure as at least one goal has been achieved: the Self ‘had come to learn [...] my patrimony’ but only that it was ‘unknowable; unpossessable.’\(^100\)

In spite of the son serving as a buttress for the father’s emotional wellbeing in most of *Golden State*, the concept of acceptance and how a speaker responds to the lack thereof when they are cast out is of relevance. In ‘Herbert White,’ the father’s ability to become a real father to children that were not his own undoes White’s sense of acceptance; his father no longer needs him. White has been replaced, becomes a ‘bastard,’ and then reaches for the coping mechanism that his mind has developed: disassociation and the act of violence by the ‘other.’ For the speaker of ‘Golden State,’ the ultimate rejection in death is, ‘in many ways | a relief.’\(^101\) The speaker is no longer the object and prop of the father’s ‘helplessness.’\(^102\) The poet’s voice does not turn away from ‘the conditions of my life’ and its limitations.\(^103\) The act of confrontation allows for the poet’s stated troubles to ‘fall, and melt’ while White ultimately ‘cannot stand | what I see.’\(^104\)

While *Golden State* largely addresses, via its Post-Confessional framing of relationships, the complications of patriarchal relationships, the complication of the mother figure is still present although on a smaller scale. Evidence of a matriarchal figure also addresses the theme of rejection; in this case the mother figure of ‘Herbert White’ giving

\(^{99}\) ‘An Interview with Mark Halliday,’ p. 238.
\(^{100}\) ‘Another Life,’ p. 50 ll. 90;
 ‘Golden State,’ p. X, ll. 27.
\(^{102}\) Ibid p. 28, IV, ll. 9.
\(^{103}\) Ibid p. 29, V, ll. 3.
\(^{104}\) ‘Golden State,’ p. 29, V, ll. 16;
birth to other children. In turn, White feels betrayed and asserts a semi-rejection of his mother. White complains, ‘Who would have wanted to stay with Mom?’ Her echoes within the text are evidence that White does not completely disregard her. The feelings of betrayal ultimately stem from an intense jealousy and desire to have the focus of said parents on oneself.

In ‘Confessional,’ the speaker appears glad that the mother experiences a miscarriage and regards the possibility of other progeny as betrayal. White retaliates against the strain of kinship through the act of killing and defiling females who serve as replacements for the objects of his anger. The phrase ‘Spunk of the earth…’ trails and precedes scenes of successful killings and how it made White feel ‘alright.’ The shift in setting indicates that White supplants the echoes of his mother with that of the killings. Bidart can then conduct White as a character that connects the dismissal of his mother through the dismissal of his victims.

The words of the mother carry the same tone that the mother figure in ‘California Plush’ possesses. The base idea of the mother-figure is the past and like ‘Herbert White,’ ‘California Plush’ returns to the mother-figure’s words on the past more than once. There is a ‘returning, as always, to the past,’ and when she utters the phrase again, it is with the revelation that the past is, ‘maiming us, | makes us | fruition | is also | destruction.’ This figure functions as a guiding force, something that is not dismissed. The retaliation against the mother-figures in Bidart’s personal poems is handled differently than in ‘White.’

The mother of the rest of Golden State is disruptive but only insofar as she is a foil of the father figure. She returns periodically, as the prophetic voice in ‘California Plush’ that seeks to destroy the father figure’s consuming inadequacies. In ‘Book of Life,’ the

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105 ‘Herbert White,’ p. 4, ll. 32.
106 ‘Confessional,’ II, ll. 30, 44-45
107 Ibid II, ll. 30, 44-45
108 ‘Herbert White,’ pp. 4-5, ll. 52 & 55.
recollection of the mother’s role in her second marriage is deemed a ‘poverty of history, of awareness.’

She loses her authoritative gravity and eventually becomes reduced to the speaker viewing her with the same bitter pity that the father-figure is given. ‘Illness’ makes her, metaphorically speaking, ‘try to turn brass and tin to gold.’ The opening of ‘Golden State’ conveys her as a commiserating presence to the speaker’s, but again, hers is one of absence to the father; a symbol of what the father had lost. The mother figure is ‘the only woman I’ve ever loved’ despite the poem referencing a number of other women romantically linked to the father. These other women seem to be as easily cast aside as the victims of Herbert White. ‘Golden State’ treats many of these girlfriends as interchangeable and disposable, just ‘another woman’ that would cause the mother-figure to leave the father. The destructive and cyclic relationship of the mother and father instills a lack of kinship that the speaker must reconcile with:

The exacerbation
of this seeming necessity
for connection—;
you and mother taught me
there’s little that’s redemptive or useful
in natural affections . . .

The mother-figure of Golden State, of White and Bidart’s narratives, can no more act as a nurturing force than the father figure can. Together, they represent a barrier that the speakers of the book cannot quite get passed.

The reaction to a lack of nurturing force within the text shows itself in how White’s approaches his oppression and repression psychotically; never solving his issues or becoming ‘cured.’ White is stranded in a cycle created by his history and largely exacerbated by his mental disorder. In spite of his realisation at the end, White will never be able to extricate

110 p. 22, ll. 47.
111 ‘Book of Life,’ ll. 43.
112 Ibid ll. 80.
113 ‘Golden State,’ pp, 25 & 27, I ll. 5-9; III ll. 18.
114 Ibid p. 27, III, ll. 15.
115 Ibid p. 34, VIII, ll. 20-25.
himself from his madness. Bidart says of White, ‘I imagined him as a voice coming from a
circle in Hell […] in the mind of someone for whom the issues in the book were in the
deepest disorder.’ The idea of Hell designed by Dante is one where the Judeo-Christian
god cannot hear those who suffer within it. The abandonment that Herbert White imagines
leads to the choices that condemn him to suffering.

*Golden State* ends with a confrontation between White and Bidart, the two voices
confronting each other’s vulnerabilities. ‘Another Life’ is the culminating poem in *Golden
State*, and one that, according to Smith, reveals ‘the total pattern – the structural principles
which we have been testing.’ The poem gathers the objective history of the late 1960s and
the book’s representation of violence as a response to trauma which has its origins in
personal, subjective history. Bidart returns us to where we left off in ‘Herbert White’ and the
speaker of ‘Another Life’ encounters:

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I saw a young man, almost
my twin, who had written
‘MONSTER’
in awkward lettering with a crayon across
the front of his sweat shirt.
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The 1983 interview with Mark Halliday references White in a near identical manner: as a
‘MONSTER’ and ‘all I was not.’ Bidart says in a 2009 interview that White becomes a
‘dream […] monster figure,’ the last obstacle that the poet must conquer that he may liberate
himself from the obsessions that preoccupied the book.

‘Another Life’ becomes a battle between the two figures, the poet declaring that he is
not White and White insisting he is. Or rather, White is confronting Bidart on the use of
the feint, inextricably linking the characters. Bidart revisits the topic of White where he was
left horrified at the end of his respective poem. Their relationship does not remain stagnant,
as they form an uneasy alliance to watch a parade of the sins. That the poet-as-speaker insists that ‘no part of us the same’ so vehemently provides the sense that the opposite is true, giving the impression that they have developed a perversion of the kind of relationship between Vergil and Dante.\(^\text{122}\) This idea is reinforced by their shared perspective regarding what the parade represents: the traumas instilled by his parents and the ‘disasters they embodied.’\(^\text{123}\) Whichever role they embody, it is White who is left behind in this nightmare landscape and Bidart who emerges from Hell in to a purgative state. Bidart transforms the landscape into a painting, forever suspending White in his violent ‘pattern[s], this cycle.’\(^\text{124}\)

Then all types of history are rendered two dimensional, dismissible abstractions that now lack any movement and thus, the ability to change or influence that which it pushes against. But like ‘Herbert White,’ ‘Another Life’ does not offer replacements for what has been discarded. White’s patterned circumstances provide Bidart both with the means to address and approach Confessional poetry from a different angle. The theatrics of a character most unlike the poet in fact reveals a great deal about him. White presented Bidart with a figure that was both like and entirely unlike himself; who spoke, thought, and behaved differently and yet had experienced a markedly similar past. The result was a commentary on how the well and mentally ill can be more closely related than the mentally adept might be comfortable admitting.

\(^{122}\) ‘Herbert White,’ p. 6, ll. 84.

\(^{123}\) Ibid pp. 5-6, ll. 71 & 85-96.

\(^{124}\) ‘Herbert White,’ pp. 5-6, ll. 59 & 103-106.
III. The Voice of Herbert White: The Use of the Everyday and Prophetic Speech Genres

Bidart’s reciprocal lending of biography was one method of achieving an aspect of White that was universal and therefore understandable in spite of his brutality. The binary nature of White as interpreted through his psychological characteristics and actions were paradoxically unfathomable and pitiable. Bidart reiterates this dualism in his approach to dialect. Jeffrey Gray writes that poetry in the last half of the twentieth century aspired ‘to achieve a homely flatness through plain diction and declarative sentence structure, and where affective locution is duplicitously underplayed in order to produce heightened affect in the reader.’¹²⁵ But Bidart’s language lives in fragments of thought and punctuation that reduce breath to gasps; language that Gray says, ‘[flies] in the face of all poetry-workshop wisdom about being concrete, avoiding abstraction.’¹²⁶ Robert von Hallberg reasons that ‘Bidart is out to find the common ground between the literary and the supermarket culture. He is trying to draw instruction from the sort of story that the tabloid would simply capitalise upon, and for poets the lessons are in the words.’¹²⁷ In the case of ‘Herbert White,’ Bidart employs ‘supermarket culture’ speech as it existed in the 1970s, so that while the reader and White may not share history, they would share the same dialect.

Lawrance Thompson says that using the jargon specific to the time period a poem was written in was a method long practiced by other poets like Wordsworth, Coleridge, Emerson, and Frost.¹²⁸ Frost, specifically, wrote in his notebooks that his poems were held together ‘by the voice’ and ‘a natural and appropriate use of carefully selected phrases and sentences

¹²⁶ Ibid p. 720
possessing the rich and homely idiom speech patterns.¹²⁹ Lawrance Thompson observes that Frost adopted a speech pattern that was ‘down-to-earth,’ ‘unaffected’ and like the type of speech used in rural America.¹³⁰ Bidart draws upon speech pattern cues from predecessors like Frost by adapting and amplifying the rhythms of his characters so they straddle either side of the average American dialect as it existed in the 1960s and 70s.

White slips between what Nick Halpern refers to as the speech of the ‘everyday’ and the ‘prophetic;’ the voices where White is at ease or exhibiting anxiety, and that which says urges change.¹³¹ The speaker’s fluctuation in tone echoes the fluctuation in mental state and a failure to communicate within the scope of a single personality. These ‘tonal juxtapositions’ are, as Bakhtin describes, a ‘transfer of one style from one [speech] genre to another’ which ‘not only alters the way a style sounds, under conditions of a genre unnatural to it but also violates or reviews the given genre.’¹³² The ease in which Bidart slides between speech genres sets him apart from previous poets like Sylvia Plath, who as Christina Britzolakis and Steven Hoffman claim, was known for changing the speech of her poetry based on the character she inhabited. The difference between Bidart and Plath is that Plath’s speech tended to be theatrical in its displays of hostility and victimisation.¹³³ Bidart’s White, whose actions suggest similar psychological implications to Plath’s poetry, avoids Plath’s orotund style of speech through that very use of the ‘down-to-earth.’ A White that spoke like any of Plath’s voices would not have been as psychologically accessible.

To a degree, Bidart’s voice for White was modelled on Lowell’s method of contrasting high and low speech. Halpern writes that Lowell juxtaposed speech genres in


¹³⁰ Thompson, p. 46.

¹³¹ Halpern, pp. 4-5 & 19.

¹³² Ibid, p. 75.

order to increase the complexity of his speakers through tonal friction. ‘Dear Sorrow I’ from *Lizzie and Harriet* features glimpses of Lowell’s early poetic speech and the more conversational tones that surfaced in *Life Studies*:

If I can’t whistle in the dark, why whistle?
One doubts the wisdom of almighty God
casting weak husbands adrift in the hands of a wife.
We need the might diaphragm of Job
to jangle grandly. Pain lives in our free discussion,
life the Carlyles fighting meat from the mouth of their dog.
Luckily the Carlyles couldn’t bear children ---
ours sees me, ‘Genius, unwise, unbrilliant, weird,’”
sees you, ‘Brilliant, unwise, unwrird, nerves.’
Barbaric cheek is needed to stay married . . .
Lizzie, I wake to the hollow of loneliness,
I would cry out *Love, Love*, if I had words:
*we are all here for such a short time,*
*we might as well be good to one another.*

Prophetic diction like ‘doubts,’ ‘wisdom,’ ‘almighty God,’ ‘casting, ‘weak,’ adrift,’ ‘in the hands of’ ‘belong to an anguish we associate with Job, Halpern writes. Lowell contrasts this speech with everyday speech like ‘urbane,’ such as ‘weird,’ ‘cheek,’ and ‘jangle.’ The effect, Halpern adds, is one of comedy and interchangeability between the voices of the prophet, Lowell, and Elizabeth Hardwick. And perhaps one might detect a sense of comedy from the use of ‘spunk’ in the midst of Bidart’s prophetic voice, but unlike Lowell, there is a clear distinction between the prophetic language and the informality of violence in ‘White.’

In proportion to his use of prophetic speech, Bidart opts to ground White in day-to-day speech. It is therefore surprising that when ‘White’ opens with the use of prophetic, Biblical speech from Genesis 1:10; a much loftier sounding speech than that found in grocery store gossip magazines. Bidart pairs the ‘it was good’ with the violence of murder. The poem has started but the reader is not ‘at home’ in it because the line is not at home with itself, it resides in two opposing realms of locution. The same lack of ‘at home,’ writes Halpern, is

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134 Halpern, pp. 51 & 87.
136 Halpern, pp. 87-88.
present in Lowell’s book *History*. The dialect of the second line, however, is uniform and an uneasy ‘settling in’ develops. The prophetic voice is gone and Bidart transmutes the produced friction between each of the halves of line one into something easygoing and relaxed. The ‘at home’ in line two, then, comes not from the disparate tones in words, but through the voice conveying a tone that matches the kind normally associated with White’s violent action. White hits his victim ‘a couple of times, ----,’ and views said actions as ‘funny.’ Bidart uses this quirky, loose language as a pseudo-anaesthetic. White is at ease with himself through most of this fragmented retrospection. A Herbert White without agitation means that he can hold together the illusion that ‘somebody else’ carried out the murder. White is therefore able to envision himself as upstanding and sane. While a reader will not forget that White is responsible, they can at least step-back from the horror and have a buffer between their reading and the ‘sharpness’ and finality of killing. While the method is not the same, the effect is similar that of understatement, which Phillips says was used by the Confessionals to avoid gross sentimentality.

Bidart returns to his unsettling use of the prophetic at a number of other points. ‘*The salt of the earth*’ is drawn from Matthew 5:13: ‘You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled underfoot.’ Bidart references this passage three times. The first instance stands alone, the second accompanies ‘man’s spunk’ and the third builds upon the second instance by adding ‘and grows kids.’ The passage takes on an additive nature and Bidart seems to answer this biblical question. Semen re-salts what was lost and when that

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137 Halpern, pp. 75-76
138 ‘Hebert White,’ p. 3, ll. 2-3.
139 Ibid p. 3, ll. 4.
140 Ibid p. 3, ll. 5.
141 Ibid p. 4, ll. 51.
142 Phillips, pp. 16-17.
143 ‘Herbert White,’ p. 4, ll. 51.
144 Ibid p. 4-5, ll. 52 & 75.
happens, life grows out of it. These actions ‘make it | somehow come alive …’

Bidart is not referring to the resurrection of the dead girls, but something that is dead within White, something that elevates White above being ‘no longer good for anything.’ The pairing of the ‘salt of the earth’ with vulgarity becomes the exact kind of genre combination to make White’s speech come alive. Without it, White can only describe sexual violation of the dead as ‘beautiful’ though really, he doesn’t ‘know how | to say it.’ The profane additions to the verse are quotes from White’s mother, a representation of a force that can grow life in a manner that White cannot. White must pervert an already perverted concept in attempt to mimic what this nurturing force is capable of. He is not the grower of life so much as containing the catalyst, the semen, from which his idea of ‘alive’ can blossom. The informality of ‘spunk’ and the prophetic tone and implications of ‘salt’ endure the type of war with each other that Halpern says exists between the prophetic and everyday speech genres.

A war of tonalities might qualify as a more developed version of the ‘cinematic’ language Dan Chiasson observes in Bidart’s early collegiate poems. Halpern suggests that the cinematic might also be regarded as the ‘everyday’ and seems to agree with Robert Pinsky’s assertion that Bidart is a prime example of a poet whose poetry ‘bases itself so genuinely on the writer’s way of speaking.’ But in ‘Herbert White,’ Bidart adopts another way of speaking. Everyday speech is evident in a voice that is largely not Bidart’s. White’s idea of the normal and everyday also include the profane and abnormally violent, types of language not found in the other poems of Golden State. This type of everyday speech is the

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144 ‘Herbert White,’ p. 4, ll. 49-50.
145 Ibid p. 3, ll. 16-17.
146 Everyday and Prophetic, p. 5.
147 One Kind of Everything, p. 79.
148 Everyday and Prophetic, pp. 19 & 36;
voice that Halpern describes as saying, ‘Blouaugh!’ and ‘groping to bed after a piss.’\footnote{Halpern, p. 19.} An ideal example of this is evident in Eliot’s Tiresias. Like the voice in Lowell’s ‘Dear Sorrow I,’ Tiresias is a combination of characters claims Loy Martin.\footnote{Martin, p. 233.} Within the space of a few lines, Tiresias shifts from the prophetic voice:

\begin{quote}
I Tiresias, though blind, throbbing between two lives,
Old man with wrinkled female breasts, can see
At the violent hour, the evening hour that strives
\end{quote}

to Halpern’s idea of a form of everyday speech genre: ‘Twit twit twit | Jug jug jug jug jug jug.’\footnote{Eliot, ‘The Wasteland,’ p. 71, ll. 203-204.} This combination says Michael Levenson is ‘a deliberate and exaggerated artifice, characterized precisely by book words, periphrases and inversions, and by things that one would never say.’\footnote{Michael H. Levenson, \textit{A Genealogy of Modernism: A Study of English Literary Doctrine 1908-1922}, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), p. 156.} Bidart’s contrast between prophetic and everyday is less extravagant; the voices in ‘White’ are always believable. If there is artifice, it resides in the neurosis of White, so extreme and complex that such a person might never exist. This construct, for different reasons, remains just as ‘cinematic’ as Tiresias, though both poets employ different methods to arrive in a similar situation.

The casual tone paired with the violent actions creates the impression of one sitting in a movie theatre watching a physical comedy with White. The victim’s demise can be laughed at; her death appearing as a clownish misfortune. The cinematic language ceases its comedic tone and takes on a more horror movie quality when White exchanges one type of violence for another: physical violence for sexual violence. We revisit the word ‘hit’ but this time, it is paired with ‘screwed,’ a chanted line that creates a trailing-off effect without the use of
ellipsis. This heightens the impersonality behind dismissal of the victim by the singled out word ‘buried.’ The language treats the victim as a camera might: a prop for the perpetrator.

What makes White more accessible than Tiresias or Lowell’s speaker in ‘Dear Sorrow I’ is the more normative use of contemporary, everyday dialect. Eliot, even in his most risqué, is prone to higher diction than Bidart:


Bidart, instead, applies vulgarity to reflect White’s merciless nature and is also indicative of periods when White’s façade gives way. The first use of ‘shit’ is used to dismiss and devalue one of White’s victims where he is:


White is heavily focused on the leaves, something shared between perpetrator and victim. ‘Shitty’ heightens the connection, the sense of ‘leaves’ - a notably unexciting word. Bidart does here what Halpern argues many of his predecessors did with their work: ‘make readers feel that lowered voices are more exciting than elevated voices’ and use ‘subversive humor.’ Such humour becomes evident when White references his mother and half-siblings:


‘What the shit’ serves as a comical exclamation and interruption of the description of his parents’ divorce. In this scene, White’s father is the broken one and White attempts to soothe

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154 ‘Herbert White,’ p. 4, ll. 36-39.
156 ‘Herbert White,’ p. 3, ll. 24-25.
157 Halpern, p. 19.
158 ‘Herbert White,’ p. 4, ll. 31-33.
him. Bidart uses this interruption to call attention to an unnatural scene: the parents needing emotional support from the child instead of the other way around. Thus, Bidart uses a fictional family drama to represent how a person with White’s ascribed diagnosis might originate: in the conflicting drives and needs between a parent and child.

Profanity is also a way to dismiss the victim. White’s victims are just as ‘ordinary,’ as unimportant, as the ‘shitty’ leaves they are juxtaposed against. The victim in Bidart’s ‘The Book of Life’ is treated with equal contempt by the character, Snake:

‘Niggers, you know they’re different from us, they go mad when they make love, we white men have to watch out or women won’t have anything to do with us.’

(pause) “Back in McKinney, there’s a spot on the pavement where they caught a nigger who’d raped a white woman, right there they tied him down, poured gasoline on him, and lit him afire. --- You can still see the mark.”

The profane use of ‘nigger’ might have been excused as the everyday speech in past times if not for the lack of consideration towards the victim. The character’s focus is not on the victim, or even the possible rape victim, but ultimately on the mark left by violence. The effect of telling this story is not one of anxiety or madness, but ‘illumination.’

Snake feels ‘justified’ in believing that both victims needed to be punished for turning upon the white man. This is a callousness, like the callousness of Snake’s hands, that White only partially maintains. White must pretend that someone else committed murder to maintain mental balance.

But the affront to White that causes him to murder is not unlike the affront to the white man that Snake perceives. White feels slighted by his father through the pressure of being

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160 Ibid ll. 27.
161 ‘Book of Life,’ ll. 28; ‘Herbert White,’ ll. 23, 61, & 116.
leaned upon and abandoned by his father. This scene causes a psychotic break in White, who picks up a girl and after he kills her, he ‘screwed, and screwed, and screwed, and screwed…’. This pushes the vividness of the cinematic and everyday language to an excess. White’s speech is the cinematic and everyday with edginess, a joining of high and low speeches. White’s casualness can be somewhat likened to speech rhythms employed by poets like Frost. Lawrance Thompson observes in Frost’s work: ‘the very limitations of a small vocabulary and of expressiveness in folk speech force the speaker, into direct statements shaded by those tones of voice which convey peculiar intensity of emotion and thought.’ This is most evident in the slang Bidart uses like ‘old lady’ and ‘screwed.’

However, while Frost’s language remains ‘deliberately restrained and relaxed,’ Bidart engages ‘White’ with the crude. The language used, said Bidart in a 1999 interview:

> has got to be a little shocking in this context and that’s central. A more decorous word would not suggest the joining of high and low, that we’re creatures who are interested both in crotches and harmonies. Language has to embody the fact that a smooth and harmonious set of orders does not lead from one to the other. I think probably the only longish poem I have written that is almost wholly in the demotic is ‘Hebert White.’ I carried that as far as I could go.

The product, then, is the type of person who can behave in society as a man with an ‘old lady and kids,’ but by himself, instinctually behave like the kind of man that deserves to ‘fry.’ Bidart’s use of pulling together demotic language into a single poem might also be seen in the development of the Confessionals; namely, the movement of language from the imagination to the personal. However, Bidart’s framing of White through disparate speech genres is subtler than the Confessionals. White’s actions are indeed shocking, and without Bidart’s syntactical approach, ‘White’ would truly read like a tabloid magazine of the ‘supermarket

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162 ‘Herbert White,’ p. 4, ll. 37.
163 Lawrance Thompson, p. 47.
164 ‘Herbert White,’ pp. 3–4, ll. 7 & 36.
165 Lawrance Thompson, p. 48.
167 ‘Herbert White,’ pp. 3 & 7, ll. 7 & 124.
culture.' What Bidart does with diction has a two-fold effect. Firstly, the reader is provided with yet another element that universalises White in spite of his unique behaviour. Secondly, the everyday and prophetic speech genres, working for and against each other, produce a kind of dialectical tension. Inside ‘this tension lies flexibility’ says Halpern. Everyday poems and prophetic poems are at odds with each other how to establish poetic space and what type of message they want to convey. ‘White’ is much the same, except that the ‘high and low’ genres are contained within the same space. White is suspended in an untenable mental space where his halves are a threat to each other. Halpern speaks of speech genres as based on the intent of the poet or an anthropomorphised poem; these types of speech are not ‘harmonious,’ and feel as if the other will overwhelm them. Using both in types of utterance in a poem prefigures White’s breakdown, counterpointing him against the interrogative nature of *Golden State*.

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169 pp. 6 & 22.
170 Ibid pp. 4-5.
IV. A Novel Approach to Typography: Bidart’s Form as a Reflection of Psychological Disturbance

Bidart composed ‘Herbert White’ as a collection of memories in a dramatic monologue, professedly disordered as the main character himself. Erratic stanza indentions, italics, capitalisation, and punctuation create a kind of poem that Dan Chiasson calls ‘a material scar on the page.’ This serves as an embodiment of the character’s mental scars on a magnified level, providing access to a character that might otherwise be inaccessible. Bidart uses the visible organisation of a poem to reveal the unseen and unsaid of a character. He says of his unorthodox structuring:

As the voice moves through what it is talking about – trying to lay out, acknowledge, organize ‘the material’ – it needs dependent clauses, interjections, unfinished phrases, sometimes whole sentences in apposition. The only way I can sufficiently articulate this movement, express the relative weight and importance of the parts of the sentence – so that the reader knows where he or she is and the ‘weight’ the speaker is placing on the various elements that are being laid out – is punctuation. […] Punctuation allows me to ‘lay out’ the bones of a sentence visually, spatially, so that the reader can see the pauses, emphases, urgencies, and languors in the voice.

‘Herbert White,’ Bidart not only uses punctuation to make the character’s voice clear, but also to display what is said by what is not being said: Herbert White’s inability to confront memories that reveal reality and responsibility. The reluctance to confront one’s traumas is at odds with Bidart and the Confessional poets’ prosody, where ‘The need for the past’ is a compelling feature. What is different between Bidart and his contemporaries is that he heavily manipulates the typography of his work so that the speakers exhibit intense emotion through voice (which includes emotions surrounding the acceptance and rejection of confrontation). The speech of Bidart’s mentally ill characters, as directed by typography,

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171 Chiasson, p. 82.
174 ‘California Plus,’ p. 11, ll. 17; Phillips, p. 16-17.
sound more natural than the displays of illness Where the Confessional poets generally right-aligned their poetry and used traditional punctuation, Bidart makes copious use of white space and unique punctuation combinations.

In ‘White,’ punctuation is used to end speech and cease the thoughts of the speaker before self-realisation and reflection can materialise. White does not want to realise his full identity. When faced with remembering his involvement in the murder and rape of a girl, White says:

and saw a little girl ---
who I picked up, hit on the head, and
screwed, and screwed, and screwed, and screwed, then
buried,
in the garden of the motel …

---You see, ever since I was a kid I wanted […] 175

Bidart impassively recounts this grisly scene and swiftly redirects the attention to another memory further back in White’s history. Had Bidart continued with the scene after ‘garden of the motel,’ White would have been forced to admit responsibility for the violent act. Repeated use of punctuation to repel the speaker away from what he does not want to know creates insulated packets of uneasy memories.

Within these memory packets are what we might consider disordered collections of stanzas or stanza ‘families.’ These families share a plot and tend to be surrounded by distinctive amounts of white space and punctuation designed to demarcate grand pauses. Bidart opts to separate said stanza families with ellipsis marks. These marks not only indicate an ending to a story, but also indicate that White has reached an emotional threshold within the narrative:

--- Once on the farm, when I was a kid,
I was screwing a goat; and the rope around his neck
when he tried to get away
pulled tight;--- and just when I came,
he died . . .

175 ‘Herbert White,’ p. 4, ll. 35-40.
I came back the next day; jacked off over his body; but it didn’t do any good. . . .

Mom once said:
‘Man’s spunk is the salt of the earth, and grows kids.’

These types of stanzas are what Claudia Rankine would refer to as fragmentation:

The ruptured syntax and the fragmented text are used to suggest and perhaps reflect, the process by which existence (being in time) is enacted – which is to say, the text engages in irruption, interruptions, and discontinuities in order to approach the initial silence of being.

In reference to ‘White,’ when an emotional threshold is reached, Bidart severs White’s through the use of ellipsis, fragmenting White’s commentary or recollection.

As ‘Herbert White’ is a dramatic monologue, it would be beneficial to take a brief look at how fragmentation was addressed in a traditional dramatic monologue that addressed the same subject. Robert Fast refers to fragmentation within the dramatic monologue as ‘digressions’ and they were used by the Victorians as a way to ‘actualize the process of memory.’ He notes such poems as Browning’s ‘Count Gismond’ and Buchanan’s ‘Nell’ exhibited this method, but one of the most notable of poems to use it was Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s ‘A Last Confession,’ whose speaker, like Herbert White, is guilty of a murder he does not wish to admit to. Rossetti said that the poem aimed to convey the ‘simple agony of memory’ and the speaker digresses often as a resistance to confession. Eventually, the speaker says to his father:

The day was one red blindness; till it seemed,
Within the whirling brain’s eclipse, that she
Or I or all things bled or burned to death.
And then I found her laid against my feet
And knew that I had stabbed her, and saw still
Her look in falling.

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176 ‘Herbert White,’ p. 5, ll. 67-75.
178 qtd. in Faas, pp. 158;
179 Ibid p. 158.
The speaker’s digressions are purposeful and expose his ‘other obsessions such as the memory of the victim’s long hair.’\(^\text{181}\) One reason for the difference is that where Rossetti’s speaker is aware but reluctant to admit guilt, White’s memory and illness work against him so that he cannot. Bidart’s fragmentation is meant to compel the mentally ill White away from revelation where Rossetti’s speaker seeks to prolong having to confess to his father. Punctuation in ‘White’ tends to serve as a blockade against revelation where normal punctuation, like simplistic comma usage, would fail to produce the necessary aural rhythms to convey everyday speech as uttered by a psychopath. ‘A Last Confession,’ by comparison, uses the theme of guilt to suppress the speaker’s admission rather than typography.

The voice of the rest of *Golden State* uses ellipsis and syntactical fragmentation in a more conventional manner: to indicate pause for thought. Bidart resists using the marks as an indication of overwhelming emotion, preferring to be more confrontational with dramatic expressions of emotion. ‘Self Portrait, 1969,’ the poem immediately following ‘Herbert White,’ demonstrates increased transparency in regards to negative emotions:

> He’s *still* young ---; but looks younger ---
> or does he? . . . In the eyes and cheeks, tonight,
> turning in the mirror, he saw his mother, ---
> puffy; angry; bewildered . . . Many nights
> now, when he stares there, he gets angry: ---
> something *unfulfilled* there, something dead
> to what he once thought he surely could be ---\(^\text{182}\)

‘Self-Portrait’ does not use abnormal punctuation, uneven lineation or erratic indentations to break up emotion implied by action, as does ‘Herbert White.’ ‘Self Portrait’ is more cerebral and there is a decisive lack of action. ‘Herbert White’ and its treatment of neurosis often extend into its use of white space, into the poem’s silences. The poems operate as inverses of each other; contrasting methods to approaching negative, volatile emotions.

As with his use of ellipsis, Bidart also used the dash to signal fragmentation; however, the dash causes fragmentation with a scene instead of between scenes. The onset of ‘White’

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\(^{181}\) Faas, pp. 158-159.

thrusts the speaker directly into madness by way of everyday speech, plot, and punctuation working to produce these digressions. The first use of the dash is combined with commas to create a silence around an aside that is longer than an aside set off with commas alone:

“When I hit her on the head, it was good,
and then I did it to her a couple of times, ---
but it was funny, --- afterwards.”

The heightened emphasis on death and murder as comedy infuses White’s character with informal speech and the absurdity of his reality. This notion is confirmed in the next aside created by dashes: ‘--- It sounds crazy, but I tell you | sometimes it was beautiful---;’ Silence precedes the start of this line, and also stanza, and confirms the dichotomy of the poem: the halves of Herbert White; ordinary husband and son as one persona and the psychopathic villain as the other. The body these halves inhabit struggles to make itself understood.

Another example of dash usage occurs toward the end of the poem when White’s reality starts to unravel. Bidart positions White in his truck, fighting with himself over his desire to abduct a girl:

I saw her coming out of the movies
saw she was alone, and
kept circling the blocks as she walked along them,
saying, “You’re going to leave her alone.’
‘You’re going to leave her alone.’

An abrupt combination of stanza space and dash preceding the right aligned text finds White in the woods:

---The woods were scary!

The temporality of the poem becomes elusive, the white space and dash serving as a vessel where unknown time and action are hidden. In lines one hundred six and one hundred seven,

183 'Herbert White,' p. 3, ll. 1-3.
184 Ibid ll. 15-16.
185 Ibid p. 6, ll. 101-105.
186 Ibid p. 6, ll. 106.
White makes mention of the soil eroding to the point that the skull of a victim becomes visible. With the lines ‘you saw more and more | of the skull show through,’ Bidart is signalling that the poem has made temporal progression but the exact ‘when’ is unclear. The victim has changed from walking down the sidewalk to bone, if indeed the skeleton is the same person. Bidart then returns to using the dash to create a concrete, descriptive aside, of the skeleton only to return to using the dash to advance time again: ‘and the buds, ---erect like nipples. . .’. Bidart described the poem as ‘chaos,’ and in this sense, the plural nature of the use of the dash, unlike the consistent use of ellipsis marks (up to this point), augments the sense of urgency and impending destruction of the reality that White faces.

Then the poem is propelled forward to an undisclosed point in time where ‘nothing worked,’ signalling an impending deviation within the pattern of White’s psychosis. Rather than undergo dissociation where a second personality overrides his responsible, everyday persona, ‘nothing worked’ becomes the promise of a coherent breakdown where the speaker cannot escape the weight of his actions. Bidart follows ‘nothing worked’ with ellipsis marks, as if the pattern of escaping what the speaker does not wish to realise is still trying to assert itself. He uses them to separate descriptive elements in the same way that he had previously used dashes. Punctuation usurps the function of ‘nothing’ where all of White’s lost memories reside; they are desultory as White’s current ability to mentally withdraw from his surroundings and actions. Bidart buries the ‘nothing’ between white space and ellipsis marks, suggesting that another key feature to pacing and voice production is the use of white space.

At the end of ‘White,’ Bidart is using larger spaces between lines to slow the pace down. A heavy sense of dread enfolds White and ‘couldn’t,’ in line one-hundred fourteen, is

\[\text{158}\]

\[\text{187} \text{ ‘Herbert White,’ p. 7, ll. 109}\]

\[\text{188} \text{ Ibid p. 7, ll. 111}\]
repeated and emphasised as if the word could stop realisation now that ‘nothing’ has been obliterated. The meaning of ‘couldn’t’ is unclear, making time equally unstable.

A conflict arises here between reading with respect to the stanza and reading with respect to punctuation. Given that Bidart divides the sentence into two stanzas, one cannot necessarily trust in the authority of the period. If ‘couldn’t’ is paired off with just the two preceding lines that join it in the stanza, then ‘couldn’t’ indicates that White cannot bear to realise what he has done. If paired off with the next stanza, ‘couldn’t’ means that dissociating has failed. Given the organisation of the stanzas, it could be argued that a double-meaning of ‘couldn’t’ is the desired interpretation. The concept of ‘the double’ is already rampant within the poem; double meanings of words created through physical arrangement are equally plausible. And yet, without Bidart’s astute manipulation of white space, where meaning is found in silence, much of White’s dualism in respect to diction would be lost.

Of silence, Allen Grossman writes, ‘Some of the meanings of silence are: noise, darkness, possibility, death, ‘woman,’ chaos, ineffability, unconscious life, sin, the curse of God.’ Many of these interpretations apply to the white space in this poem: Bidart avoids the noise of speech needed to convey a memory that White is uncomfortable with, the darkness of the woods and time of day in which White operates, the possibility that White committed murders during a time when he has convinced himself that he has not contributed to death of the victims and the chaos of his reality, etc. White cannot cope with reality while being aware of memories that cause anxiety or are triggers for dissociation.

Yet, he cannot linger in silence either. The use of silence and white space in between an ellipsis and the next memory serves to alleviate tension that builds during the act of recollection. Bidart uses the space as a veritable ‘reset’ button:

standing above her there,

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in those ordinary, shitty leaves . . .

--One time, I went to see Dad in a motel where he was
staying with a woman; but she was gone

The need White experiences is evident in the acts he remembers (i.e. masturbation) and
Bidart draws attention to the position of the corpse in the white space between lines twenty-
four and twenty-five. It is just ‘there’ and yet the gravity imposed by the white space
indicates the body is something White briefly finds beautiful. The ‘ordinary, shitty leaves’
bring White closer to self-revelation as indicated by the manner in which Bidart follows it
with ellipsis marks.

The final section of poem is a tumble of single lines that reflect Grossman’s position
that ‘the line as lineament is the countenance of the person.’ Uniform alignment sheds
itself from the spine of the poem; White has finally come undone:

I tried, and tried, but there was just me there,
And her, and the sharp trees
Saying, ‘That’s you standing there.

You’re . . .

just you.’

I hope I fry.

---Hell came when I saw

MYSELF . . .

and couldn’t stand

what I see . . .

The ellipsis marks in lines one hundred twenty and one hundred twenty-four are like pregnant
pauses for air as Bidart seems to make White review what he really is. They are preceded by
‘you’re’ and ‘MYSELF,’ words that direct attention outward and then inward in relation to

191 ‘Herbert White,’ pp. 3-4, ll. 24-27.
192 Ibid. ll. 21 & 24.
the speaker and yet, they represent the same being. White becomes aware of his other and the two fuse into a single, conscious entity ending with the final use of ellipsis at the poem’s end.

The one-line stanza ‘I hope I fry’ is positioned in the centre of this fusing and is the only perfectly centred line in the entirety of the poem. The white space around this proclamation is filled with what doesn’t need to be said, or what John Frederick Nims calls the ‘withheld image.’ The reader has already witnessed what White was unconscious of. The special treatment of the line’s position replaces White’s earlier desire: ‘to feel things make sense.’ If the centring of the line is unique within the confines of the rest of the poem, the punctuation is not. The period offers no such movement of consciousness or trains of thought that occur. Bidart uses a period which leaves no room for equivocation; ‘I hope I fry’ is a firm proclamation and self-admission of guilt that will not offer solace or escape. Bidart’s use of typography not only manipulates the way that White delivers his argument, but it also is indicative of fragmentation of self and a mind in disarray without speech being present.

Initial readings of Golden State appear to reflect the unevenness of white space observed in many of Ezra Pound’s poems and it is for this reason that this thesis evaluates Pound and Bidart’s lineation in respect to each other. Both poets have written collections which contain many poems shaped as jagged renderings of voice and image. Pound’s dramatic monologue ‘Homage to Sextus Propertius’ contains such unpredictable spatial turns. Ron Thomas notes that the poem is a satire which ‘superimpos[es] Propertius living in

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197 ‘Herbert White,’ p. 4, ll. 41.
198 Ibid ll. 32
199 ‘Interview with Mark Halliday,’ pp. 233 & 237.
Augustan Rome with [Pound] living in Georgian London’ and is meant to convey a sense of ‘poetic anxiety’:

Analyists will continue to record Roman reputations,
Celebrities from the Trans-Caucasus will belaud Roman celebrities
And expound the distensions of Empire,

But for something to read in normal circumstances?
For a few pages brought down from the forked hill unsullied?
I ask a wreath which will not crush my head.
And there is no hurry about it;
I shall have, doubtless, a boom after my funeral,
Seeing that long standing increases all things regardless of quality.

And who would have known the towers pulled down by a deal-wood horse;
Or of Achilles with staying waters by Simois
Or of Hector spattering wheel-rims,

Pound opts to organize stanzas as if they were a thing and, writes Loy Martin, is ‘little concerned with spatial or temporal continuities beyond the boundaries of the entity.’ It is important to note that when Pound composed this and other dramatic monologues, he was not yet using his ‘ideogrammic method.’ ‘Homage’ was written in a style that preceded the ideogrammic method, but was more ‘ironic’ and ‘concise’ than his dramatic monologues from a decade earlier. One might say ‘Homage’ was Pound’s ‘in-between’ phase as John Steven Childs and Peter Th. M.G. Liebregts note that ‘Homage’ was written between narrative-driven, Browningeque monologues like ‘An Idyll for Glaucus’ and the dense, coded nature of his Cantos.

While each image in this excerpt inhabits its own line, there are two, right-aligned commentarial asides that augment the importance of the image in the preceding line;

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203 Cuddon, pp. 411 & 415.
modifiers not used in Pound’s later work which condensed and aimed, as Childs claims, ‘to use absolutely no word that [did] not contribute to the presentation.’

Pound has said that he organized each sub-image in spatial relation to an overarching image or ‘complex in an instant of time’ whereas Bidart’s treatment of an image aims to indicate its effect on temporally vague periods of time. So while Bidart’s *Golden State* appears to appropriate the irregular spatial form of Pound’s ‘Homage,’ Pound’s content and style concentrated on image over referential narrative and the absence of total temporal awareness.

Unlike ‘Homage,’ the treatment of the image in ‘Herbert White’ does not always collate images into one per line:

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I saw her coming out of the movies,
saw she was alone, and
kept circling the blocks as she walked along them,
saying, ‘You’re going to leave her alone.’
‘You’re going to leave her alone.’
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The walking girl and driving White share space in line one-hundred three, and the image is then comprised of two interdependent sub-images. Though the image in ‘Herbert White’ can be interpreted to some degree through the lens of what Thomas implies is Pound’s unfinished Imagist theory, it must be argued that Bidart modifies his images in ways that Pound, even in his mid-career, would deem excessive. The use of repeated phrases and their physical placement in regards to the image they reference augments the dramatics of these images more so than Pound’s asides. These phrases are a type of element that redirects Bidart’s poetry away from Imagism (Vorticism) and toward prosody that is not only influenced by clear, horrific image, but also through the spoken, rather than lyrical. This compounds how that image and the relationship between all of the images are perceived. The stratification of

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205 Childs, p. 77.
207 ‘Herbert White,’ p. 6, ll. 101-105.
208 Thomas, p. 57.
images, which are then juxtaposed, allow for the perception of White’s changing mental state. The addition of modifiers like ‘screwed, and screwed, and screwed, and screwed’ provides greater access into the psychology of the poem.

That is not to claim that psychology was unimportant to Pound. One component of his initial design of Imagism, said Pound, was that the poet should serve as ‘the advance guard of the psychologist on the watch for new emotions’ and that the ‘emotional force gives the image.’\(^{209}\) But Pound’s method, Michael Levenson writes, created an ambiguity: ‘the desire for the autonomy of form and the claim that the root source and justification for art is individual expression.’ He adds that ‘pure form was the goal; individual will was its underpinning.’\(^{210}\) Bidart, however, positions psychological signifiers not as asides, or secondary features, but as a mode comparable to the importance of spatial and syntactical arrangements.

What the two poets do share, however, is an affinity for temporal abstraction. Chronology, in the works of both poets, is not static or always known. In ‘Homage,’ the sections of the poem ‘progress linearly from one section to the next.’\(^{211}\) But Pound’s work as a whole is regarded as ‘inconsistent, even incoherent.’\(^ {212}\) His *Cantos* are united through devices linking lines to lines and paragraphs to paragraphs, not through historical and narrative referentiality.\(^ {213}\) While not nearly as fragmented, the poems in *Golden State* often use time loosely. In ‘Herbert White,’ Bidart uses ellipsis as a separating element to create moments ungrounded from time. There are only abstract time markers that place White in a ‘when’ and the temporal relationship between sections is tenuous. It is unclear if the victim from line one is the same as the victim from line one-hundred one. It is also unclear as to how much time passes after the last description of murder and White’s mental revelation in the

\(^{209}\) qtd. in Levenson, p. 134.  
\(^{210}\) Ibid p. 134-135.  
\(^{211}\) Thomas, p. 57.  
\(^{212}\) Levenson, p. 37  
\(^{213}\) Ibid pp. 13 & 15.
woods. But the distinction is made between White as a child and White as an adult, and thus, there is an abstruse sense time participating in White’s fragmented narrative.

Like ‘White,’ ‘California Plush’ and ‘Golden State’ loosely use temporality and chronology as contributors to narrative. In fact, the narratives themselves are very loose if present at all. The latter two poems indulge more in ruminations, visual and aural memories tied together by the psychological intensity experienced by the speaker, than through completed anecdotes. Each poem, however, is brought about in its own space, and is assigned an abstract sense of time if Golden State is read as a psychological process, something impossible in Pound’s work. Bidart has said that each poem represents a different position in Bidart’s cathartic process. Golden State, however, echoes the chronological vagueness of poems like ‘Herbert White’ and ‘California Plush.’ This temporal vagueness in Golden State serves as a unifying factor in the book.

Moments that seem to occur to the speaker in that instant instead of extensive, linear plot development, serve as a rejection of the ‘process’ Lowell had employed in the chronological events documented in Life Studies. Bidart has said that looking at life at twenty-six was much different to Lowell looking at his life at forty and that the ‘eloquent, brilliantly concrete world of Life Studies’ was not available to him. M.L. Rosenthal writes that Life Studies is tightly organized so that the poet clearly ‘finds himself’ in the book’s connected narrative. Golden State inhabits a more cerebral space than Lowell; completed images and narratives partially related to the process are sacrificed for the fragments of said narrative that are imperative to referentiality. Lowell’s ‘saturation in detail’ was a means of ‘avoiding sentimentality’ in comparison to Bidart’s use of spatial and grammatical

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214 ll. 104-105.
215 ‘Interview with Mark Halliday,’ pp. 236-238.
fragmentation to effort to avoid the same fault. ‘California Plush’ best expresses Bidart opted to rely on a disjointed presentation of events:

the room suddenly seemed to me
not uninteresting at all:
they were the same. Every plate and chair
had its congruence with
all the choices creating
these people, created
by them --- by me.\textsuperscript{218}

\textit{Golden State} leaves out many incidents that are common examples of familial anxiety because they already existed in a social and literary construct. Therefore, they exist in the white spaces and are implicitly understood. Confessional poets like Lowell and Plath had already established the traumas of family in the preceding generation. Had Bidart followed the same path and increased the use of temporality and event cohesion, his form would have been unnecessarily burdensome and subject matter possibly platitudinous. The omission of commonplace family drama is essential to keeping ‘Herbert White’ from descending into melodrama. Lack of a linear biography feeds into what we imagine occurring in the white space, and that makes the concept of White scarier.

However, it is possible for madness to be conveyed formally, without melodrama, as in the dramatic monologues of Browning, Tennyson, and Lowell. The last dramatic monologue of \textit{Life Studies}, ‘A Mad Negro Soldier Confined at Munich’ is considered by Rosenthal to be Lowell’s most dramatic and ‘savage’ piece of his career. It funnels the ‘madness of society to its embodiment in one man’\textsuperscript{219}:

Oh mama, mama, like a trolley-pole
sparking at contact, her electric shock ---
the power-house! . . . The doctor calls our roll ---
no knives, no forks. We file before the clock,

\textsuperscript{218} pp. 15-16, ll. 125-131.
\textsuperscript{219} Rosenthal, pp. 32-33.
and fancy minnows, slaves of habit, shoot
like starlight through their air-conditioned bowl.
It’s time for feeding. Each subnormal boot-
black heart is pulsing to its ant-egg dole. 220

While a manic, ‘high-speed’ poem, Rosenthal argues that ‘A Mad Negro’ is still bound within organized stanzas, rhyme scheme, and narrative that were the norm in the 1950s and 60s. 221 But Bidart uses an unpredictable typography as a method to transcend Lowell’s formal dramatics, which would lessen the cinematic, horror-movie tension that the poem gravitates toward. Bidart orders the events of ‘White’ in a disordered fashion to aid in the portrayal of White as irrevocably insane and build towards an inescapable climax.

The after-effect of this climax is observed in ‘Another Life,’ the last poem of Golden State, whose spatial organization is more uneven than any other poem in the book. However, where ‘Herbert White’ is in the voice of White, ‘Another Life’ is Bidart’s poetic voice:

I saw a young man, almost
my twin, who had written
‘MONSTER’
in awkward lettering with a crayon across
the front of his sweat shirt.

He was gnawing on his arm,
in rage and anger gouging up
pieces of flesh —— 222

The speed of ‘Another Life’ is slower than both ‘White’ and Lowell’s ‘A Mad Negro’ as it takes longer to navigate Bidart’s typography. ‘MONSTER,’ in particular, holds much gravity and emphasis; its physical isolation and size in comparison to the rest of the text encourage readers to be drawn back to this word again and again. Does the slower pace of ‘Another Life’ cause White to seem more disturbed than in ‘Herbert White’? In ‘Herbert White,’ White exhibits violence only towards others, while ‘Another Life,’ he only exhibits violence

221 Rosenthal, p. 63.
222 Bidart, ‘Another Life,’ p. 48, ll. 37-44.
towards himself. Bidart calls attention to this by designating ‘gnawing on his arm’ as the only right-aligned line that describes White. Such a finding complements Bidart’s assertion that White represents the ‘chaos [that] everything else in the book struggles to get out of;’ chaos that is multidirectional.223 The result is Bidart’s changeable typography and points-of-view provide more avenues to accessing a killer’s mind. When in the midst of his breakdown White speaks in short bursts, rather than Lowell’s sustained mania in ‘A Mad Negro.’

‘Herbert White’ offers no end solution as the speaker’s process, the path to realisation, is coerced. This is the opposite of the intent of Golden State, and thus, Bidart has made a tactical choice in opening his book with a poem representational of everything the book argues against. ‘Herbert White’ is a partition, a barrier for the reader, and so the failure and dissolution of White at the end of the poem is, in respect to form and symbolic importance to the book, is fundamental.

‘Herbert White’ establishes an emotional state that Bidart must redirect his energies from if he is to understand the history embedded in Golden State and if he is to ‘reconcile’ himself with it.224 ‘Herbert White’ offers no cultural or historical references and very little is revealed about the literary and historical contexts elsewhere in Golden State. ‘California Plush’ opens Part II and he positions his heritage not amongst the Greeks and Romans like Lowell and Pound, but in the seedy capital of contemporary America’s pop-culture:

The only thing I miss about Los Angeles

is the Hollywood Freeway at midnight, windows down and radio blaring
bearing right into the center of the city, the Capitol Tower
on the right, and beyond it, Hollywood Boulevard blazing

--- pimps, surplus stores, footprints of stars

--- descending through the city
fast as the law would allow.225

The spatial and grammatical styles are much the same as in ‘Herbert White.’ But Bidart removes the ‘I’ after the first line and omits any punctuation until the third stanza as a means of placing emphasis on the setting as an entity. The dashes of lines seven and eight are indicators of unique things and process; arriving in underbelly of what is supposed to be the most glamorous of places in America and then going further, ‘descending.’ It is only after treating his subject matter in this new way that Bidart addresses a sense of literary history.

Where Lowell opens Life Studies by establishing his literary history, Golden State closes with it. Part III opens with a translation of Vergil’s The Aeneid. Vergil’s name alone is an indication of process, of change, as the guide of Dante in La Divina Commedia. Thirty-six lines long, ‘Vergil Aeneid 1. 1-33’ is one stanza containing only four indented lines. Sentences are long and unfragmented; lines enjambed, unmetred and unrhymed; and the dialect is formal and poetic. It is unlike any other poem in Golden State. After the fragmented dramas of Parts I and II, ‘Vergil’ serves the same function as Bidart’s odd indentions or punctuation combinations: it compels the reader to slow their pace and resets the book’s pitch: ‘Muse, make me mindful of the causes, load upon me | knowledge of her sorrows.’

This is what Golden State has accomplished up to this point. What happens after this poem is, ‘Within her mind the resistless past returned:’ Each subsequent poem becomes more and more alike in form to those in the previous parts until the book’s ending. The repeated process of constructing and deconstructing one’s past and psychology through form seems as important to the contexture of Golden State as the thematic and biographical elements.

The return to Herbert White, as a reconstructed figure at the end of Golden State, is a recognition and reification of the madness that ‘Herbert White’ never resolves. White is the bookend figure of Golden State; he is the first presence we encounter and then understand as a product not only of plot, but of fragmentation. Nonlinear temporality as a product of the

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227 Ibid ll. 25
‘withheld image’ and typography is meant to intensify the perception of White’s anxiety and neuroses. White’s madness is keenly histrionic and Bidart’s technical methods are more suitable for creating White than those of Pound or Lowell. Bidart’s form is also key to one of the more important aspects of a Bidart poem: the conveyance of voice. Typography is a means of conducting the reader to hear the words exactly as Bidart hears them. How speech is uttered is equally important as the fragmented narrative. Consequently, what type of diction, or speech genre, is used in combination with the typography make for a voice, a character, equal in intensity to White’s murderous violence.
Chapter 2: “Ellen West” – Bidart’s ‘Unlogical, Nervous, Individual “I”’

Frank Bidart first encountered Ludwig Binswanger’s case-study of his most famous patient, Ellen West, as an undergraduate student at the University of California, Riverside. Upon reading her story, Bidart felt an affinity with her struggles and said in a 2009 interview:

I was certainly obsessed with food, and with both losing weight and eating. I found a mirror in the case of Ellen West. She was at the mercy of this desire not to have a body, in a way that I have felt too—but never with as imperious necessity as she did. I grew up a Catholic, with Catholicism’s fundamental sense that there is a war between the mind and the body, between the spirit and the body. The case of Ellen West allowed me to see this more sharply. I felt it was profoundly common and human . . .

In West, Bidart identified a soul and will ‘unbroken but in stasis’ who chose annihilation rather than surrender her autonomy to another, a subject he was able to address after the death of his mother over a decade later. Of herself, the historical Ellen West wrote, ‘My inner self is so closely connected with my body that they two form a unity and together constitute an, “unlogical, nervous, individual “I””. The concept that a 'will' rejects what it regards as inferior from the exterior world and leaving nothing left but refusal and an absence of personal development is one that Bidart said ‘haunted him,’ and was appropriated into the ‘Ellen West’ as a core part of his version of her. The Ellen West that appears in the poem is not a true representation of the historical West; the image and experiences of West were refracted through the perceptions of Binswanger and then Bidart before emerging as the doomed speaker of this dramatic monologue. The theme of the disordered psyche being

4 ‘Interview – With Mark Halliday,’ p. 227
connected to West’s atrophying body pervades the poem as much as the case study, but
Bidart also places an emphasis on how poetry can communicate an identity as part of a multi-
layered mental crisis. Miranda Sherwin refers to Confessionalism as a having ‘psychoanalytic
poetics’ and this thesis argues that Bidart redirects ‘Ellen West’ away from these poetics and
towards an element of the dramatic monologue that Robert Langbaum refers to as ‘the poetry
of experience.’ The Ellen of the poem was ‘not simply a “case”’ as she was represented in
the case-study. Bidart inhabits West’s ‘I,’ and makes it his own, much as does in ‘Herbert
White’ and ‘The Arc.’

The dramatic monologue was just one method Bidart used differently than the poetry
of the Confessional movement; poetry that M.L. Rosenthal placed the poet as the ‘I’ of a
poem in order to express some historical or emotional aspect of the poet’s biography. Perhaps the most common confessional subjects, says Steven Hoffman, were that of mental
distress and a development of a ‘multifaceted self.’ Bidart altered how Confessional poetry
addressed form, anthropological histories and phenomena, and the representation of a unique
identity unequipped to cope with the conflicting ideologies set by the self and society. The
subject of mental illness is not specific to confessional poetry. When Bidart adopted the
dramatic monologue, he stepped into a literary tradition that was equally capable of exploring
insanity.

Bidart’s poems, in general, favour plots, characters, and events that ‘conclude without
concluding - how they could reach a sense of ‘resolution,’ or completion, without

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‘resolving’ things that are inherently unresolvable.’ These themes complement each book’s contexture, which are a combination of biographical and fictional poems. If every poem reveals a mind’s process, then so do Bidart’s books when considered in their entirety argues Carol Moldaw. Bidart has said that *Golden State* detailed the journey of a son-figure ‘trying to “analyze” and “order” the past, in order to reach “insight.”’ But by the last poem, ‘Another Life,’ it is clear that the insight gained is that reconciliation with the father-figure is not possible; the father is dead and all that remains is the unchanging concept of him that the ‘I’ retains.

Bidart was much more subtle when applying a contexture to his next book, *The Book of the Body*. The book opens and closes with dramatic monologues: ‘The Arc’ and ‘Ellen West.’ ‘The Arc’ involves a homosexual amputee struggling to come to terms with the loss of his arm. ‘Ellen West’ relays a mentally ill woman’s argument for death. The fragmented narrative places West in a space where the variety of her symptoms convolute her thoughts and the perceptions of the world around her. Rather than write ‘Ellen West’ from a single perspective, Bidart counterpoints the voice of West against the prose of Binswanger. The voice of West aims to justify her world-view and maintain authority over a reader’s perception of her experience. But the clinical objectivity of Binswanger’s analysis and her own mercurial ruminations prevents West from unifying the conflicting aspects of her ‘self.’ West kills herself, and her final unravelling parallels the mental destruction of Herbert White. As with *Golden State*, *The Book of the Body* thematically seeks out a reconciliation and freedom from the traumas of the past only to find that the past can be understood and one can ‘make oneself,’ but escaping memory without the aid of amnesia or death is impossible. Consequently, with death, one cannot ‘pretend’ an event ‘never existed,’ as the

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9 ‘Interview with Mark Halliday,’ p. 227.
11 ‘Interview with Mark Halliday,’ p. 238.
speaker from ‘The Arc’ wishes. Death means a complete stop, loss of consciousness and self and, most importantly, an end to the actual person. ‘Ellen West’ allowed for Bidart to enter a frame of mind that was directed toward an inescapable end without having to directly approach the subject with his own poetic voice or autobiography. To do so in a confessional-style poem would burden the subject in melodrama and sentimentality. For that reason, the dramatic monologue, having been honed in the Victorian period, made for a suitable replacement.

As stated in the introduction, the dramatic monologue is not a static form and its features have been changed by degrees since Robert Browning and Lord, Alfred Tennyson first made the form and genre popular. Alan Sinfield writes that ‘genre implies a hierarchy and fixidity.’ A decay of genre reflects a ‘loss of the system,’ says Sinfield.\(^\text{12}\) This thesis argues that this ‘decay’ surely applies to ‘Ellen West.’

W. David Shaw writes that the genre’s beginnings are based on a sense of ‘subversive tradition’ and as such, it was an influential component of the change and loss that other genres underwent.\(^\text{13}\) Decay of genre, however, does not equal loss of pre-eminence in terms of what a poem can offer back to the form. In concerns to ‘Ellen West,’ Bidart taps in to the innovative and evolutionary properties available to the dramatic monologue. Bidart’s version of the dramatic monologue offers a more precise and divided voice through which the severely mentally ill reveal a multitude of inescapable torments over time; which causes their failures to seem more tragic and understood than monologues that occur in a single, present-tense event.

Another benefit to using the dramatic monologue is that the poet can encourage a multi-textual reading and interpretation of a single poem. By relying on one of the more traditional characteristics of the dramatic monologue, a feint, Bidart establishes ground as a Post-

Confessional poet, redefining what it means for the poet to place themselves in their writing. Additionally, Bidart explores what it means to wear a mask and project his presence into ‘West’ where the masculine and feminine voices work in opposition to each other. The resulting West is an amalgam of poet and the character appropriated from Binswanger’s case study that eclipses diagnostic study.

It is the surface ‘I,’ West, which garners the majority of critical attention in the poem as is common with the dramatic monologue. The speaker and his or her mental sphere are customarily the linchpin that augments the intensity of dramatic experience. Ergo, an understanding of the function, motivations, threats, and psychological makeup of a dramatic monologue’s speaker is imperative to understanding the greater function and intertextuality of the poem itself. A number of critics, largely within the confines of many of the essays within the anthology *On Frank Bidart: Fastening the Voice to the Page*, do not address the ‘I’ of ‘West’ as an entity whose dramatic situation and experiences are augmented by symptoms from different neuroses and obsessions. Instead, the historical and created Wests are assigned the diagnosis of ‘anorexia’ and the poem is analysed based on this diagnosis. This is in spite of the historical West being diagnosed with a form of schizophrenia and in spite of the fact that the limitations on food intake, binging, and purging more aptly fit the criteria of bulimia.¹⁴

Bidart’s West escapes psychiatric classification altogether through an emphasis on experience, much like insane characters from Victorian monologues. When West says, ‘Only to my husband I’m not simply a “case”’, she is indicating a bitterness towards the very act of external authoritative forces defining her person.¹⁵ Nevertheless, with so many references to food aversion, it becomes relatively easy to use the most simplistic of labels as a one-word descriptor; often tacked-on in passing when discussing some other aspect of Bidart’s body of work.

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work. Oddly, Bidart perpetuated this habit developed by others during later interviews and when he wrote about his experience with ‘Ellen West’ in Metaphysical Dog: ‘he was never anorexic but like Ellen he was obsessed with eating.’ Critics have concerned themselves with West’s struggle with weight and the corporeality of the physical body but stop short of including analysis on the character’s other obsessions such as people she envied or related to, her difficulty with relationships, gender identity, and aging.

The ‘push-and-pull’ torment of the idea of food and body are but two symptoms of a larger issue that plagued the historical and poetic figures. Jeffrey Gray writes that, ‘her disease is not her torment but her solution to that torment.’ The use of ‘anorexia’ as an umbrella term for the character’s mental disorder is simply not accurate enough to capture the extensive intricacies of the character. Anorexia, instead, serves as a symptom of a much larger psychiatric crisis. With its broad conception of the fluidity of the dramatic monologue, the poem contains an ideologically divided identity engaged in a journey to self-annihilation, which trumps any corporeal identity West or those who interact with her can formulate.

Syntactical readings of ‘Ellen West’ present a more conflicted character than originally thought. The juxtaposition of masculine and feminine speech styles indicate a strong undercurrent of sexuality and gender identity conflicts that extend beyond West’s question ‘Why am I a girl?’ West’s varied impulses and rigid ‘ideals’ interact as a means of exploring actions unconsciously determined by mental illness as opposed to conscious choices made in spite of mental illness. There is also cause to consider the variance of power between West and external characters and West’s conflicted desire to have the power of self-determination.

16 Hix, p. 192; Bidart, ‘Writing “Ellen West,”’ p.4, ll. 8-9.
18 ‘Ellen West,’ p. 30, ll. 16.
West can also be understood through the poem’s operation within the dramatic monologue tradition. Bidart includes elements like a letter and prose, which have not been widely used as part of the dramatic monologue form. Examining how these features operate within the poem shows that Bidart uses them in order to increase the dramatic tension of the poem. This only heightens the sense of West’s mental disorder and anxiety so that the poem produces the effect of sympathy and an intellectual and emotive understanding of the severity of West’s suffering. Sympathy, as defined by Robert Langbaum, ‘is a way of knowing, what I call romantic projectiveness, […] what psychologists call empathy,’ and is a way of suspending our moral judgement against West. These features used by Bidart are features that Langbaum claims lessen the dramatic effect as they take the reader away from the active situation and presence of the speaker. What Langbaum argues is lacking in dramatic monologues that redirect a degree of awareness away from the speaker, Bidart uses in ‘West’ as a foil for West’s world-view and to reveal her ‘unconscious truths.’

Another element of the dramatic monologue that Bidart uses in ‘West’ is the feint, which he previously used in ‘Herbert White.’ In much the same way, West and Bidart’s archetype have a reciprocal relationship. Unlike with ‘Herbert White,’ what Bidart and West exchange is more akin to emotional truth and motivations that have bearing upon their biographies. Both shared an obsession with food, but like ‘Herbert White,’ the obsession expressed in ‘West’ was hyperbolic in comparison to Bidart’s suffering. It becomes apparent that food is a prop or weapon for other traumas and obsessions, most notably those which centre on relationships. His mythic Self and West concertedly seek out and reject emotional attachment. West is afraid of further losing her identity and being forced to surrender to ‘ideal’ to a domesticated life; a life that she wishes for to a degree as her ideal body type is

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that of the Victorian woman. West desires the look but not the social expectations that accompany it, which leads her to decide that rebuking her corporeality is a solution.

The feint serves as a Post-Confessional technique which creates a double-plot within a dramatic monologue. Bidart underlays ‘West’ with the thematic crisis of The Book of the Body, so that like Herbert White, West is heir to the accumulation of mental trauma and failure. The dramatic monologue is a form that allows Bidart to approach a correlating extreme aspect of his ‘self’ without actual consequence. It is a way to access one’s own terrible memory via the memory of an ‘other’ and access one’s own obsessions via the destruction of another’s due to histrionic versions of the same obsessions. West is, as Bidart, claimed, ‘commonly human’ when we understand that her experiences, motivations and emotions, as ignited by mental illness, express a dark, universal suffering.

I. The Construction of the ‘I’: The Language of the Unstable Self

The speakers of dramatic monologues, Loy Martin writes:

furnish hypothetical centers of being-in-language. But the language in which they have their being always fuses them with that which is outside themselves. [...] While it exclusively displays the unique individual, it allows him or her to exist only as in indissoluble part of something that is not himself or herself. 22

Within the scope of Frank Bidart’s dramatic monologues, the poem and character that most exemplify the construction of a character through various relationships and presences is ‘Ellen West.’ In a 2008 interview Bidart said, ‘Ellen West as a person did exist—but the crucial thing is not whether she literally existed, but that she corresponds to my sense of human experience, and the nature of human experience and the possibility of human experience.’ 23 There is a universality and authenticity that Bidart sought to unearth in the complex interpretation of West’s psychosis by Binswanger. It is important to note that what Bidart encountered was Binswanger’s analysis of West’s neurosis and not West’s actual presence. One of Bidart’s aims was to improve upon and intensify ‘Binswanger’s recital’ so that the resulting poem achieve more than a voice meant to reflect a scientific case study. 24 His aim in creating a lyric West was not only to inhabit the voices that existed in the case study but to highlight ‘each scene of her life.’ By doing so, Bidart presented a sense of ‘necessity’ and more accurate depiction of a human being which he felt was missing from the original text. 25 Each scene of ‘Ellen West’ displays a segment of a journey that West uses as justification for her solution. 26 Bidart forms a reified voice whose suicidal response to a social construct is a means of escape. West’s response is also a return to the motif of ‘freedom’ Bidart wove throughout Golden State.

23 Hix, p. 192.
24 ‘Writing “Ellen West,”’ p. 7, ll. 48-49.
26 Ibid pp. 8-9, ll. 56-57 & 66-67.
Dan Chiasson points out that Bidart makes free use of Binswanger’s notes to trace an objective narrative through West’s last four months alive.\textsuperscript{27} Bidart claims that to make Ellen West his own, he internalised her ‘dramas’ and produced a voice that allowed him to manipulate his own.\textsuperscript{28} On one occasion, Bidart quotes the actual West, citing her disdain for pancakes: ‘At twelve, pancakes | became the most terrible thought there is . . .’\textsuperscript{29} Surprisingly, this is the only instance of Bidart using West’s actual words. Therefore, while the line is striking because of its tense incongruity, it is evidence that West’s true voice and way of perceiving the world was not the basis of the poem.

Jeffrey Gray writes that, ‘Bidart does not come this close to the precise wording of his source; rather, he captures Ellen’s tone and the gist of her constant concern.’\textsuperscript{30} His assertion is incorrect. Bidart rarely inserts his own language into the case study sections and instead, changes a few dates and omits sections of Binswanger’s entry that do not add anything to the poem.\textsuperscript{31} Chiasson presents a more accurate description of Bidart’s use of prose when he argues that we observe West through ‘pre-existing verbal forms’ and that the lyric inhabits a ‘bounded consciousness’ through the adaptation of Binswanger’s ‘narrative.’\textsuperscript{32} The case study text, then, stands out in blatant contrast to Bidart’s crafting of West’s speech as we are never meant to believe that Binswanger is speaking but writing. By quoting Binswanger directly, these sections prove to be a foil to West’s ‘refuser.’ Binswanger’s notes are what Robin Lakoff refers to as a ‘masculine [...] idealization.’ She clarifies by writing:

> When such a man speaks, his contribution is incisive, precise, and to the point—utterly straightforward—and tells us as little as possible about the speaker’s state of mind and his attitude toward the addressee. We


\textsuperscript{28} ‘An Interview – With Mark Halliday (1983),’ p. 239; ‘Writing ‘Ellen West,’’ p. 7, ll. 50.

\textsuperscript{29} Binswanger, ‘The Case of Ellen West,’ p. 251; ‘Ellen West,’ ll. 92-93.

\textsuperscript{30} p. 726.

\textsuperscript{31} ll. 103-107 are Bidart’s words, not Binswanger’s. Bidart employs the use of much more ‘poetic’ language in these lines than Binswanger does in his dryer, more clinical language.

\textsuperscript{32} Chiasson, p. 90.
expect here, too, an even and low pitch, flat intonation, declarative rather than interrogative sentence structure, no hedging or imprecision, and lexical items chosen for their pure cognitive content, not their emotional coloration.33

The prose sections are the clinical, assertions made by a male figure that provide a more objective description of the ‘unconscious liar’ that is West.34 It also assigns her an identity that is not of her own choosing. West’s voice, then, is the feminine voice demanding that her definition of self be the true one even for all of its irrational fallacies. Bidart’s exploration of how to approach the ‘I’ is also a study in how difficult and multitudinal such a process can be.

The two presences act as counterpoints, as did the voices of the everyday and high rhetoric found in ‘Herbert White.’ Moreover, the counterpointing in ‘West’ prompts a similar effect to the counterpointing of the speaker and bandaging instructions in ‘The Arc,’ the first poem of Book of the Body. All three of Bidart’s dramatic monologues up to this point, 1977, involve some measure of placing the speaker in opposition to a second presence that it does not interact with. The perception of these characters is not the product of a singular process but of stratified perspectives working through the problem of identifying some ‘whole’ of the speaker. This method is not so different from Eliot’s construction of Tiresias in The Wasteland. Marie from ‘The Burial of the Dead’ and the unnamed women in ‘A Game of Chess’ combine to form the masculine voice of Tiresias in ‘The Fire Sermon’:

I Tiresias, though blind, throbbing between two lives,
Old man with wrinkled female breasts, can see35

Eliot explains that ‘the self passes from one point of view to another […] so that the reality of the object does not lie in the object itself but in the extent of the relations which the object

34 Shaw, Origins of the Monologue, p. 168.
possesses... Michael Levenson says that in Eliot’s poetry ‘points of view, though distinct, can be combined. Order can emerge from beneath; it need not descend from above.’ In ‘The Arc,’ the prose section intimates a stringent routine that the speaker must follow, which seems to contradict the sense of freedom the speaker desires. But in ‘Herbert White’ and ‘Ellen West,’ the speakers suffer from more self-destructive neuroses than the speaker of ‘The Arc’ and as such, the friction between the speakers and the opposing presence is sharper. The form and mental illnesses are reciprocal in relation to each other. The disparate nature of presences reflects the severity of mental illness and vice versa.

The same reciprocal connection is found between speaker and technical aspects of the poem. Bidart continues to use a similar punctuational style to that employed in ‘Herbert White.’ Still present are the use of dashes that cause sudden, jarring halts in speech and ellipsis marks that indicate a trailing off of thought. The uneven line margins are used to manipulate the reading experience, the edges appearing much more ragged than those in ‘Herbert White.’ For example, at the point where the husband is on the verge of taking control of the orange slice, and thus West herself, on the train, Bidart writes,

My husband saw me staring
down at the piece . . .

---I didn’t move; how I wanted
to reach out,
and as if invisible

shove it in my mouth--;38

West’s pauses come at a faster pace that White’s; the breath is jagged, pause lengths are uneven. This is an indication of what kind of speech patterns could come out of a person conscious of their affliction, a speaker who is actively suffering moment to moment and unable to turn away.

37 Ibid p. 198.
38 ‘Ellen West,’ p. 41, ll. 276-279.
As many critics have noted, Bidart borrows from the case study directly in many instances to construct the ‘I.’ In the case study, Binswanger quotes West as writing:

Now, in spite of my hunger, every meal is a torment, constantly accompanied by feelings of dread. The feelings of dread do not leave me at all any more. I feel them like something physical, an ache in my heart.

When I awake in the morning I feel dread of the hunger that I know will soon appear. Hunger drives me out of bed. [...] It drives all thoughts out of my head. Even when I am full, I am afraid of the coming hour in which hunger will start again. When I am hungry I can no longer see anything clearly, cannot analyze.39

In ‘Ellen West,’ Bidart translates this sentiment into:

the inability not to fear food
day-and-night; this unending hunger
ten minutes after I have eaten . . .

   a childish
dread of eating; hunger which can have no cause.--

half my mind says that all this
is demeaning . . .

Bread
for days on end
drives all real thought from my brain . . .40

Bidart chose to employ punctuation and phrasing that had, by that point, become a mainstay of his poetry in order to separate his prosody from Binswanger’s West. The punctuative signature of Bidart and the retention of a West-centric, obsessive vocabulary constitute a conscious dual sense of self that wants to, as Chiasson phrases it, ‘scar’ the page itself.41

The voice produced as a result of the jagged typography is unlike the assertions made by a number of other critics concerning the interpretation of West’s character. Her voice is nothing so clean as a ‘sculptor seeking to release a beautiful figure trapped within a block of uncut marble’ as Helen Vendler describes; or, contrastingly, the poem is not a ‘hopelessly sexualized’ account of the ‘normalization’ of ‘the grotesque’ as perceived by Edmund

39 Binswanger, ‘The Case of Ellen West,’ p. 253
41 Ibid ll. 82
White.\textsuperscript{42} A more fitting example of Vendler and White’s conflicting assessments about West can be found in the speaker in ‘The Arc’:

I had to try to cut from my brain
my phantom hand
which still gets cramps, which my brain still
recognizes as real ---

and now, I think of Paris,

how Paris is still the city of Louis XVI and
Robespierre, how blood, amputation, and rubble
give her dimension, resonance, and grace.\textsuperscript{43}

And rather than choose between Vendler or White’s assessment, both opinions are valid when applied here: in the implied beauty of the landscape and in the misshapen shape of the speaker’s arm. West and the eponymously named poem, on the other hand, are neither hyperbolically sexualised nor beautiful sculptures.

West, instead, is at all times a discordant chord at odds with everything in the physical world around her instead of absence. The friction with the physical world is symptomatic of being at odds with an aspect of her social designation. The speaker of ‘The Arc’ faces an obstacle inverse to that of West’s. The image of the speaker’s stump in ‘The Arc’ is less important than the speaker voicing the need for autonomy from this newfound defining feature. The speaker is at odds with the intangible, ethereal realm where part of his body resides.

While not an account of over-sexualisation, ‘West’ does venture into the exploration of gender classification and significance. Gender and how one identifies with the societal role that is assigned with one’s biological sex serves as a natural part of the poem’s ‘being-in-the-

\textsuperscript{42} Helen Vendler, ‘From ‘Recent Poetry: Ten Poets,’ in \textit{On Frank Bidart: Fastening the Voice to the Page}, eds. Liam Rector and Tree Swenson, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007), pp. 112-114 (pp. 112-113);


world' crisis that Binswanger asserted was part of the historical West’s mental illness. West is ill at ease with both. This portrayal of West is supported by Lakoff’s assertion that ‘Women have always been classified as the other, the not-quite-human, whether by medieval theologians who claimed women had no souls or by more modern psychologists [...] who would claim that a “healthy woman” and a “healthy man” are characterologically very different things…’ For the woman who would break with gender and social norms, even in more recent decades, public scorn and objectification were just one punishment issued by a male-dominated society.

David Holbrook says of Sylvia Plath’s forays into the questioning of gender identity and roles in the 1950s and 60s, ‘[…] how terrible it is for a woman to have to pretend to be a woman, when she cannot find herself to be one. And she is rejecting the mere trappings of femininity, or of being a wife, thrust upon a person by social coercion, when she does not naturally find her way into them […]’ For Bidart to appropriate the West of the late 1800s and his voice of the 1970s, the matter of her bisexuality and gender confusion found in Binswanger’s case history provided a channel to conveying another striation to her disorder.

To successfully pen West as dually-sexed and yet belonging to neither sex, Bidart needed to capture a more authentic voice for the actual West than did Binswanger. That is to say, his approach needed to produce a character that could plausibly exist outside of the clinical language and analysis that served as the only available connection to the real person. For if Bidart’s adaptation of West’s speech mimicked Binswanger’s text, the character would exude a definitive artificiality that Bidart’s mechanics would not be able to gloss over.

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45 ‘Stylistic Strategies,’ p. 67.
47 ‘Writing “Ellen West,”’ p.7, ll. 48-49.
Placing West in a social space that sought to define her as ‘meat’ and an inhuman ‘case’ achieved the desired authenticity as it placed West in a real-life social issue.\textsuperscript{48}

Bidart’s aim was to capture an authentic feminine voice that challenged the concept of femininity despite being male. Where this was enacted was in the use of adjectives. Lakoff argues that the feminine voice of the American middle-class was distinctive largely because of their adjective heavy speech.\textsuperscript{49} She writes that it implies that women are given to ‘expressing emotional not intellectual evaluation.’ The feminine voice includes ‘intonation patterns that resemble questions, indicating uncertainty or need for approval.’ In total, this sense of weakness isn’t about the character’s ‘lack of power’ so much as it is about how the character feels about ‘the possession of power. Women’s language becomes a symbolic expression of distance from power, or lack of interest in power.’\textsuperscript{50} Christina Rossetti’s poetry is that of the elegant Victorian woman and demonstrative of the feminine voice’s investment in the emotive adjective:

My heart is like a singing bird  
Whose nest is in a watered shoot;  
My heart is like an apple tree  
Whose boughs are bend with thickset fruit;  
My heart is like a rainbow shell  
That paddles in a halcyon sea;  
My heart is gladder than all these  
Because my love is come to me.

Raise me a dais of silk and down;  
Hang it with vair and purple dyes;  
Carve it in doves and pomegranates,  
And peacocks with a hundred eyes;  
Work it in gold and silver grapes,  
In leaves and silver fleurs-de-lys;  
Because the birthday of my life  
Is come, my love is come to me.\textsuperscript{51}

\textsuperscript{48} ‘Ellen West,’ p. 30, ll. 13 & 15.  
\textsuperscript{49} Lakoff, ‘Stylistic Strategies,’ (p. 53). Lakoff’s position on women’s language as a stereotype: ‘But even more to the point, women’s language is accessible to every member of this culture as a stereotype. Whether the stereotype is equally valid for all women is certainly debatable; but the fact of its existence, overt or subliminal, affects every one of us and its assumptions are generally agreed on.’ ; qtd. in Stephen Burt, Randall Jarrell and His Age, (Chichester: Columbia University Press, 2002), p. 40.  
\textsuperscript{50} qtd. in Burt, Randall Jarrell and His Age, p. 40.  
M.H. Abrams writes that Rossetti’s poems were ‘an aesthetics of renunciation’ providing her ‘a powerful way to articulate a poetic self in critical relationship to the little that the world offers.’52 But the Victorian era was not without women poets who dissented with the stereotype of the ideal woman.

The dramatic monologue provided women writers a mask from which to challenge the expectations of male-dominated Victorian society.53 Cynthia Scheinberg notes that ‘Amy Levy provides a great example of diversity embodied by Victorian poets. As a Jewish woman, she challenged the most basic formula for English poetic identity - Christian and male;’54. In ‘Xantippe,’ the poem’s namesake speaks out against Socrates and Plato’s ideas on the role of women:

By all great powers around us! can it be
That we poor women are empirical!
That gods who fashioned us did strive to make
Beings too fine, too subtly delicate
With sense that thrilled response to ev’ry touch
Of nature’s, and their task is not complete?
That they have sent their half-completed work
To bleed and quiver here upon the earth?
To bleed and quiver, and to weep and weep
To beat its soul against the marble walls
Of cold men’s hearts, and then at last to sin!55

The role of women was ‘fixed and formalized’ and Levy’s poem protests the ‘fixed and formalized’ ‘cultural beliefs and traditions’ of the Victorian age. It was also an indirect method of criticizing and countering long-term historical anti-feminist sentiments. Levy and other women’s poets, like Augusta Webster and Catherine Dawson, subversive techniques involved ‘inhabiting the conventional in order to expose it.’56 By inhabiting an ‘other’ in a dramatic monologue, the female Victorian poet could speak as either gender and be ‘in

56 Byron, pp. 86 & 88.
control of objectification. Xantippe is the wife of Socrates, wanting to learn, be educated and make more of herself, but finds that for all of Socrates’ enlightened philosophy, he still holds the traditional belief of the nature of women and their place in society.

It is society’s expectations that West be submissive, that she be like the female in the restaurant; West could never ‘happily myself put food into another’s mouth---;’ And West describes herself as ‘eager’ to adhere to the norms ‘But something in me refuses it.’ It is as if the halves of West inhabit the competing ideologies of Rossetti and Levy. The language that Bidart adopts for West is that of being at odds with both power and gender. Bidart’s speech straddles the issue of autonomy and self-fulfilment.

‘Ellen West’ employs some of the devices described as feminine by Lakoff; West appears uncertain when asking, ‘Why am I a girl?’ and somewhat accepts the answer provided by her doctors. However, West does not remain weak and uninterested in power throughout. By the end of the poem, she has wrested control of her existence back from her doctors and defined herself outside of the confines of psychological jargon. Here, West is at her most forceful and dominant, not seeking the approval of any other source.

However, the train scene could be interpreted as a ‘relapse’ into the trappings of the female stereotype. Power is granted by West’s character to the husband, who throws the orange slice out of the window. West seems emotional and perhaps even guilty over the perceived ‘disappointment’ and lack of approval directed at her by her husband, this scene’s masculine loci of dominance. And yet, it is West’s character who has chosen to allow her husband that level of authority, whether consciously or as a way of giving in to the gender ideals assigned to her. The idea of shame and disappointment is repeated in West’s letter to a

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57 Byron, p. 81.
58 ‘West,’ pp. 33 & 43, ll. 83 & 322.
59 ‘Ellen West,’ pp. 30-31, ll. 16-22.
60 Ibid pp. 39-45, ll. 228-230 & 239-245.
female companion. Bidart utilises adjectives like ‘sterile,’ ‘unreal,’ ‘crippled,’ ‘anger,’ and ‘happiness’ to construct a sense of West’s irrational emotions.62

West’s desire to appear as ‘dainty’ coincides with the ideal of her time period: the slender, demure Victorian woman. Janet Dunbar describes what women were expected to strive for in *The Early Victorian Woman*: ‘softness and weakness, delicacy and modesty, a small waist, [and] curving shoulders.’63 Bidart’s West is interested in being an ‘effortless’ and ‘elegant’ sort of ‘thin,’ with ‘sharp, clear features, a good | bone structure.’ She looks down upon those with ‘ordinary bodies, pleasant faces,’ those that are ‘short’ and would be tall; those attempting to be what they are not.64 This is in spite of the fact that she rejects the natural and forces herself into a physical frame that is regarded by the medical community as ‘unnatural’ and a ‘disorder.’ The poem’s concept of disorder is revealed through West’s drive to push beyond the Victorian ideal of femininity. Instead, she becomes one of the very ‘creatures’ she abhors: ‘pathetic, desperate’ and filled with the ‘desire to be not what they were;--- 65. West is unconscious of her association with the artificial, which draws attention to Bidart’s interest in the difficulty of knowing the true self.

Ellen West relies on subversive inaction and displays the conflict between male and female dominance on a syntactical level. Bidart relies heavily on striking a balance between verb and adjective usage. Bidart applies dramatic imagery like ‘mercurial, fragile, masterly,’ ‘shrill,’ ‘unreliable, ‘ravenous,’ and left with ‘shreds of a voice’ to his descriptions of Callas, who serves as another figure under extreme scrutiny.66 West uses what can be interpreted as adjectives with negative connotations when she evaluates her own self after her assessment of

62 ‘Ellen West,’ p. 39, ll. 327-331.
64 ‘Ellen West,’ pp. 30, 32, 34,40, ll. 5-7, 47-48, 94 & 249-258
65 Ibid p. 40, ll. 253-255
Callas: ‘childish,’ ‘demeaning,’ and ‘dark-complexioned; big-boned.’ However, powerful verbs present themselves in a way that shows an empowered femininity. Words like ‘obliterated,’ ‘loathed,’ ‘embody,’ ‘manifest,’ ‘annihilate,’ ‘drives,’ and ‘acting; choosing; rejecting’ are aimed at restoring power to the female figure.

The result is the creation of a character who demonstrates both feminine and masculine traits through speech and spends the duration of her existence struggling to come to terms with her gender identity. West’s sections vary in the dominance of the ‘verbal forms’ and copious use of adjectives as indication of the feminine. Her created voice has a division of its own. The formal choices Bidart makes, adjectives and verbs vying for dominance, are as much of an indicator of personal crisis as the narrative. The figure that emerges is at once a victim of masculine interference and an aggressive feminine spirit of rebellion.

Other male writers have also tried to step into the role of female characters using the dramatic monologue. Not only was Randall Jarrell one such poet but Stephen Burt argues that Bidart was ‘influenced by the psychoanalytic goals of Jarrell’s poems.’ Both poets pursued ‘a poetics of psychoanalytic process --- one appropriate to the step-by-step disclosure of self with help from an imagined listener.’ Jarrell’s female figures are often paired with the theme of loneliness and ‘situations from which the recognized speakers wish[ed] to escape.’

The language he used for the female speaker in ‘The Christmas Roses’ involves speech described as a ‘bawl,’ causing the reader to ‘react almost as if to a real acquaintance dying or [...] dismiss her pleas as sentimental as failures of art’:

[...] And now I know you never meant
the least letter of the poorest kiss
You thought about and gave me; you and life were tired of me,
You both thought – quickly, quietly, in a dream ---

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69 Chiasson, One Kind of Everything, p. 90.
70 qtd in Randall Jarrell and His Age, p. 114.
To kill me, to be rid at last, for good, for good,
Of that blind face that still looked up to you
For love, and then pity, and then anything.
And now I’m dying and you have your wish.
Dying, dying; […]

Jarrell risked the poem being labelled as a constructed, overly sentimental female character through ending poems with ‘abstract adjectives’ or ‘bizarre, affecting, abstract illocution.’ which indicate a level of indirectness.

Unlike Jarrell’s sensitive feminine voice, the feminine voice in ‘Ellen West’ maintains a brutal candour and level of specificity not found in Jarrell’s feminine voice. That said, the female speakers of Jarrell’s monologues do not suffer from similar mental anxieties as West. While Bidart wrote West as having inclinations towards the female role and language seen in the poetry of Christina Rossetti and Randall Jarrell, he also made his West desire control and power, which surfaces as aggression and aggravation because this conflicts with the expectation to be the ideal Victorian woman. ‘West’ exhibits aggression that is apparent in the character’s refusal to discard her ideals and the eating demonstration she displays for her doctors. These acts of ferocity serve to question gender identity, the language associated with being female, and social roles that women are forced to contend with.

West suffers from a mind that works against its interests and Bidart makes use of short, irregularly indented lines as sharp little weapons, a shape of a poem that Lakoff argues is undeniably masculine. Bidart more clearly displays a masculine voice in non-persona poems, like ‘Book of the Body’:

Sex the type of all action,
reconciliation with the body that is
annihilation of the body.

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73 Burt, pp. 33 & 40.
74 ‘Ellen West,’ p. 34, ll. 99-101;
Binswanger, ‘The Case of Ellen West,’ p. 263.
75 qtd in Randall Jarrell and His Age, pp. 40-41.
My romance with pornography,

watching it happen, watching
two bodies trying to make it happen,
however masterful or gorgeous, helpless

climbing the un-mappable mountain
of FEELING […]¹⁶

This excerpt allows for syntactical evaluation without taking into consideration varying pause lengths, which in turn affect word emphasis, created by Bidart’s unusual typography.

Lakoff’s description of the idealised masculine speech resembles the speech of the poet’s voice. The power of this passage from ‘Book of the Body,’ its syntactical authority, resides in the dynamic rather than static nature of the verb and the lack of adjectives that reveal the overwhelming emotions that are only subtly unearthed. Sentimentality and melodrama is avoided, despite the explicit subject matter.

‘West,’ like ‘Body,’ makes use of similarly weighted dynamic verbs but also offers a deviation from the classical use of longer, unindented lines which make use of the narrative and word choice to augment the emotional weight of the dramatic monologue. In this case, ‘Ellen West’ is reminiscent of the lineation used in ‘Herbert White’ and both approach the subject of highly emotional states without falling prey to melodrama and prosaicness.

Harsh, grinding short lines like ‘tapeworm,’ ‘I loathed ‘Nature,’” ‘childish,’ and even ‘bread’ serve as criticisms that seem to haunt West to the point where discarding her body seems to be the only escape.⁷⁷ West functions as the being which Herbert White becomes at the end of ‘Herbert White’: a character that feels trapped and confronted by the reality of the mind’s own disordered making.

Bidart’s appropriation of the case study reinforces the notion that West is at odds with her gender in other instances. Binswanger writes that as early as seventeen, West felt a compulsion towards male identification. Her poems, ‘expressed the ardent desire to be a boy,

⁷⁷ ‘Ellen West,’ pp. 34, 36, 38, 39, ll. 91, 138, 198-201, 209, 213.
for then she would be a soldier, fear no foe, and die joyously sword in hand.78 Bidart relays this feature of West’s personality with word choices like ‘eating the flesh,’ ‘suffocating customs’ seemed expressly designed to annihilate spirit,’ and ‘kill this refuser.79 The force of this jargon is more adept at conveying contradiction than the historical West’s own words:

If you seek peace and quiet,
Then we’ll come creeping nigh
And we’ll take vengeance on you
With our derisive cry.80

The type of contradictions and conflict found within this translated excerpt lack the quick back and forth between masculine and feminine diction that Bidart’s poem contains. Bidart’s construction of ‘Ellen West,’ even at the grammatical level, builds itself around the notion of opposition. Masculine action like ‘eating the flesh’ is paired with the strong adjectives ‘mercurial’ and ‘fragile;’ the masculine and feminine voice meeting in the same sentence.81

The inclusion of syntactical conflict to reveal a conflicted character creates a stronger personality than the historical West exhibits in her poetry. Clarity and force of personality is a crucial element of the dramatic monologue’s speaker as, what Loy Martin deems, a ‘person-as-process.’ Martin writes that ‘The material person is always being produced, but it cannot be produced by any process that does not also produce a contradictory idea of the unitary self.82 But ‘person-as-process’ is not only a product of West’s sexuality and gender identity contradictions as found in the narrative and grammar of the poem.

As with the treatment of West’s gender identity, Bidart also accomplished a sense of multiplicity when it came to the handling of West’s mental disorder. As stated earlier, many critics insert the diagnosis of ‘anorexia’ in front of West’s name when discussing the poem, whether their subsequent analysis results in a different conclusion or not. Some, however, do seek to justify such a diagnosis. Chiasson argues that the diagnosis of anorexia is what ‘seeks

78 Binswanger, p. 239.
79 ‘Ellen West,’ pp. 36, 37, & 43, ll. 142, 161-162, & 324.
80 qtd. in ‘The Case of Ellen West,’ p. 243.
81 ‘Ellen West,’ p. 36, ll. 142-144.
82 Martin, p. 106.
an accurate ‘representation’ of spirit.” While the ‘representation of spirit’ is a viable theme present in the poem, the character of West does not use only her fear and obsession with food to explore the concept of body versus lack of body. Chiasson’s description fails to take into consideration that her neuroses also centres on relationships, aging, and gender which are not dependent on the existence of her fixation on food.

Sven Birkerts argues that West’s purposeful ‘turning away from the flesh’ indicates that ‘Bidart’s interpretation of anorexia, like Binswanger’s, is existential.’ But this thesis argues that in addition to her fixation on food, West is caught up in expressing her spirit through additional mental dilemmas that root the poem in the power a person wields. This, in turn, influences their circumstances versus forces they must submit themselves to in a non-existental manner. While it is undeniable that West suffers from mental illness, Bidart bombards West with symptoms from a number of different psychoses which compound her lack of true understanding in regards to her own identity. The poem is less focused on what disorder is represented and instead emphasises how mental disorder can bend and warp one’s will, desire, and the very act of living. Additionally, the poem considers what mental elements that provide stability can be stripped away before empiricism is overshadowed by disease so that, for West, there is no other option but to ‘not have a body.’

The lack of specific neuroses correlates to how Victorian dramatic monologues often revealed mental illness. Mental illness in Victorian society was not classified into the multitude of disorders described today. Instead, Ekbert Faas and Ann C. Colley say that Victorians used four classifications: melancholia, mania, partial insanity, and moral insanity as set forth by ‘the new mental science.’ Victorian alienists, like A.O. Kellogg, admitted

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83 One Kind of Everything, p. 90.
85 ‘Ellen West,’ p. 38, ll. 201.
that ‘he and his colleagues had “little to add to what Shakespeare appears to have known of
these intricate subjects.”’ Poets like Tennyson, Colley writes, were composing a number of
dramatic monologues in what was considered a ‘clinical’ manner in attempt to ‘[identify]
significant physical characteristics and distinguishing qualities of mind which determine how
each of [Tennyson’s] subjects perceives the world around her and controls the way others
react to her.’

This description is eerily close to the plot of ‘West.’ Where Bidart differs from
Tennyson is that Bidart’s descriptions of mental illness were distinct rather than generalized.
Consequently, Bidart had the analysis of Binswanger and two hundred years of psychiatric
development to draw from, whereas the Victorian period was only entering in to the subject
modern psychology. Of Tennyson’s clinical mental evaluations, Colley adds that:

...in ‘Claribel’ he notes how Claribel’s solemn ways affect the
landscape so that it too seems to suffer from an ‘inward agony’; in
‘Lilian’ he considers his subject’s ‘airy fairy’ ways and how they
simultaneously charm and frustrate him; in ‘Madeline,’ he concentrates
on his person’s subtle range of facial expressions, which mirror her
‘every varying’ nature and unbalance those around her; in ‘Marion’ he
defines ‘the peculiar charms of a very ordinary person’; and in
‘Adeline’ he dwells on his subject’s mysterious smile, half early and
half divine, which makes him wonder ‘what ails her.’

Tennyson’s work is far subtler than Bidart’s when revealing mental illness and leaves much
to interpretation. ‘West’ is increasingly explicit; it is made apparent as to the specifics of her
emotions and agony: ‘Bread | for days on end | drives all real thought from my brain . . .’

Moreover, Bidart draws upon symptoms from illnesses other than anorexia.

Bidart elects to have West experience her many ‘symptoms’ through a lens of
extreme, uncontrollable emotion propagated through paranoia and irrationality (even when
explaining herself through what she might perceive as perfectly rational rhetoric). In addition
to conflicting compulsions towards food, she exhibits symptoms of gerscophobia, obsession

87 qtd. in Faas, p. 31.
88 *Tennyson and Madness*, p. 67.
89 Colley, pp. 67-68.
with the relationships between other people; even the intense desire to ‘represent her spirit’ by appropriating the spirit of another, whom she regards as perfection within the confines of her ideals. These stressors limit experience as the anxiety they produce limit her ability to act, to live. Her attempts to exist within the confines of her obsessions meet with failure. The most noted and written about limiter is indeed West’s obsession with food; she is both unappeasable in her hunger and repulsed by food. She decides that denying the former symptom power over her experience in favour trying to satisfy the criteria of the latter. Being thin, however, fails to help West achieve a sense of mental equanimity. Failure augments the severity of how the psychosis is expressed.

Both ‘Ellen West’ and ‘Herbert White’ have speakers who can be interpreted by way of Stephen James’ arguments about Lowell’s work; Bidart’s speakers’ interpretation of ‘the self is often fragile, friable, close to disintegration’ and are ‘driven by an unappeasable sense of lack or loss.’ ‘West’ addresses the fragile speaker as someone for whom any type of assimilation is impossible. It is, again, part of West’s ‘being-in-the-world’ crisis. Rather than adapt, West narrows the scope of her experiences until action, as experienced on the train, becomes insurmountable. As Bidart frames it, the adoption of compulsion as a part of West disappears if the focus of said compulsion is cast off (i.e. the body). ‘West’ is a lesson in all forces of the poem, including her compulsions, attempting to subjugate each other, vying to be the dominant influence over West’s self perception. This includes any attempt to diagnose the poem’s West with a definitive and specific psychological disease. The poem returns again and again to the idea of corporeality in an ill-fated attempt to understand what it

94 ‘Ellen West,’ p. 41, ll. 276-277.
really means to relinquish the body while retaining some sense of self instead of dominating it.

Conflict with corporeality is a general theme of *The Book of the Body*. The amputee of ‘The Arc’ experiences a phantom limb and the mind’s trouble accepting that a part of the body is no longer present. The poem also recounts a soldier whose penis is bisected when he attempts to have sex with a Vietnamese prostitute; the body is wounded, then repaired, but is not the same. The amputee’s lover says ‘but what can he tell his wife?’95 The disfigurement of the body seems to coincide with the irreparable damage of interpersonal relationships. The ‘sympathy’ from the amputee’s family is partially what drives him to Paris to escape the idea of what life had been before the accident.96 Thus, the poem is also bound up in the same theme as *Golden State*: freedom from a person or event that has left permanent, emotional scars; trauma that the speakers struggle to come to terms with. Where *Golden State* sought to understand and reconcile, *The Book of the Body* wishes to ‘erase’ or ‘pretend’ what has come to pass.97 Bidart’s speakers and characters seek to escape what has scarred them while concurrently understanding that their attempts will fail. The speaker’s mother in ‘Elegy’:

\begin{quote}
 says that when she allowed herself to love
 she let something into her head which will never be got out---;
    which could only betray her
 or be betrayed, but never appeased ---;
 whose voice

    death and memory have made
 into a razor-blade without a handle . . . 98
\end{quote}

Emotional trauma seems to quite literally kill the body instead of the person. The reason the person dies or wants to die is of more significance than the actual act of death.

\begin{footnotes}
95 ‘The Arc,’ p. 6, ll. 84.
96 Ibid, ll. 178.
97 ‘The Arc,’ ll 191-192.
98 Frank Bidart, ‘Elegy: IV Lineage,’ pp. 23-25 (pp. 24-25, ll. 28-35).
\end{footnotes}
A similar process occurs in ‘West.’ West’s emphasis is on her journey to making the decision to commit suicide. We learn about her death from Binswanger’s notes before she reveals her final reasons in the ensuing letter. West’s arrival at the notion of not having a body is paired with the idea that after her body is gone, she cannot know herself. The choices she makes regarding her person are what make her. After she has defeated nature and has completely rejected all forms of physical existence, we find that she has left behind part of herself. The letter serves as a projection of a future and permanent self, a form of consciousness that is immortal. Bidart suggests that West looks forward to death because of the immortality that writing grants her. Her final descent towards death depicts a character already ‘transformed’ and already unfettered by the constraints of her irrational terrors. Bidart has once again drawn from the case study as a means of constructing West, and thus, Binswanger's assessment that it is ‘choice’ that West strove for; specifically, the choice to be a self of her choosing rather than a self-wrought by influence. Through choice, West discovers an identity. Death becomes a by-product of what has really defined and liberated the character. Binswanger writes:

This entrance is festive not only because death comes as a friend, and because freedom and liberation from the fetters of life come in its train, but also for the much deeper reason that is voluntary-necessary resolve for death that existence is no longer ‘desperately itself’ but has authentically and totally become itself! […] The festival of death was the festival of birth of her existence.

Ergo, by becoming ‘authentic’ and casting off the false self, she can, according to Jungian theory, avoid ‘punishment.’ Additionally, West can kill a portion of the self that is a ‘refuser,’ what Williamson interprets to be the living entity of opposition born ‘of the unconsciousness

102 Ibid p. 298
[...] seeking wholeness’ and balance that not only becomes conscious in a character like West, but plays a large part in conducting her insanity.103

The dual sense of self within the poem seems rooted in ‘dread;’ West experiences both a ‘dread of eating’ and a ‘hunger’ which combine to form this extreme ‘fear.’104 When West speaks of not wanting to ‘refuse,’ of wanting to ‘compromise,’ she means not only her conflict to ‘hunger,’ but all of her obsessions that extend far deeper into her identity than starving, binging, and purging.105 West’s extreme weight loss is an emotional and physical by-product of the ‘being-in-the-world’ crisis that surfaced during puberty.

What she unconsciously is at odds with is the inclusion of self with another’s. Bidart’s use of the unconscious truth is a component of dramatic monologue. Abrams wrote that ‘the principle controlling the poet’s selection and organization of what the lyric speaker says is the speaker’s unintentional revelation of his or her temperament and character.’ The speaker, Abrams adds, is ‘unconscious of their deepest truths.’ West is unconscious of the fact that shedding her body makes her nothing; it does not aid in ‘discovering[ing] who and what Ellen can be.’106 In her letter to Dearest, West opens as a timid character, wanting inclusion, afraid to be ‘alone.’ West recalls a memory:

on hikes with friends, when
they rested, sitting down to joke to talk,

I circled
around them, afraid to hike ahead alone,

yet afraid to rest
when I was not yet truly thin.107

West revisits ‘weight’ out of habit, but in actuality, the poem’s weight is just as centred on a crippling fear of people and the loss of self by association. This realisation encompasses not only her doctors, but popular culture and those who function within it. West is ‘expressed’

105 Ibid pp. 43-44, ll. 322-328.
106 ‘Ellen West,’ p. 39, ll. 231.
107 Ibid p. 43, ll. 311-316.
through a multitude of obsessions so that Bidart is able to deepen the sense of ‘lack and loss’ that James perceives in Lowell’s work. This bereavement is experienced as West shrinks the scope of her personal world.\textsuperscript{108}

The world and its expectations are what ‘have by degrees drawn me within the circle; forced me to sit down at last on the ground.’\textsuperscript{109} The speaker overcomes these external influences in favour of the aspects of her psychosis and an aspect of culture that enables and promotes her line of thought: that of the Victorian woman. West’s inclination towards the delicate female image is a contradiction for while West may claim this type of female is her ideal, the masculine speech employed by Bidart indicates that West is lying to herself. She is entirely at odds with the entire concept of ‘being-in-the-world’ as it denies the ‘I’ the ability to have total power over the perception of their ‘true self.’\textsuperscript{110}

Bidart irrevocably removes West from ‘the world’ when the character has reached the limits of what she can experience and know. West has no more to impart to the reader about, ‘name, gender, action; fashion; MATTER ITSELF’ because she has removed herself from that landscape.\textsuperscript{111} Bidart’s emphatic use of masculine verbs and adjectives as an ‘emotional, not intellectual evaluation’ provide West with an identity that is under pressure to live two, antithetical empirical truths simultaneously.\textsuperscript{112} The parts are inverses, cancelling each other out and creating a void in which West does not survive. The ‘I’ collapses upon itself.
II.  ‘Ellen West’ and the Mutability of the Dramatic Monologue

The form of ‘Ellen West’ is classified as a dramatic monologue; but the significance of being included in this literary tradition, as discussed in the introduction, is as variant as the definition itself. The poem certainly complies with Robert Browning’s definition of the dramatic monologue on a surface level: ‘the story is told by some actor in [the poem], not by the poet.’ ‘Ellen West’ is directed away from more stringent definitions that would require the poem to have an occasion, influence of an auditor, or take place entirely in the present as required by Ina Beth Sessions’ classification system. What is clear is that West is speaking in a ‘direct language’ and ‘express[ing] something no one else can say.’ ‘West’ embodies a function of the dramatic monologue laid out by S.S. Curry as ‘reveal[ing] the struggle in the depths of the soul.’ Of course, this is not the entirety of what a poem must do as a dramatic monologue, but it does convey what the anecdotes within ‘West’ work together to achieve. The dramatic events of West’s life and the limited, subjective view the reader is shown of those experiences places the poem in a spectrum of poems and movements that comprise a dynamic literary tradition. Perhaps this is why it is beneficial to analyse the dramatic monologue as a form with mutable features which has allowed for great poets of later eras, like Eliot, Lowell, and Jarrell, to experiment and alter various elements while retaining an ‘I’ that has been or is being subjected to a form of crisis. ‘Ellen West’ is one of Bidart’s more technically adventurous dramatic monologues and how it responds to the dramatic monologue tradition is a more fruitful discourse than evaluating the degree to which the poem is or is not a dramatic monologue.

Sessions writes that the dramatic monologue ‘must be electric and it must be unfolding with the speaker’s words. The audience must be a participant in the original

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113 Sinfield, p. 8.
114 Sessions, p. 508.
115 p. 11.
occasion, and the action must all be in the present time. Dramatic effectiveness is lost if all these characteristics relate only to past action.' Sessions references Browning’s poems ‘My Last Duchess’ and ‘Fra Lippo Lippi’ as poems that exhibit this behaviour precisely.\textsuperscript{116} However, ‘Ellen West’ uses both present and past tenses and what Sessions calls the ‘original event’ is absent.\textsuperscript{117} There is not a situation or circumstance from which West officially speaks. While West’s reflective introspections are in the present tense, the medical notes, memories and letter are in past tense. Changes in tense do not lessen the ‘excitement’ of ‘Ellen West’ and the tension of the poem is not diminished, nor is the interplay between speaker and audience in jeopardy of being less dramatic. Shaw argues that one aspect of the dramatic monologue is the ‘speaker's unpredictable apostrophe’ and ‘swerves of voice.’\textsuperscript{118} ‘Ellen West’ is rife with both

Like ‘West,’ Lowell’s ‘The Fat Man in the Mirror,’ from \textit{The Mills of the Kavanaughs}, yields a mixture of tenses and a sort of apostrophe and vocative:

\begin{quote}
This \textit{I}, who used to mouse about the paraffinned preserves,
And jammed a finger in the coffee grinder, serves
Time before the mirror.
But this pursey terror . . .
Nurse, it is a person. \textit{It is nerves}.\textsuperscript{119}
\end{quote}

Lowell also uses italics and ellipsis to conduct the pacing and increase the drama of the speaker’s voice. The rhyme scheme serves to heighten the madness of the speaker rather than create order and calm through predictability. The use of ‘O’ is increased as the poem progresses, and the reader comes to understand the distress that the man experiences as he attempts to reconcile what he was with what he has become.

‘Ellen West,’ however, occurs mostly in the past and unlike ‘The Fat Man in the Mirror,’ uses recollection of the past to argue a state of mind in the present. Rare instances of present

\textsuperscript{116} Sessions, pp. 510-511
\textsuperscript{117} Ibid p. 510.
\textsuperscript{118} \textit{Origins of the Dramatic Monologue}, p. 9.
tense action occur in the opening section of the poem and in the prose sections. Yet, Sessions argues that, ‘Dramatic effectiveness is lost if all these characteristics [action] relate only to past action’ and classifies the dramatic monologues that lack occasion in the present time as imperfect.  

This is not entirely true. While many early dramatic monologues were set in present tense situations and memories implied, says Faas, a number of the poems which established the genre used a mixture of tenses or were mostly in past tense.  

Browning’s ‘Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came’ and Tennyson’s ‘Maud’ mostly use past tense and the drama of the poems is based in past events. Browning’s ‘My Last Duchess’ and Tennyson’s ‘Tithonus’ use past and present tenses to create a sense of friction between what has happened and what is happening. The combining of verb tenses in the dramatic monologue encompasses several implications. Firstly, events in the past and present may indicate dramatic action, indicating that the speaker has endured under duress for a length of time as opposed to an instant of time where the drama occurs and is over, as in Browning’s ‘Porphyria’s Lover.’ Extended crisis is not necessarily less intense than a burst of drama, especially if the severity and horror of events are comparable. Secondly, if the speaker speaks from a present position and recounts a past dramatic event, they are indicating that the past trauma still affects them. Tennyson’s ‘Ulysses’ uses the events of Troy and his travels to justify ‘How dull it is to pause, to make an end, | To rust unburnished, not to shine in use’  

Bidart resorts to using a shifting timeline in ‘Ellen West’ as a means of increasing dramatic effectiveness, perhaps indicating that a display of a larger span of West’s life is necessary to show the permeability of her identity. The instability of the verb tenses also prevent a stable auditor from being known. That is to say, it is not usually clear to who West speaks. This feature is typical of Bidart’s

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120 ‘Dramatic Monologue,’ p. 511.
121 Faas, p. 147.
dramatic monologues, as ‘Herbert White,’ ‘The Arc,’ and ‘The War of Vaslav Nijinsky’ also lack specified auditors. An example of a clear auditor, says Sinfield, would be the envoy from Browning’s ‘My Last Duchess’ or the watchmen in ‘Fra Lippo Lippi.’ But Curry also noted that in the monologue’s development is the lack of specified auditor within Browning’s ‘Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came,’ and later on, Eliot’s ‘The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock.’ As indicated in the introduction, what is important to the dramatic monologue is that the poet uses everyday language rather than poetic diction so that the speaker sounds like they are truly speaking to something, whether to themselves or another, rather than sounding like they are writing a formal narrative.

There is an exception to this rule, however, as the use of letter is not uncommon. According to Curry and Claud Howard, a confessional, first-person letter-poem by a character that is not the poet is the closest poetic form to the dramatic monologue without actually being one. The letter, Howard adds, carries with it the ‘dramatic monologue attitude of mind.’ Browning’s ‘Cleon’ and James Russell Lowell’s ‘The Biglow Papers’ both involve extensive use of the letter and what ensconces them within the dramatic monologue tradition, Curry writes, is that ‘The mental action is sustained consistently; the dramatic completeness, the definite point of view, and the dialect, enable us to picture the peculiar characters who think and feel, live and move, talk and act for our enjoyment.’

The letter in ‘Ellen West’ is also the closest the poem comes to defining an auditor. The ‘Dearest’ character in the letter is reading the letter not in time with the events of the poem but after the poem has ended. The letter is not indicative of a one-sided conversation where Dearest’s reactions from reading the letter affect West. West cannot be affected by this auditor because she is dead. Moreover, it cannot be assumed that Dearest is the auditor

123 Sinfield, pp. 2 & 8.
124 Curry, p. 18.
125 Sessions, p. 505.
126 Curry, p. 19.
in the preceding parts of the poem and it is possible that ‘West’ is directed at more than one auditor. It is not unheard of for a dramatic monologue to have multiple auditors argues Shaw; Coleridge’s ‘This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison’ and Tennyson’s ‘Ulysses’ both lack a single auditor.\footnote{Shaw, \textit{Origins of the Dramatic Monologue}, pp. 17 & 65.} Bidart’s manner of not using a defined auditor has an effect of allowing West to indirectly escape the type of external judgement described by Langbaum in \textit{The Poetry of Experience}, as does Prufrock, whose judgements come from within.\footnote{The Poetry of Experience, preface} With West’s presence permanently preserved in the letter, any possible response ‘Dearest’ or the reader may have will not be heard by the ‘I.’ With no auditor active in the bulk of the poem, there is no one-sided conversation, no-one that responds to West off of the page and there is not a presence that influences her in a present tense setting. Sinfield explains that the auditor exists to apply ‘an external pressure so that we see two sides of [her], as it were, interacting.’\footnote{Sinfield, p. 3.} Bidart accounts for the poem missing this pressure by having West place pressure on herself. In other words, West is naturally a divided character whose counterpointing impulses apply pressure on her whole.

For that reason, the inclusion of the past is acceptable within the dramatic monologue form. However, Faas notes that recalling memory is common but that the memories are usually recalled from a specific occasion occurring in the present. However, we have no notice of what prompts West to start speaking of her memories while still retaining the type of speech that Faas describes as, ‘the babblings of a twentieth century neurotic talking to his psychoanalyst.’\footnote{Retreat into the Mind, pp. 156-157.} Rumination of this type is found in Eliot’s dramatic monologue ‘The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock’:

\begin{quote}
For I have known them all already, known them all ---
Have known the evenings, mornings, afternoons,
I have measured out my life with coffee spoons;
I know the voices dying with a dying fall
\end{quote}

\begin{flushleft}
\footnote{Shaw, \textit{Origins of the Dramatic Monologue}, pp. 17 & 65.} \footnote{The Poetry of Experience, preface} \footnote{Sinfield, p. 3.} \footnote{Retreat into the Mind, pp. 156-157.} \end{flushleft}
Beneath the music from a farther room.\textsuperscript{131}

‘Prufrock’ is far removed from any coherent present tense action, leading Martin to refer to Prufrock as ‘a man without a present, at least in terms of meaningful uses of language.’\textsuperscript{132}

West’s ramblings, in the end, are also without a true present, but her most passionate and illogical ramblings centres on her critique of Maria Callas. This and other sections relayed in the past tense are evidence of past failures that prove that the future also promises failure. In the present, West reasserts that nothing is left for her but ‘not to have a body.’\textsuperscript{133} This becomes the basis of the struggle for identity that Bidart promotes.

Sinfield writes that the Modernist ‘dramatic monologue deliberately undermines the naturalistic conception of character. The speaker and his situation hang in an insubstantial void. Attention is concentrated upon moments of intense apprehension which transcend circumstances and perhaps personality.’\textsuperscript{134} Each recollection of West’s causes her to exhibit tense anxiety and severe swerves of mood as she declares she will adhere to her unrealistic ‘ideal.’ But for every proclamation, West is also prone to desiring the opposite. There are moments where she wishes to take the man in the restaurant as her lover, should not dread food, should not obsess over it, and wishes on some level that she could have reciprocated their feelings.\textsuperscript{135} ‘The Arc’ also seems to revolve around an undermining thought: the speaker does not have part of an arm but his body is convinced that it does. The speaker escapes his familiar life to go to Paris in attempt to reconcile his body and mind; but like West, the speaker fails. His body still feels an arm that isn’t there.\textsuperscript{136}

Both ‘The Arc’ and ‘West’ approach their undermining like the rambling, slow pace of Eliot’s ‘Prufrock.’ But Pound offered a more precise and rigid version in ‘La Fraisne:

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{132} Martin, p. 235.
\item \textsuperscript{133} ‘Ellen West,’ p. 38, ll. 201.
\item \textsuperscript{134} \textit{Dramatic Monologue}, p. 65.
\item \textsuperscript{135} ‘Ellen West,’ ll. 59-60, 205-215, & 317-321.
\item \textsuperscript{136} ‘The Arc,’ p. 10-12, ll. 173, 178-180, & 215-218.
\end{itemize}
For I was a gaunt, grave councillor
Being in all things wise, and very old,
But I have put aside this folly and the cold
That old age weareth for a cloak.\textsuperscript{137}

Part of what aids Pound in creating an ungrounded character is temporal fragmentation, writes Martin. These subversions are ‘verbal affectations’ because the present has ‘no meaningful continuity with something said before.’\textsuperscript{138} In both ‘La Fraisne’ and ‘Prufrock,’ the past and present are never able to intersect.\textsuperscript{139} This method is more apparent in ‘West’ than in ‘The Arc.’ West speaks in the present, yet by the end of the poem, the reader comes to understand that she is dead. Bidart, then, makes a good case for allowing West to speak from a position of ‘not having a body,’ even though that is an impossibility.

What grounds the reader in the real and connects West’s present and past are Binswanger’s notes. However, this presents a possible incongruity in respect to the form’s use of one character. Most accepted definitions denote the dramatic monologue as having only one speaker or character. Langbaum states that by using only one speaker ‘we give [the main character] all our sympathy as a condition of reading the poem, since he is the only character there.’\textsuperscript{140} The second character in ‘Ellen West’ impedes absolute participation in West’s cognitive projections. It is important to note that Binswanger’s notes do not equate to a speaker, as do the different speakers of Eliot’s The Wasteland. The notes are clearly a written language, and while they do contradict West’s ideals, they are not interacting with an auditor or West. The alternating sections of prose and lyric perform a duel of sorts, heightening the tension and torment of West. These disparate, duelling sections of lyric and prose also create a fragmentation that perhaps had its beginnings in ‘Herbert White’ five years prior. Whereas ‘Herbert White’ consists of numerous small dramatic monologues

\textsuperscript{138} Martin, pp. 223 & 227-228.
\textsuperscript{139} Ibid p. 235.
\textsuperscript{140} \textit{The Poetry of Experience}, preface.
interrupted by weighty section breaks and white space, Bidart employs prose, white space, and widely-spaced, bolded periods (the latter being used throughout *The Book of the Body*) that interrupt Ellen’s tangents. The poem, then, is a series of fragments.

Langbaum insists that providing the reader with means to reflect removes us from the realm of dramatic monologue. The speaker is meant to be an ‘autonomous force,’ which the reader denies the speaker by responding to and impeding the speaker’s freedom of ‘self-expression.’ He argues that maintaining the first person point-of-view is necessary to build tension and more readily access the speaker’s ‘extraordinary perspective.’ It allows the reader to establish a sense of ‘disequilibrium’ between ‘sympathy’ and ‘judgment’ towards the speaker through maintained exposure to them. Such ‘disequilibrium’ created by constant exposure ‘is the whole purpose of the dramatic monologue.’ But Bidart is able to achieve ‘disequilibrium’ without West's unrelenting voice.

While West is not a constant voice, given the fragmentary nature of the poem, she is undoubtedly the leading dramatic figure. A. Dwight Culler says that a fragmentary nature is part of the ‘essence’ of the dramatic monologue and that ‘the reader participates in the creation of meaning by tacitly supplying the other side of the dialogue, the antecedent and concluding actions.’ Physical voids in a poem provide the reader with time to respond to the speaker, which then introduces judgment and suspends unconditional sympathy.

The fragmentary nature of ‘Ellen West’ offers the reader a reprieve where West is allowed none; we are meant to ‘survive her.’ When West states that her doctors see her ‘as just a “case,”’ the prose sections step in to strongly advise the reader that West is not of sound mind; her truth is not to be trusted. The prose sections note, without bias, a different West than the speaker portrays: she ‘suffers tortured vomiting at night and violent

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141 *The Poetry of Experience*, pp. 137, 139 – 140, & 177.
142 ‘Monodrama and the Dramatic Monologue,’ p. 368.
143 ‘Writing ‘Ellen West,’” p. 8, ll. 5.
144 ‘Ellen West,” p. 30 & 40, ll. 13 & 239-245
diarrhoea during the day,’ is ‘a skeleton, and weighs only 92 pounds.’ She is neither ‘elegant’ nor ‘big-boned’ and the contradictions prevent the reader from completely believing and sympathizing with West as the sole ‘instrument of perception,’ ‘maker of meaning,’ and ‘maker of the poem’s validity.’ West, then, faces not only judgment from her doctors, but from the reader and what might be called the third-party, referred to as a ‘silent auditor’ by Sinfield. Whereas a more traditional dramatic monologue, according to Sinfield and Shaw, forces the reader to understand the world through the speaker’s perspective, Bidart’s poem repeatedly sets up West’s contradictory perspective just to deconstruct it or oppose it.

Bidart’s portrayal of body-dysmorphia might be an example of what Shaw calls ‘the post-Nietzschean model of interpretation’ in Modernist dramatic monologues. Shaw explains that this model argues that man exists unable to unravel or identify self-deceptions and poetry lacks sincerity. Shaw explains that the model is set in opposition to the Romantic concept of ‘I feel, am what I feel, know what I feel.’ He adds that critics that use this model of interpretation ‘are interested in charting the operation of bad faith or unconscious self-deception and of determining the limits of what can and cannot be known in a dramatic monologue.’

Robert Giannone writes that Pound, in ‘Portrait D'une Femme,’ emphasises a ‘psychological effect with a minimum of reference to associated experience.’

Your mind and you are our Sargasso Sea,
London has swept about you this score years
And bright ships left you this or that in fee:
Ideas, old gossip, oddments of all things,

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145 ‘Ellen West,’ 30 & 31, ll. 4-7, 26-29.
146 Ibid p. 30 & 39, ll. 7 & 222.
147 Langbaum, The Poetry of Experience, p. 52.
148 Sinfield, p. 18.
149 Sinfield, pp. 5-6; Shaw, Origins of the Monologue, p. 12.
150 Origins of the Monologue, p. 188.
151 Ibid p. 188
Strange spars of knowledge and dimmed wares of price.  

The speaker is addressing a painting and therefore, experience is imagined or based on other’s experience with the painting. All experiences are revealed with the intent of conveying what the speaker interprets the psychological implications of the painting to be. Bidart, in a similar fashion to Pound, has West assign psychological traits to Maria Callas. Those, in turn, are assigned to West, but West’s interpretations of Callas’ experience are not those of West despite West feeling as though Callas’ life is a reflection of her own. Bidart’s method of using speakers who, by various degrees, lie to themselves implements the speech of ‘illusion’ from which the mentally unsound speaker will voice their empirical truth. The illusion becomes the universe and is subject to interpretation by entities external to it. Bidart presents West as an unsound character struggling with identity who fails to expose a legitimately honest nature. However, in many places in ‘West,’ Bidart relays experience from which West derives her argument from:

*Only by acting; choosing, rejecting, have I made myself – discovered who and what Ellen can be.*  

These sentiments do seem to apply to the Romantic notion of, ‘I feel, am what I feel, know what I feel’ that is in direct opposition, which is an indication that Bidart drew from numerous modes of dramatic monologue tradition when writing his own. West ‘feels’ that she is a ‘case,’ ‘meat,’ an ‘ideal,’ and a disappointment to others. Her self-definition and

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154 Ibid p. 188-189.
155 ‘Ellen West,’ p. 39, ll. 228-231.
157 ‘Ellen West,’ pp. 30 & 42, ll. 10, 13, 15, 297.
reaction to opposition is much the same in the beginning of the poem as it is in the end, her end.

--- My doctors tell me I must give up
this ideal;
but I
WILL NOT . . . cannot. 158

In keeping with the concept of lack self-knowledge, Bidart presents a West that is either incapable or unwilling to accept the observations of outside parties because knowledge is limited to the ‘I.’ The meaning of what West is unable to say or know is known to the reader. Shaw writes that this is one aspect of a dramatic monologue and that the unconscious is ‘usually more important’ than the ‘conscious.’ 159 West straddles the line separating inability to know about one’s self and revealing to the reader their subjective truth. It is this manner of existing, what Shaw calls ‘double irony’ within most dramatic monologues, that heightens the crisis of Bidart’s West and promotes the idea of ‘the nervous, illogical I’ found in Binswanger’s text. 160 Bidart uses the Modernist and Romantic ideas concerning experience versus psychology against each other, is yet another method of revealing mental disorder and West’s refusal or inability to cope with it. West is unable maintain a consistent approach to her argument.

West’s inability to turn away from her obsessions prevents her from deciphering the ‘illusions [she] lives by,’ which Shaw perceives in Browning’s ‘Andrea del Sarto’ and Tennyson’s ‘St Simeon Stylites.’ 161 West’s letter at the end of the poem grants her eternal life ‘outside of the dramatic situation.’ 162 This, again, falls outside of what Sessions argues is the aspiration of perfect dramatic monologue because the tense of the situation has been

158 ‘Ellen West,’ p. 30, ll. 9 – 12.
160 ‘Masks of the Unconscious,’ p. 439;
161 Shaw, Origins of the Monologue, p. 188
transferred to a different time. However, the letter also serves as the hero’s justification and defence and is the final evidence presented that proves that West is the same as she was at the start of the poem: a figure who ‘WILL NOT ... cannot’ ‘give up this ideal’ and is meant for ‘dying.’ She is reaffirming her self-deception and her main argument, which creates the type of patterns that Langbaum saw in dramatic monologues like Eliot’s ‘J. Alfred Prufrock’ where the speaker sends the initial message forward to the speaker at the end of the poem. Langbaum argues that the repetition of such dramatic sentiment is ‘the most effective climax in dramatic monologues.’ In other words, a dramatic monologue’s speaker exists in stasis and a reaffirmation of a speaker’s position at the end of the poem establishes this.

That West is not aware of truth is typical of the speakers in dramatic monologues. The speaker, ‘can embody or live their truths but never speak them,’ which, in a manner of speaking, is a way that the speaker lies to himself to preserve their delusory mentality. Shaw lists Browning’s ‘Andrea del Sarto’ as an example. Del Sarto begs his wife to stay the evening with him, but Shaw argues that, though he is unaware, he is not actually disturbed by her departure. In ‘West,’ the idea of a ‘refuser’ might evoke images of strength and conscious will, West also describes herself as ‘crippled,’ implying weakness and lack of control. What the reader comes to understand through use of this manner of repetition is that West is more capable of choice and self-control than she either knows or admits to herself, marking her as wholly unreliable. West’s unconscious need for self deprecation and the idea that she has choices become the poem’s unconscious revelations.

As part of her defence, West must add to her discourse on what coping mechanisms she has attempted in order to escape the constant ‘dread’ that drives her towards what

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163 Sessions, p. 510.
164 ‘Ellen West,’ p. 30, ll. 3, 9-12.
165 Poems of Experience, p. 191.
166 Ibid p. 154.
167 ‘Masks of the Unconscious,’ pp. 439 & 442.
Langbaum calls the ‘only ultimate conclusion of a dramatic monologue’: ‘the speaker’s death.’ West argues that all methods she undertakes to combat thoughts of eating and lack thereof ‘[are] like trying to appease thirst | with ink.’ Each night, West regurgitates laxatives and other contents of her stomach, and dares to hope that in the morning, the night’s rejection of food will have quieted her mind. It doesn’t. Hope serves an inverse function within the poem; any grain of it within the poem amplifies its own ineffectiveness.

‘Ellen West’ is meant to be dramatic and the hyperbolic nature of the speaker’s illness is meant to increase the dramatic nature of the poem where adherence to genre is disregarded. What the poem does have are the unconscious revelations and ‘unpredictable apostrophes or swerves of voice’ which Shaw claims are a common feature. ‘West’ combines elements of the Modernist and Victorian monologues as counterpoints much like Bidart counterpoints Binswanger’s notes against West’s truths. The latter method, however, is one of Bidart’s additions to the form, a feature that Bidart has added into a form that has not maintained rigid requirements. In the next section, this thesis discusses how Bidart employs the use of a feint in ‘West.’ This feature is what T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound regarded as ‘the poet speaking to the audience through a mask.’ Bidart uses the poem not only as a reinvention of Ellen West’s psychological history, but as a front for his own, in the same manner that he and Herbert White’s experiences often paralleled. ‘Ellen West,’ then, harnesses the ‘essence,’ what Culler regards as of vital importance to classification, of what a dramatic monologue is generally thought to be. It is able to function as a loose form of dramatic monologue that encourages us to further investigate the genre’s innovative possibilities.

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172 Culler, p. 368.
III. Covert Confessionalism: Bidart’s Use of the Feint As Agent of Loss

Many literary critics who discuss the dramatic monologue have surmised that while it contains a first person speaker that was not the poet, the poetic form still contained strong hints of a third voice, ostensibly the poet. Shaw says that this is the poet ‘speaking to the audience through a mask.’\(^\text{173}\) Pound echoed this exact sentiment, adding only that the act of wearing masks could be interpreted as an act of translation and provide the poet with the freedom to experiment with different forms and linguistic modes.\(^\text{174}\) Prior to ‘Ellen West,’ Bidart had used a feint in ‘Herbert White’ when, in his 1983 interview, he indicated that he used an anti-self as a vehicle to work through personal issues.\(^\text{175}\) Bidart used what he was not in order to say what he was.

Subsequently, the mask worn for ‘Ellen West’ reacts to the surface differences between the poet and character. The use of the feint gives credence to Bidart’s classification as a Post-Confessional poet who creates characters or utilises historical figures to ‘gain access to otherwise inaccessible characters.’\(^\text{176}\) Consequently, Dan Chiasson hits upon something critical when he maintains that to explore Bidart’s poems is equivalent to ‘encounter[ing] Bidart’s presence – often contentious -- within another, foreign, presence.’\(^\text{177}\) Ellen West occurs on the page as a character just as unlike Bidart at face-value as two of Bidart’s other characters from his dramatic monologues: Herbert White and Vaslav Nijinsky. Like Nijinsky, West is a historical figure, one that Bidart was trying to translate rather than create.\(^\text{178}\)

In attempting to ‘translate,’ as Pound described, Bidart designed a character linked to the person in Binswanger’s case-study: a woman filled with ‘dread’ concerning both familial

\(^{174}\) qtd. in Sinfield, pp. 71-72.
\(^{175}\) ‘An Interview -- With Mark Halliday (1983),’ p. 238.
\(^{176}\) Chiasson, One Kind of Everything, p. 80.
\(^{177}\) Ibid p. 80
\(^{178}\) ‘An Interview -- With Mark Halliday (1983),’ p. 239.
and romantic relationships, food, gender, the role women were required to fill in society, and even her own gender identity. As West’s illness progresses, so too does her isolation; her sphere shrinking, contracting so that her obsessions with food and existing become a ‘psychophysical garb’ she wears as justification for her inflexible ideal. This ideal functions as a prison where there is no escape.\textsuperscript{179}

While Bidart does not suffer from the symptoms of anorexia, he claims he felt an obsession with food.\textsuperscript{180} It can also be inferred from ‘West’ and Bidart’s personal poetry that both the real West and Bidart experienced overwhelming, co-dependent familial relationships and, as in ‘Herbert White,’ the sharing of experience, emotions, and philosophies. Bidart not only builds up West, but her narrative adds to the archetype of the Self that Bidart creates over the course of his books

If one is to start simply, we find that it is Bidart who likes ‘three scoops of vanilla ice cream,’ as indicated by Bidart’s college associate Alice Mattinson.\textsuperscript{181} The historical account of Ellen West in Binswanger’s case study doesn’t contain any such description. In fact, Binswanger observed that the historical West was averse to milk products.\textsuperscript{182} In these opening lines, Bidart not only chooses to speak through his character, he chooses to present himself first. It is as if he is saying through this one detail, ‘I am her, she is me.’ West and the poet are then firmly categorised together as being simultaneously repulsed and preoccupied with food. Food and lack of food challenges the concept of corporeality and how this coincides with expectations placed on the different genders.\textsuperscript{183} Bidart uses food, the most fore-grounded image in ‘West,’ to make various points regarding intimacy, its loss or the

\textsuperscript{179} ‘The Case of Ellen West,’ pp. 239-242, 245, 249, 281, 336.
\textsuperscript{180} ‘Writing ‘Ellen West,’” p. 4, ll. 8-10.
\textsuperscript{182} Binswanger, ‘The Case of Ellen West,’ p. 238.
\textsuperscript{183} ‘Writing ‘Ellen West,’” p. 4, ll. 8-10.
rejection of. Food, though, is predominately associated with death, the escape and wish for freedom that many of Bidart’s books unresolvedly pursue.

What we find is that food does not satisfy either poet or character on an emotional level. West says that, ‘…trying to stop my hunger with FOOD | is like trying to appease thirst | with ink.’ If Bidart’s newest poems ‘Glutton’ and ‘Mouth,’ both from *Metaphysical Dog*, are read as personal poems meant to represent some autobiographical truth for the poet, then he too is unable to find gratification from food. In the poem ‘Glutton,’ Bidart recalls his grandmother’s sausage, but he is unable to remember how it tasted. He applies the same longing for the taste of a perfect pear he once ate. He hungers for a sensation that is irrevocably lost, and coincidentally, appears to hunger for a past relationship or an emotional connection that has been severed. Likewise, West’s sense of taste seems also misplaced, as the mentioning of particular foods within ‘Ellen West’ generate images rather than producing memories of what these particular foods offered in the way of exposing other sensations. The reader witnesses the restrained manner in which West ‘allows’ herself the action of eating bread and ice cream. However, she doesn’t truly experience the food; or rather, she does not remember the experience. She chooses to focus on the idea that she feels isolated in a crowded restaurant. Essentially, food is being used as a prop, a disguise and excuse to eavesdrop. It is a tool used to promote one of her other neurotic compulsions: obsessions with people and relationships.

In the restaurant, West observes a couple that, at first, meet her idea of physical perfection. She wants to be the slender woman and, concurrently, desires to replace her as the slender man’s ‘lover.’ It is as if West is looking to this couple for meaning, to sate a mental hunger that physical food cannot. David Holbrook refers to such hunger as ‘existence-

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184 *Ellen West,* p. 40, ll. 236-238.
187 Ibid p. 31, ll. 35-42.
188 Ibid p. 32, ll. 43-60.
hunger,’ which is an infantile hunger aimed at ‘substantiality of identity.’ Bidart creates a character searching for a stable relationship to live through vicariously, having failed to establish one of her own that offers complete fulfilment. The couple has shown itself capable of sharing an intimacy that West cannot. While the couple act in tandem, as one, West cannot as she has denied herself any capability needed for a true and healthy union. Such fear causing ‘mutual incorporation’ can be found in an ‘ontologically insecure’ individual according to R.D. Laing. West’s desire to ‘not have a body’ and know herself in the process is similar to Laing’s argument that ‘the denial of being, as a means of preserving being’ is to die so that the person can live. However, West is not entirely rejecting ‘being,’ she is ‘acting; choosing.’ This is not the total existential rejection and alienation that is described by Birkerts. Her rejection of food is not a rejection of her sexuality so much as being conflicted with it. Her bisexuality does not indicate a lack of sexuality, nor does her obsession with food cause a ‘flaring-up of her sexual being’ as Birkerts claims. She exhibits a ‘homo-erotic’ relationship with another patient during a period of mental calm rather than during a period of ‘vexation and torment.’ So while West is divided, she experiences both sides of her conflict, prompting her to be overwhelmed. Food is an object that can be controlled and Bidart morphs it into a non-lethal weapon. West is unconscious of food as a threat to her world and it is not lack of food that ultimately kills her. Food is representative of failure rather than food serving as the main aggressor that assaults West.

Bidart’s treatments of food in other poems are echoes of what we see in ‘Ellen West,’ reinforcing the idea that Bidart’s person is a background presence in the poem. The

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191 Laing, p. 150.
192 ‘Ellen West,’ p. 39, ll. 229.
193 Birkerts, p. 119.
194 Bidart, ‘Ellen West,’ p. 34, ll. 108-111.
experience Bidart shares in ‘Glutton’ indicates that food is a similar representation; it is a
symbol for the loss of intimacy or inability to create such a connection. The link that Bidart
shared with his grandmother has been cut off. In other words, the mutual attachment
conceived through their familial relationship has ceased to exist on the side of the
grandmother, leaving the grandson figure bereft. What is left is the memory of her sausage,
something so singular and special; it warrants its own line and stanza:

Ropes of my dead
grandmother's unreproducible
sausage, curing for weeks

The act of making this food, ‘curing [it] for weeks | on the front porch’ indicates that through
food, there was a bond forged which was completely unique based on the irreproducibility of
the recipe. The feint of this sort goes beyond shared histories between West and Bidart.
Where Bidart treasures the familial intimacy, West does not. It is West, ultimately, who dies
never having known what it is like to be ‘drawn […] into a circle.’

Inclusion within The Book of the Body is something the speakers attempt to avoid or
escape. The speaker of ‘The Arc’ carries out an emotionally superficial and fleeting
encounter with a married man in conjunction with escaping his family’s ‘sympathy’ by
travelling to Paris. The emotional connection that the speaker does experience is a sense of
identification with a three-legged dog. The dog, incapable of sentient thought, is therefore
incapable being aware ‘of what he lacked; | free of memory as a vegetable.’ The speaker
tries to replicate this moment, but like West, his attempt ends in failure. While the speaker
has untangled himself from human relationships, he has not been able to erase his memories.
He must face them as ‘Herbert White,’ in Bidart’s previous book, was compelled to. For

197 Ibid p. 55, ll. 2-3.
198 ‘Ellen West,’ p. 43, ll. 319.
Bidart, once the journey to remember was achieved, the archetype he constructed was thereby fated to forever be subjected to traumas that could not be entirely healed.

Bidart’s archetype and West are not only incapable of resolving their issues, but also of being able to use ‘material’ things as coping mechanisms which would allay anxiety and allow for intimacy. Another poem from *Metaphysical Dog*, ‘Mouth,’ utilises food consumption for a similar purpose as ‘Ellen West’ and ‘Glutton’: food cannot serve as a substitute for intimacy. Like West, the speaker is a ‘refuser.’ However, it seems as though in this instance, his body is rejecting the food in spite of his desires:

...his stomach
rebeld at food, as quickly as he ate
it passed right through him, his body
refused what his body needed.
[...]
... he shoved
meat into his mouth but still his
body retained nothing. Absorbed
nothing.

What the speaker really pursues is ‘Love, which always to his surprise | exhilarated even as it tormented | and absorbed him.’ By way of torment, love produces feelings of danger and need to escape: ‘Faces too close, that despite themselves | promise, then out of the panic disappointment.’ Love forces sensation on him so that ‘when you smell your | flesh you smell | unfulfillment.’ Flesh is treated impersonally, just as the treatment of food, where nothing other than meat is mentioned. Even then, the word ‘meat’ is noticeably vague. Thus, ‘flesh’ and ‘meat’ can be treated interchangeably, so that now, two sensations produced by interaction with food cause mental anguish. This is a sentiment expressed so strongly in ‘Ellen West’ that it has become perhaps the most discussed critical aspect of this poem.

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200 ‘Ellen West,’ p. 38, ll. 197.
202 Ibid p. 85, ll. 16-18.
199 Ibid p. 86, ll. 34-35.
204 Ibid p. 86, ll. 40-42.
This anguish is indicative of the feelings of love that the speaker of ‘Mouth’ cannot reciprocate. The lover makes demands, but the speaker does not do the same, thus indicating a helplessness and absence of symbiosis. Instead, the speaker, ‘twists inside the box | he cannot exit or rise above. | He thinks he must die.’ Lack of reciprocation and the possibility of being forced into abandoning one’s principle equals death. Bidart cannot abide or endure the demands of the lover so he imagines his death.

_The Book of the Body_ treats intimacy as an overall inconvenience. The speaker of ‘The Arc’ resists emotional investment in his lover and family. ‘Elegy’ indicates that an attachment to a family pet is preferable to attachment to family; when Belafont dies, the speaker dies on some level as well. ‘The Book of the Body’ displays the appeal of the empty sexual act and the anxiety at coming to terms with sexual identity. Attempts to comply with the ‘unreasonable’ nature of relationships strain the ‘limits of the will.’ ‘Ellen West’ is the end poem of _The Book of the Body_ and recipient of all of the failings from the preceding poems. West’s response is an eruption, containing not only the anxiety of what Bidart was trying to convey of the historical West, but of the speaker of ‘The Arc’ and the Bidart projected into the personal poems that make up the interior of _The Book of the Body_. After being unable to live up to the expectations she feels her husband, doctors and ‘Dearest’ have, West kills herself. The act is not as a result of denying herself food, shrinking her body to nothingness. Instead, she ingests poison; takes something into her body, adds to it, to still her mind. ‘West’ is the only poem where self-annihilation is the equivalent of peace; even in other dramatic monologues like ‘Herbert White’ and ‘The Arc.’ With the images in ‘West’ reappearing in Bidart’s other works, ‘Ellen West’ itself can be read as more complex than originally thought. A feat of this sort, says Sinfield:

205 ‘Ellen West,’ p. 86, ll. 40-41.
206 Ibid p. 86, ll. 53-55.
207 ‘Elegy: Lineage,’ pp. 23-24, ll. 13-22;
places the individual in a wider context of thought and events. On one hand we have a powerful impression, through his own mind, of the kind of person the speaker is. On the other, we feel the pressure of an external force which threatens to qualify or even nullify the efforts of the speaker. […] the validity of their approach to the world and their own significance within it is challenged by our larger consciousness.  

Death and the end of the self are the answers that ‘Ellen West’ and ‘Herbert White’ arrive at, an impulse that developed within Bidart himself after the death of his mother.  

As Golden State explored and sought to work through Bidart’s relationship with his father, and to a smaller extent his mother, ‘Ellen West’ and ‘Confessional,’ a pseudo-fictional poem that accounts for emotional autobiography rather than Bidart’s history, focus on the psychological negativity provoked by his relationship with his mother almost exclusively. This connection exists in spite of the fact that ‘West’ only mentions a mother figure twice within the poem, negating a narrative connection as in ‘Herbert White.’ Bidart reveals in ‘Writing “Ellen West”’ that the poem was an ‘Exorcism of that thing within Frank that wanted, after his mother’s death, to die,’ connecting ‘West’ to Bidart’s archetype in terms of the motivations of the characters. The extraordinary feint in ‘Ellen West’ is focused on the mother without the poem having to be as the poet was focused on her while writing ‘West.’  

The mother figure that is present in ‘Ellen West’ is representative of the breaking of a natural bond. West views her mother as an object forced to succumb to aging as dictated by nature:

Even as a child,  
I saw the “natural process of aging  
is for one’s middle of thicken ---  
one’s skin to blotch;  

as happened to my mother.  
And her mother.  

I loathed “Nature.”  

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208 Dramatic Monologue, p. 34.  
209 ‘Writing ‘Ellen West,’” p. 4, ll. 2-4.  
210 Ibid p. 4, ll. 2-3.  
211 ‘Ellen West,’ pp. 33-34, ll. 85-91.
For Bidart, nature was also an adversary of sorts; at the least, an inaccessible medium which he needed to exist to bond with his mother. The mother-figure in ‘Book of the Body’ represents the same alienating force, the same psychological burden, apparent in ‘Herbert White.’ In section II, ‘Pruning,’ the mother is a threatening figure:

But I can’t help but remember
her at least fifteen years earlier,
standing in the doorway, shrieking at me
when I wanted to be a priest:
‘It’s just as well!
You had mumps ---; they went down ---; you’ll never,
gelding, have kids!’
twisting her last knife

Her denunciation of the speaker as a ‘gelding,’ separates the speaker literally from his sexual organs and figuratively from his masculinity. Such is a permanent break between the two and her attempt to re-forge the bond, force her dependency on him, is met with resentment and resistance:

she begged me to take her out;
the cruel,
*unreasonable* things she said to me! Her doctor
told me I was doing the right thing, but
what she said
almost drove me crazy . . .

‘Elegy’ was written after Bidart’s mother’s death and there is at least some emotional truth if not biographical truth to ‘Elegy.’ The literal breaking of their bond remains existing and conflicted in *The Book of the Body.* By committing it to the book, the duality of their bond builds until ‘Ellen West,’’ where West kills herself, the act that Bidart says in ‘Writing “Ellen West”’ was what he desired after she died.

*Sacrifice* followed *The Book of the Body* and continued using conflict with mother figure thematically. In ‘Confessional,’ he writes, ‘We couldn’t meet in Nature, --- | … AND ALL WE HAD WAS NATURE.’

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212 ‘Elegy: Pruning,’’ p. 20, ll. 6-12.
213 ‘Elegy: Lineage,’’ p. 24, ll. 18-23.
relationships were accessible when based on opposing wills or foreign actions and emotions. West’s dependence was tied up not in her mother’s actions toward her, but in what the slow decay represented. The slow death of West’s mother due to aging haunted and challenged West more than action or lack-of-action on the mother or grandmother’s part. For Bidart, the mother figure in many of his non-dramatic monologues ‘JUST DIED,’ ‘the issues in her life | didn’t come out of somewhere, reached no culmination, | climax or catharsis, ---.’ The haunting that Bidart experienced, was inescapably tangled up in, was the co-dependent nature of their relationship. The child-figure that Bidart created for his voice wanted ‘to be the center, the focus of her life.’

It was as an adult that he wanted to sever the co-dependent connection:

All he had told her in words and more than words for years was that her possessiveness and terror at his independence were wrong, wrong, wrong.

* He was the only person she wanted to be with but he refused to live down the block and then she died.

As Bidart denied the mother figures a physical nearness in any poem of his that contained such a character, West rejected her mother (and more futilely, nature) and the mother/daughter connection forged by two female bodies aging.

Bidart’s personal poems indicate a lack of control in concerns to the wants of the mother. The speaker feels that the mother figure unconsciously wants him ‘to die.’ The lack of control the faced in ‘Ellen West’ is equally distressing for the speaker. West could not control the aging process of her mother and grandmother. She could only reject them and attempt to fight off the natural maturation processes in her own body. To give in to what could not be controlled would be to compel West to give up the ‘ideal’ she adopted after developing such disgust towards the process she witnessed in the female members of her

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216 ‘Writing ‘Ellen West,,”’ p. 6-7, ll. 36-40.
217 Ibid p. 6, ll. 36.
family as a child. Such a ‘compromise’ seemed ‘sterile and unreal.’

West realises that inclinations aside, a domestic life is not something that is achievable for her. In an interview concerning ‘Ellen West,’ Bidart confirms the usage of the shadow self when writing dramatic monologues. He explains that, ‘As a graduate student, I had taken a course in Yeats, who talks about the “anti-self,” about the usefulness of including an anti-self in the work of art— which is to say, someone who is all the things that one is not. By giving voice to what one is not, one understands oneself by confronting one’s shadow.’

In consequence, by writing ‘Ellen West,’ once again ‘being what he was not,’ Bidart confronted the impasse he was at with yet another parent, this instance being his mother and not his father. Bidart was not his West, but by donning her as a mask, he was able to find a common ground with her. Having dealt with similar issues in a Post-Confessional manner, within the genre of the dramatic monologue, Bidart’s personal poems circumvent what Adam Kirsch regards as one of the pitfalls of Confessionalism: the ‘intoxication of narcissism.’

Bidart’s approach to the topic of self-annihilation as a discourse in ‘Ellen West’ and his poem ‘Mouth’ reveals the possibilities of healing and coping via a public platform. ‘Ellen West’ and ‘Mouth’ end in death, perhaps indicating that even closure is subject to limitations. Poems that followed the writing of ‘Ellen West,’ like ‘Glutton,’ ‘Writing ‘Ellen West,’ and ‘Confessional’ completed the poetic framing of healing by indicating the desire for continued existence. Bidart indicates in ‘Writing “Ellen West”’ that he intended to accomplish this by using West's character as a vessel to ‘expel’ his crisis. Prior to writing ‘West,’ Bidart interpreted the historical person as waging:

war between the mind and body, lived out
in her body each stage of the war, its journey and progress, in
which compromise, reconciliation is attempted then rejected

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218 ‘Ellen West,’ p. 44, ll. 325-327.
219 Hix, p. 194.
221 ‘Writing “Ellen West,”’ p. 7, ll. 46-47.
then mourned, till she reaches at last, in an ecstasy costing not less than everything, death.\textsuperscript{222}

The dramatic apex of Bidart’s conversation on physical existence through the monologue’s speaker occurs in the section regarding Maria Callas. We are to believe that Maria Callas is Ellen West’s ‘favorite singer’ and that West identifies with Callas so closely that she regards Callas’ weight-loss and career decline as autobiographical.\textsuperscript{223}

Yet such an association between the two females is an impossibility. Ellen West died in 1921 while Maria Callas was not born until 1923.\textsuperscript{224} Bidart revealed in his interview with H.L. Hix, that the interest in Maria Callas was his own, originating during his collegiate years at Harvard.\textsuperscript{225} Therefore the use of a feint becomes obvious and the presence of the poet overwhelming. Sinfield notes that, ‘the slightest touch can bring [the poet] into full focus’ and ‘at such moments the poet obtrudes and the illusion of the feint is specially transparent.’\textsuperscript{226} Such an intrusion makes us more aware that Ellen West is a ‘dramatic creation’ and ‘we are obliged to posit simultaneously the speaking ‘I’ and the poet’s “I.”’\textsuperscript{227} Gray makes an excellent assertion that Callas’ inclusion is a ‘postromantic allegory for the artistic process, practically, in a moment of conflation of Bidart- Ellen-Callas, an \textit{ars poetica}.’\textsuperscript{228} This section, though, appears to have more than one function within the text as indicated by the multi-layered textuality produced when both West and Bidart are simultaneously present. Bidart addresses the reader through the lens of his speaker; West’s

\textsuperscript{222} ‘Writing “Ellen West,”’ p. 5, ll. 11-15.
\textsuperscript{223} ‘Ellen West,’ pp. 35 & 37, ll. 114 & 172.
\textsuperscript{226} \textit{Dramatic Monologue}, pp. 31-32.
\textsuperscript{227} Ibid p. 31-32
\textsuperscript{228} ‘Necessary Thought,’ p. 730.
presence is more attuned to Callas’ biography than the poet; the link between these two characters causes Callas to appear as an object and metaphor for rebirth after a bodily decay.

This ‘new’ Maria Callas, one that even Bidart preferred says Mattinson, is not glamorised in the poem as one might suppose.229 The renewed body is not referred to with any more positivity than her body pre-obliteration. ‘Insatiable,’ ‘fragile,’ ‘shrill,’ and lacking ‘athleticism’ are just a few descriptors that indicate Callas, just like the couple in the restaurant, have failed to live up to West’s ideals.230 Callas now fights with herself to sing, her ‘art’ becoming ‘more refined,’ ‘more capable of expressing humiliation, | rage, betrayal.’ Through making herself smaller, Callas has made her essence more ‘manifest,’ and defiant against her peers and a business designed to ‘annihilate the spirit.’231 Callas, too, is painted as a ‘refuser,’ an opponent to not only herself, but to the unreasonable expectations placed on her. What West resolves to do is transcend Callas, learn from Callas’ failure. What Bidart has done, then, is lend his interests back to West in a reverse feint. Rather than use West to speak to the reader, he is lending part of himself so that West can use it as part of her defence, demonstrating how a feint can be reciprocal. Bidart lending aspects of himself to West is the equivalent to the lending in ‘Herbert White’: lending his autobiography to his character allows or facilitates the reader being able to recognise an otherwise inaccessible psychological feature.

Autobiography in the dramatic monologue provides Bidart with the space for him to ‘exorcise’ the memory of the mother in the space he created for West.232 Where West is the subjective object of this universe, Bidart is the objective commentator. He confronts the memories of his mother when he ‘no longer must face her;’ to escape unchanging

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229 Mattinson, p. 39.
230 ‘Ellen West,’ p. 36, ll. 141, 144, 150, 176.
231 Ibid pp. 36-37, ll. 155-162.
232 ‘Writing ‘Ellen West,’’ p. 4, ll. 1-3.
‘MEMORY.’ Nonetheless, there is a difficulty in defeating such memories when one is inextricably connected to them: he was the one creation his mother ‘had made,’ and he contained all of her ‘unappeasable anger, and remorse.’ When his mother’s death should provide closure, Bidart encounters a Jungian problem as described by Williamson:

A man cannot get rid of himself in favor of an artificial personality without punishment. Even the attempt to do so brings on, in all ordinary cases, unconscious reactions… To the degree that the world invites the individual to identify with the mask, he is delivered over to influences from within…An opposite forces its way up from the inside; it is exactly as though the unconscious suppressed the ego with the very same power which drew the ego into the persona.

This seems to imply that to build an archetype for the self or wear a mask has its own drawbacks.

This is something Bidart admits in ‘Borges and I.’ The myth of himself that is found throughout his work truly is a myth:

Frank had the illusion that though the universe of one of his poems seemed so close to what seemed his own universe at the second of writing it that he wasn’t sure how they differed even though the paraphernalia often differed, after he has written it its universe was never exactly his universe, and so, soon, it disgusted him a little, the mirror was dirty and cracked.

The feint in a dramatic monologue does not make the poet and speaker interchangeable. It is a technique for the poet to express some aspect of himself or herself that runs parallel to an illuminated aspect of the speaker. This problem is identical to a misconception about confessional poetry: that the catharsis of writing solves problems. As Anne Sexton noted, ‘You don’t solve problems in writing. They’re still there. I’ve heard psychiatrists say, “See you’ve forgiven your gather. There is it in your poem. But I haven’t forgiven my father. I just

233 ‘Confessional,’ p. 55, II, ll. 364.
wrote that I did.”237 One can, however, “‘get all of the parts of the problem”’ out there as
Bidart said.238 In inviting the reader to ‘identify with the mask,’ as Williamson says Bidart
accomplishes in 'Herbert White,' Bidart aims to show what he isn’t in order to show what he
is.239 He was not the schizophrenic, bulimic or anorexic female that West appeared to be.
The feint occurs as an inversion in the meanings of West’s actions, not just in the actions
themselves. Bidart, too, experienced the toxicity of relationships and the harmful feelings,
thoughts, and behaviours that can result from such faulty connections. He expresses empathy
with West’s obsessions, mental disorder, the need for internal and external control, and the
weight of exterior expectations. Moreover, he understood the process of developing irrational
views that seemed perfectly logical and the surrender disguised as escape and freedom.

West is never truly recognised as she would like. Her perceptions cause her to see her
husband and friends’ recognition of her transformation as steeped in disappointment. Thus,
her isolation is maintained both by external and internal forces. She, through madness-tinged
lenses, observes their rejection and in turn rejects them.240 The reciprocal rejection in ‘Ellen
West’ is similar to how the ‘Bidart’s ‘self-as-myth’ rejects the mother figure involved in his
personal poems. In ‘Confessional,’ the speaker’s viewpoint is rooted in ‘anger,’ having been
‘made’ by someone, his mother, instead of being free to make himself, as Ellen West did.241
To ‘unmake,’ West kills herself. Holbrook writes, ‘To die is the ultimate freedom from
ambivalence, or ‘stickiness,’ the mess of human emotions: its purity is an escape from
humanness.’242 For Bidart, selecting a doomed character as the vehicle for a feint served as a
way to pursue such purity without literally facing the dangers of self-annihilation. His
appropriation of Binswanger’s psychoanalytic case study provided him an ‘unwilled’ plot he

239 Williamson, Introspection and Contemporary Poetry, p. 41;
‘Writing ‘Ellen West,’’ p. 9, ll. 64-65.
could meld with his own where Ellen West’s fate could not be avoided. Bidart could approach torment, add himself to the ‘double plot,’ without staking the body that existed.  

Bidart’s use of the feint to augment the contexture of his books and add to the significance of the other poems contained within makes for an effective contribution to the dramatic monologue. In turn, his dramatic monologues increase the mythic nature of his personal poems and any idea one might garner as to the nature of the poet. Post-Confessionalism maintains the intensity of crisis found within Confessionalism but the reader is never able to associate the poem with the poet. Instead, the Post-Confessional poem houses an entirely fictive character or constructs a myth that one never believes represents the entirety of the poet. It is as if the personal poems of Bidart are thin dramatic monologues using a feint of their own where his presence emerges to a greater extent. The Post-Confessional poet, then, is a ‘protected essential self [...] mixing our essence with what is false.’  

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243 Hix, p. 33.
244 ‘Borges and I,’ p. 10, ll. 30-32.
Conclusion

‘Herbert White’ and ‘Ellen West’ are poems of experience and limitation; poems where mentally unsound speakers proceed toward annihilation while the very landscape, the text that contains them, burns in their wake. They prove how Bidart’s work renovates the genre of Confessionalism, borrowing the unique circumstances of his speakers and integrating it as part of his phantasmagoria. Their narratives intensify the degree to which the speaker of dramatic monologues can compel the reader to extend sympathy to them and recognise the severity of their mental illness. Frank Bidart’s ‘bizarre’ application of punctuation and lineation fuels the debate on the line or the punctuation as a means of reading a poem’s voice. The lyrical intensity of ‘Herbert White’ and ‘Ellen West’ is supplied by the manic shape of the poem and its punctuative circus. Breath is no longer dependent on the white space at the end of the line or after a period. Pauses take on an array of length, complementing the wide range of indentions and breaks. The syncopated momentum of the language became a direct representation of the disturbance within Bidart’s characters. Their voices are their unique world perspective and history, examples of the abnormal psyche cleaved and made accessible to the reader in ways that psychological profiling and popular media have failed.

In Bidart’s poetry, the revealing of a mentally ill character is not an exercise in psychological analysis and the speaker’s abnormal mind is not made the sole focus of the narrative. Alan Williamson writes that Bidart’s characters refuse the exploration of ‘the definable, the psychological self’ in favour of contemplative retrospection on their experiences. The poets preceding Bidart were ‘committed to a quest to define [...] the pattern of individual character – the psychological Fates.’

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3 Ibid p. 2
was at the centre of many confessional poems, most notably Robert Lowell’s *Life Studies*. Bidart eschews what Elizabeth Sewell calls ‘poetic psychology’ and its focus on, ‘the normal mind and body, and in their functions of thought and imagination.’ It is through the extraordinary that Bidart summons us below the ‘relatively unexceptional surface of repeated social and economic relations.’ ‘I wanted to see beneath it, cut | beneath it, and make it | somehow, come alive . . .’ is not only the mantra of ‘Herbert White,’ but a central component of Bidart’s *ars poetica*.

‘Herbert White’ and ‘Ellen West’ are his first two poems within his body of work that focused on the rare psyche. These minds briefly endure under the weight of what Allen Grossman calls the ‘repressive cultural forces which have rendered inaccessible [...] the scene of poetic practice.’ The drama that derives from the speakers’ limits and the limits of their respective poems can be found an assumption voiced by Mark Halliday:

> ... all human beings have some important portion of their experience in common. The difficulties involved in having both a body and a mind, in having parents, in wanting love and achievement, in growing up, in having children (or choosing not to have children), in facing death – there is a universal element in these difficulties and there are (I feel) universal elements in what will be a healthy and/or moral repose to these difficulties by each person.

In the difficulties shared by Bidart’s characters, the ‘moral and healthy’ are the opposite of how they respond. Action as reaction to trauma drives the overlaying narratives and what the reader recognises as a parallel to the everyday stems from the tensions that arise from the speakers’ everyman and formal semantics and also and also the shared histories of poet and creation. The suspense of judgment encouraged by the dramatic monologue pushes us into regarding the silence as much as the harsh environment that houses the unmatchable aspects of his poems that deny the universal.

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6 ll. 49–50
8 Grossman and Halliday, p. 167.
The form of the dramatic monologue also allowed Bidart to disengage from the direct display of the poet’s set of circumstances found in confessional poetry. Alan Williamson described confessional poetry as a ‘critical self-absorption that finally allows one to stand a little apart from the self, to see it as an entity among entities.’ Through the use of the dramatic monologue’s feint, Bidart starts at the Confessional finish line. He ‘stands apart’ from other poets like Ron Silliman, Alan Davies, Rosmarie Waldrop, and John Cage, who are also proponents of the ‘poetry of ideas’ because, Jeffrey Gray argues, ‘playful puns, ironizing, word substitutions and the like have little place in [Bidart’s] poems.’ Gray adds that:

> The numerous "mad" narrators of Bidart's poems have in common, as we will see, their search for meaning and the failure of that search. That failure has as its parallel the failure of poetry; that is, the nonmastery which Bidart both discusses and attempts to body forth paradoxically recuperates, in a new and vivid form, the subjective power we previously associated with the now exhausted and questionable poetics of authenticity.

This thesis argues that in the case of ‘Herbert White’ and ‘Ellen West,’ the characters are not searching. White runs from realisation and West is already self aware. As is common with dramatic monologues, their realisations are unconscious. That they reach their limits of experience at the end of their respective poems is not due to a search failure but that the dramatic monologue limits what can be shown to the reader.

The dramatic monologue also makes use of the ‘I’ in a way that Bidart’s Confessional predecessors did not. The feint leaves his own set of experiences free to materialise and disappear from ‘Herbert White’ and ‘Ellen West’ at will. His use of autobiography evolves in subsequent works. An anecdote concerning Augustine’s estrangement from his mother mirrors the raw theatrics of Bidart’s autobiography in ‘Confessional.’ Augustine and the cat’s death are crafted from Bidart’s imagination, much like the fictitious scenes thought up in

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10 Jeffrey Gray, “‘Necessary Thought’: Frank Bidart and the Postconfessional,” in *Contemporary Literature*, 34: 4 (Winter, 1993), 714-739 (p.719)
11 Ibid p. 716.
‘Ellen West.’ Bidart’s speakers are thrust into events that, in spite of their fictive nature, seem right at home in the authentic energy of the real figure that they are based on.

‘Confessional’ shares the same book with Bidart’s third great dramatic monologue: ‘The War of Vaslav Nijinsky.’ ‘Nijinsky’ draws its lyric-prose combination and appropriation of a historical figure from ‘Ellen West.’ The descent into madness and the refusal to acknowledge it is dredged up from the Hell that Herbert White fell into. The tone is fiercer and more rebellious than its older siblings.

The likeness begets the point that Bidart learns from his own work. Each dramatic monologue builds upon what came before it. ‘Herbert White’ is tightly coiled in comparison to the frantic abandonment of ‘The War of Vaslav Nijinsky.’ The loosening of the physical shapes of Bidart’s dramatic monologues, from ‘White’ to ‘West’ to ‘Nijinsky,’ mimics the identity of the speakers that Bidart inhabits. The stanzas of ‘Herbert White’ are neat in comparison to ‘Ellen West’; the lines only becoming scattered in their positioning when White himself suffers a breakdown in the face of revelation. Bidart writes Ellen West from the position that the speaker already understands her condition. The serrated shape of ‘Ellen West’ resumes where ‘Herbert White’ left off, adding to the agitated nature of it with sparse use of capitals and passionate proclamations. The shape of ‘Nijinsky’ resembles a dance; a beau ideal of ‘battle, horror, | catastrophe, apocalypse.’ Every physical aspect of the poem is made larger and more erratic. Bidart’s Nijinsky does not quietly descend into madness, but breaks loudly and the voice is similar in pitch to that of the Maria Callas section of ‘Ellen West.’ ‘Nijinsky’ also returns to the idea of the dual self, the other who threatens the identity of the speaker and seemingly pulls the speaker towards annihilation. Each dramatic monologue takes a literal stance with respect to the formulation of each speaker’s

perspective. Nijinsky says, ‘Suffering has made me what I am’ and we witness the long march towards the realisation and acceptance of his circumstance.\textsuperscript{13}

The extraordinary perspective of an impossible person and the positioning in the landscape of the speaker’s making, and in ours, is a universal subject in Bidart’s dramatic monologues. Each speaker gives over their loci of control to some other entity. White believes that the murderer is somebody else while West places blame on her mind and soul for her inability to quash her obsessions. It is uncommon for these characters to accept responsibility for their circumstances and they call upon us to extend our sympathies in order to do the same. As a reader, Grossman writes in \textit{Summa Lyrica}, we ‘come to luminous patience’ to understand that for the speaker, ‘the principle of life [...] is loss.’\textsuperscript{14} Bidart’s speakers address their auditors from this place of loss, their fictions bisecting this fundamental part of life. Once Bidart has established a tangent between the reader and fiction, he asks us to abandon the perspective we bring to the reading of the poem in favour of the speaker’s truth of ‘experience.’\textsuperscript{15} To do so, says Robert Langbaum, creates an ‘ambiguity’ that forces a change in ‘meaning.’\textsuperscript{16} As with Browning, these dramatic monologues serve as ‘an excellent vehicle for the ‘impossible’ case.’\textsuperscript{17}

By ‘case,’ it is not meant the type of ‘case’ that Ellen West believes she is viewed as.\textsuperscript{18} The dramatic monologue provides Bidart with an ‘excellent vehicle’ to elevate these characters above models that can be subjected to official, clinical diagnoses. Certainly, we could assign many definitions that applied to each character but never come away feeling like they were adequate and accurate enough, especially when Bidart includes the use of a feint as a fundamental component of the forces shaping their circumstances. Bidart’s poems prompt a

\begin{itemize}
\item\textsuperscript{13} ‘Vaslav Nijinksy,’ p. 2, ll. 19
\item\textsuperscript{14} Grossman and Halliday, p. 253.
\item\textsuperscript{16} Ibid p. 50-51
\item\textsuperscript{17} Ibid p. 86
\item\textsuperscript{18} ‘Ellen West,’ p. 30, ll. 13.
\end{itemize}
reading of extreme experience within the rigidity of unyielding inter-poetic and intra-poetic limitations, boundaries set by the form and narrative of the poem and the cohesion of his collections. These characters have adopted patterns; or rather have been assigned patterns by Bidart. We are compelled to realise that circumstances do not always have a resolution, just limits where life ends when the narrative action and parts of the poem give way to white space.

The problems that test the inflexible will of Ellen West and dual-identity of Herbert White and from the poem’s genesis, they will never fix inside them what is broken. The self and the difficulties representing it are expressed best in the dramatic monologue and offer a Post-Confessional poet like Bidart a method of bringing us nearer to the impossible ‘case.’ The culmination of Bidart’s dramatic monologues is not unlike the ending of Browning’s ‘Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came.’ There is no ending but their individual perspectives being ripped from them by Bidart that they spent the length of the poem giving over to the reader. That, rather than the frightening neuroses that consume his speakers, is perhaps the crux and true origins of the shock generated within the reader when encountering one of Bidart’s dramatic monologues.
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