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Robert Lowell and Anne Sexton Facing Immoderation

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At the end of the fifties, Robert Lowell and Anne Sexton worked at the poems for *Life Studies* and *To Bedlam And Part Way Back*. Independently and then jointly at a creative writing workshop held by Lowell, they opted for modes of writing that would be labeled "confessional". When M. L. Rosenthal coined the phrase in 1959 after the publication of *Life Studies*, he highlighted a poetic form which revealed autobiographical material characterized not just by extreme experience including madness – "the predicament and horror of the lost self" – but also by extreme intimacy – "the most naked kind of confession".[1] According to his definition, *Life Studies* deals with immoderate experience through immoderate self-revelation. More recently, Frank Bidart has associated the confessional mode with immoderate self-revelation threatening formal achievement: "secrets whispered with an artlessness that is their badge of authenticity" (in Lowell, 2003, p.997). We may therefore question the relationship between immoderate experience and form in the poetry of Lowell and Sexton.

Rosenthal also suggested that the speaker's telling of extreme experience was prompted by guilty feelings and was "shameful". It was not just thematic emphasis on madness or the private nature of experience which founded the confessional mode but the reader's feeling that its expression went beyond usual limits and that such excess was negative. It "exceeded just, usual or suitable bounds": it was immoderate.[2] Indeed, immoderation and its link with guilt are a central stake in both poets' works through the exposure of insanity. In fact, their poetic representation of

insanity and guilt is not only coherent with M. L. Rosenthal's definition of the confessional mode in his review of *Life Studies*, but also with Michel Foucault's considerations on the relation between madness and guilt in the nineteenth century, which raises the question of the possibility of language. Eventually, for both poets, the relation between writing and immoderation may verge on the brink of tragic failure: the poets' reading contract of self-revelation may turn into a hubristic plan and both works threaten to fall into formal immoderation, as shown in their use of the notebook form.

Poetry challenging immoderate experience.

Although Lowell's and Sexton's writing has recurrently been viewed as immoderate self-revelation, *Life Studies* and *To Bedlam and Part Way Back* rather emerged in an attempt to challenge immoderation, with opposite priorities concerning form. When Sexton started writing poetry, her priority was to distance herself from her immoderate self through verse. For Lowell in 1956, measured verse had become the very sign of painful immoderation and an obstacle to the recording of experience.

Sexton desperately wanted straightening when she turned to writing in 1956. Her "aborted" diaries renamed notebooks and then given up altogether indicate that four years later, she still found it very difficult to express insanity's immoderate urges through little mediated autobiographical writing. On May 25th 1960, she wrote:

> I do not know how to simply write to myself; must instead imagine that impossible someone who might read me gently and not turn from me in disgust(sic). However, with this idea in my head for two weeks, with even a letter to a "dear somebody" that I shall not include, I have not started.
>
> Today I will start, though it seems impossible to 'start' such a conversation with myself. There is no one here but myself.[...]
>
> […] Dare to be yourself and if anyone turns away in disgust it will be myself.[...]
>
> I start this journal full of my own sense of filth.[...]. (Sexton Papers)

The threat of aversion and self-aversion at the immoderate self is repeatedly stated and the diary only feebly challenges aversion. A year elapsed before the next entry, on May 14th 1961: “One year between that abortive attempt and this”. It was difficult for her to handle her self-disgust in prose, to face herself and overcome her shame. This may be why she insisted that verse appealed to her because it achieved an objectivation: a poem is “something you can hold”.[3] Sexton used psychoanalytical terms and declared that form might act on her immoderate urges like the superego of Freud’s *An Outline of Psychoanalysis*: it was produced by the ego and imposed itself on the ego. Sexton moved away from Freud in that for her, the superego was a liberating device for expressing true experience:

> I think all form is a trick in order to get at the truth. Sometimes in my hardest poems, the ones that are difficult to write, I might make an impossible scheme, a syllabic count that is so involved that it then allows me to be truthful. It works as a kind of superego.[4]

Sexton was keen on inventing a formal design. It was suggested by the first lines she wrote and might be a particular rhyme scheme or a shape that she drew on her page to be filled with the poem’s words. Early versions among dozens for the free verse poem “The Double Image” illustrate her method and show her looking for structure and experimenting with prosody. She first worked from a short versified narrative introducing two women’s portraits. It acted as a synopsis for the final long poem dealing with three generations of women: mother, daughter and grand-daughter, the daughter having just come out of the asylum:

> THE DOUBLE IMAGE
>
> Two portraits hang on matching walls; each stares
> At the other who watches her, as if they we:re petrified
> Upon the air. Both ladies are sitting in umber chairs.
> They wait in time. Each lady watches where the other died.*
>
> I

Part way back from bedlam I had come
To cradle in my mother's house, to wring
That madness out of me, my first death undone.

As underlined by Sexton, the first four lines are a prelude introducing a plot for the poem. Contrary to the final version and its opening on the relation with the daughter, the draft focuses on the speaker's relation with her mother. The link between madness, the vain search for a relation with the mother and the quest for identity through the mother is there: the two portraits are the speaker's and her mother's. But in the published version an intricate pattern emerges from the seminal situation. It expresses the intertwining of madness with mother-daughter relationships over three generations. The last lines of the final version, and most importantly the last sentence, retrospectively reveal the importance of the opening lines in the draft: their ending position stresses the failure of the quest for identity through the mother-figure. It is central in the speaker's madness and subverts her relation to her own daughter:

I, who was never quite sure
about being a girl, needed another
life, another image to remind me.
And this was my worst guilt; you could not cure
nor soothe it. I made you to find me.

The drafts also bear witness to Sexton's experiments with the stanza form. In the draft above mentioned, the narrative is framed by rhyme. Other drafts try visual effects:

While down in Gloucester 1 x
she had her 2 a
own portrait painted. 3 b
As if she were sure 4 a
to last after all, 5 c
if she could wear my cure. 6
I, who was well acquainted 7
with portraits watched her place it on
the south wall.[5]

Still a decade later, Sexton was asked about a subject that she'd "rather deal with in form than in free verse". She answered:

> Probably madness. I've noticed Robert Lowell felt freer to write about madness in free verse, whereas it was the opposite for me. Only after I had set up large structures that were almost impossible to deal with did I think I was free to allow myself to express what had really happened.[6]

Lowell's relation to form was more complex than Sexton's when he wrote *Life Studies*, after two decades of poetry writing. In the 1930s, his poetic practice was based on the classics and included writing Latin verse with emphasis on rhythmic patterns, as shown in his notebook.[7] In the 1940s, his elaborate verse in *Lord Weary's Castle* expressed a fascination for immoderation with emphasis on violence and on what Nietzsche calls "ascetic ideals" and their "lack of measure, aversion to measure" (Nietzsche, 1897, p. 204). In "The Holy Innocents", religious symbolism associates the horror of World War II with the declining power of faith :

> Still
> The world out-Herods Herod; and the year,
> The nineteen-hundred forty-fifth of grace,
> Lumbers with losses up the clinkered hill
> Of our purgation; […]
> Lamb of the shepherds, Child, how still you lie.

Violence has no bounds as suggested by the Shakespearean verb in the first line and powerful symbolism in the fourth line. The latter calls up images of death camps and the holocaust but also of Golgotha, so that "purgation" is already hell, annihilating "grace" and foreshadowing the ominous stillness of Christian innocence. "Lie" and its multiple meanings achieve the portrayal of a fallen, irredeemable and hopeless world. In "The Quaker Graveyard in Nantucket", man 's unlimited violence against nature is epitomized by whale hunting:

> The flat flukes arch and whack about its ears,
> The death-lance churns into the sanctuary, tears
> The gun-blue swingle, heaving like a flail,
> And hacks the coiling life out : it works and drags

And rips the sperm-whale's midriff into rags,
Gobbets of blubber spill to wind and weather,

Excess is both thematic and formal. The text is saturated by the lexical fields of flesh and tear. Such lexical excess is supported by extremely dense sound patterns and is underlined by pounding rhythm sustained through one syllable words, anaphora and epistrophic "rags". The poem focuses on a religious group, the Quakers, and questions their violence in religious terms, as meant by an epigraph referring to Genesis, chapter 26. Near the end of the poem, an "expressionless" Virgin unexpectedly provides a figure of passionless hope: "and the world shall come to Walsingham". The rest of *Lord Weary's Castle* is full of references to religion's extreme potentialities for good and evil. However, after his first fit of mania in 1949, Lowell wrote to George Santayana that his "mystical experiences and explosions" had "turned out to be pathological", that he had decided to give up Catholicism in order to survive. By and by, his detachment from ascetic ideals seemed to be accompanied by his detachment from excessively contrived form. A poem from *Notebook 1967-68*, "The Literary Life, a Scrapbook", ironically looks back on this period to suggest its alienating power:

I rest on a tree , and try to sharpen bromides
to serve the great, the great God, the New Critic,
who loves the writing better than we ourselves....

The poem draws a parallel between religious devotion and writing. The figure of the New Critic encapsulates the artistic ideals of formalism, which are metaphorically associated with religion. But they are alienating.

Lowell had admired the free verse of William Carlos Williams since the forties.[8] However, his autobiographical prose writings locate the break away from measured verse during a stay in hospital in 1956, after a manic episode. Prose then imposed itself against formalistic verse, writing like a child about childhood followed writing like an erudite about ideals. In an unpublished version of Lowell's autobiographical narrative about this key moment for the advent of his new style, we are literally made to witness the formal break:

> I sat looking out of my bedroom window at the Clinic, and once more began to type at a poem, my substitute for the regulation Occupational therapy requirement. I wrote :
>
> I was already half-way through my life,
> When I woke up from Mother on the back
> Of the Hill in Boston, to a sky-line of Life
>
> Insurance buildings, still in blue-print.
>
> Than the labor, cynicism, and maturity of writing in meter became horrible. I began to write rapidly in prose and in the style of a child.
> ...name, Bobby Lowell. I was all of three and a half. My new formal grey shorts had been worn for all of three minutes.[...] I scratched destructively with a scrubbed finger-nail at the blue anchors on my white sailor blouse [...].[9]

The self's awakening at the clinic, which is meant by a Freudian metaphor in the verse passage, seems to call for a stylistic rebirth. Contrary to Sexton, it is highly mediated experience which Lowell cannot stand, "horrible" echoing here Sexton's disgust at herself when writing her diary. He is looking for the diarist's spontaneous style, away from "the high stilts of meter" (Mariani, p.238) here illustrated by the verse passage. Childhood is a metaphor for his pathological relation to his mother in the verse passage; it becomes both the subject of his writing and the metaphor for the starting point of a formal quest. The writer goes back to the basics of formal achievement when stating his identity and is typical of Roland Barthes's remarks on modern writers' "engagement" in form.[10] Eventually, *Life Studies* does contain a prose section but it is mainly composed of verse, which remained Lowell's favorite mode. He considered it a safeguard against formal immoderation and wrote to William Carlos Williams in 1957 that he needed "the carpentry of definite meter that [told him] when to stop rambling" (Lowell, 2005, p.293). The treatment of the last sentence from the prose passage above mentioned exemplifies Lowell's formal itinerary. The sentence itself looks like a metaphor for Lowell's formal change: the attack of the mundane on pure and tailored form. It also expresses violent drives symbolized by the child's compulsive action of "scratching destructively". In the

verse, the child's point of view and metonymic detail provided by autobiographical prose are kept. For example, the degradation of clothing symbolizing both the child's extreme anxiety and the attack against form reappear in "My Last Afternoon With Uncle Devereux". In the poem, the child first identifies with "Agrippina/in the Golden House of Nero" before coming back to down-to-earth reality and his childish "destructive" drives: "While I sat on the tiles/ and dug at the anchor on my sailor blouse". Then, the child personifies the disintegration of the author's previous style in a stanza which starts with verse that is little adapted from the prose memoir :

> I was five and a half.
> My formal pearl grey shorts
> had been worn for three minutes.
> My perfection was the Olympian
> poise of my models in the imperishable autumn
> display windows
> of Roger Peet's boys' store below the State House
> in Boston. Distorting drops of water
> pinpricked my face in the basin's mirror.

Formal perfection is divine and is associated with Capitol Hill and Mount Olympus, which reminds of "Hill" in the failed attempt at writing verse in the memoir. The poem parallels Lowell's letters written while working at his new style. In 1957, he explained to Randall Jarrell: "I've been loosening up the meter, as you'll see and horsing out all the old theology and symbolism and *verbal* violence" (Lowell, 2005, p.295). He also wrote, in 1957, to Elizabeth Bishop: "It's comforting too that you find most of the new poetry tame" (ibid., p.279). His emphasis on "verbal" meant that violent experience was not expelled but it was now expressed in more moderate form. He now admired W. D. Snodgrass's "moderation" (Mariani, p.259) in unmeasured verse but wanted "tremendous fire under the lines".[11] The use of a child's point of view in *Life Studies* helped to build up such "moderate" verse, but violence remained in the speaker's experience. One of its chief expressions was madness, suggested by reference to Nero in "My Last Afternoon With Uncle Devereux" and present in all of Lowell's and Sexton's works.

Poetry representing immoderation: insanity, guilt and writing.

For Sigmund Freud, immoderation is pathological and, throughout his work, he stresses that the difference between sanity and insanity lies in the intensity of symptoms: illness is an "extensive development of the symptoms" (Freud, 1920, p.311); hysteria "exaggerates" the discharge of emotions[12] and concerning anxiety, he writes: "this fear […] fed as such a fear is from an unconscious instinctual source, proves obdurate and exaggerated in the face of all influences brought to bear from the system Cs" (Freud, 2001, p.183). Such excess recurs in Lowell's and Sexton's poetry and it is linked with guilt. Thus, their representation of immoderation meets definitions of the word that emphasize moral disapproval, especially in the nineteenth century. With its prefix, the word is defined against the positive meaning of moderation which consists in "keeping a due mean between extremes or excesses of violence" (Webster, 1830). Immoderate behavior is therefore guilty, "not confined to suitable limits" (ibid.). According to Rosenthal in his review of *Life Studies*, the thematisation of madness and guilt is a pillar of Lowell's confessional mode. The poet-speaker[13] experiences "the predicament and horror of the lost Self" and Rosenthal notices that several poems are set in mental hospitals. Moreover, for Rosenthal the guilty poet delivers a "confession" that is an act of sincerity and the acknowledgment of the speaker's shame: "it is hard not to think of *Life Studies* as a series of personal confidences, rather shameful, that one is honor-bound not to reveal". The critic suggests the difficulty for the speaker's words to emerge and spread because of shame generated by guilt. Eventually, may not the speaker's discourse be jeopardized? In his analysis of the strategies of nineteenth century asylums, Foucault describes the attempt to blame the mad which in turn causes the insane' s guilty feelings towards themselves and feelings of shame towards others. This threatens to stop communication between the mad and others and Foucault writes: "le malade est pris dans un rapport à soi qui est de l'ordre de la faute, et dans un non-rapport aux autres qui est de l'ordre de la honte" (p.616). Language would allow to counter the non-relation with others. Thus, Saint Augustine's *Confessions* purport to confront shame. But whether writing may help Lowell's and Sexton's ill

speakers to overcome shame remains uncertain.

Often in Lowell's and Sexton's poetry, and according to Steven Gould Axelrod's statement on *Life Studies*: "The emphasis is [...] on the extreme experience or psychological state" (p.113). Hyperbolic, manic figures like Caligula abound in Lowell's work: "Your mind burned, you were God, a thousand plans/ran zig-zag, zig-zag" (Lowell, 2003, p.361). Many of Sexton's personae go through trance episodes which recall fits of conversion hysteria. Nightmarish images also convey the pressure of morbid thoughts and suicidal urges, betraying the speakers' immoderate anxiety in both poets' works, as in Lowell's "The Severed Head":

> I nursed my last clear breath of oxygen,
> there, waiting for the chandelier to fall,
> tentacles clawing for my jugular.

or in Sexton's "The Hex":

> Every time I get happy
> the Nana-hex comes through.
> [...]
> a ribbon turns into a noose,
> all for the Nana-song,
> sour notes calling out in her madness:
> You did it. You are the evil.

In the speakers' minds, their surroundings metamorphose into stifling death tools. In Sexton's poem, the speaker's anguish derives from her sense of having to pay retribution for past sin. Such a link between madness and guilt is a recurring element in her work as well as in Lowell's, where insanity's immoderate pressure both originates in guilt and produces guilt. Under the influence of psychoanalysis with which both poets are acquainted, insanity is indeed connected to violent feelings towards family members, hence guilt. Sexton's personae are repeatedly victim of obsessional urges because they feel guilty for others' deaths as in "The Hex". The old lady in the poem is named after Sexton's great aunt and the representation of the speaker's relation to Nana is largely autobiographical. In particular, it reproduces Sexton's guilty feelings following her great aunt's hospitalization and death in a

mental asylum.[14] Similarly, Lowell's recurring representation of a son's violent rebellion against his father betrays guilty obsession. Commenting on a poem from the "Charles River" sequence, Katharine Wallingford underlines that this "act of violence against his father has become associated in his mind with the deaths of both parents" (p.73), as illustrated in the following quotation:

> If the clock had stopped in 1936
> for them, or again in '50 and '54 –
> they are not dead, and not until death parts us,
> will I stop sucking my blood from their hurt.[15]

Here the speaker is again largely autobiographical and the dates refer respectively to the day when Lowell knocked down his father, to his father's and his mother's deaths. A hyperbolic vampire metaphor expresses the excess of the son's guilty feelings. As highlighted by Foucault's analysis of the relation between madness and guilt since the nineteenth century, the mad in Lowell's and Sexton's poems are "déterminé et coupable" (p.637). In Sexton's "For the Year of the Insane", the speaker turns to religion in order to escape from such determinism:

> O Mary, permit me this grace,
> this crossing over,
> although I am ugly,
> submerged in my own past
> and my own madness.

The speaker's guilty feelings, which trigger off her prayer, are determined by her past and rooted in her illness. She addresses a redeeming saintly figure which may cancel extreme moral ugliness thanks to extreme spiritual beauty. A modulation of Foucault's image for the downward movement of insanity's determinism – "Dans la folie, l'homme tombe en sa vérité" (p.637) – is present in the movement from "Mary" to "madness". It is set off by eye and sound effects suggesting that "madness" is a contraction for "Mary" and "grace". The statement defining the speaker's self negatively is placed in a central position and is followed by a drowning metaphor which expresses the determinism and shame of what Rosenthal calls the "lost Self". End-of-line words draw the figure of the fall and emphasize the triad linking guilt,

past and insanity. In a similar way, one of Lowell's best representations of guilty insanity appears through what might be called a Lucifer motif, associating falling movements with light and darkness imagery, as in "Waking Early Sunday Morning":

> listen, the creatures of the night
> obsessive, casual, sure of foot,
> go on grinding, while the sun's
> daily remorseful blackout dawns.
>
> Fierce, fireless mind, running downhill.

The speaker is torn between the extremes of upper light and lower night, between nightmarish darkness reminding of Jerome Bosch's "creatures" and guilty daylight amounting to darkness: "remorseful blackout". Mental suffering reaches a climax and becomes unspeakable, as suggested by the blank. On the whole, darkness asserts itself at the expense of light: the position of "night" is not counterbalanced by "sun" since the word is used with a genitive that immediately connects it to "blackout", with "dawn" at the end of the stanza confirming the lack of luster. The last line superimposes a Lucifer image, including the repetition and negation of "fire", with a Sisyphean metaphor. The line pivots around "mind" and leads it back to guilty darkness, as in one of the author's letters, in November 1954, to his close friend Elizabeth Bishop:

> I have been sick again, and somehow even with you I shrink both from mentioning and not mentioning. These things come with a gruesome, vulgar, blasting surge of " enthusiasm ", one becomes a kind of man-aping balloon in a parade – then you subside and eat bitter coffee-grounds of dullness, guilt etc. (Lowell, 2005, p.242)

Lowell in his letter wavers between relating and not relating, that is to say telling and not telling, connecting and not connecting, overcoming and yielding to shame. Can poetry challenge the "non-relation" with others, contrary to the insane's silence in Foucault's analysis? When metapoetical, Lowell's poetry is often pessimistic about the powers of writing and focuses on the frailty of inspiration. Several poems with a metapoetical content have speakers who are poets with mental

disturbances as in "Night Sweat", in which the ill speaker writes under chemical treatment by "sweet salt":

> my life's fever is soaking in night-sweat–
> one life, one writing! But the downward glide
> and bias of existing wrings us dry–

United in a single flux, living and writing both risk drying off. In "The Nihilist as Hero", fire is metaphorically related to writing and to a simplistic "monotony of vision" before the speaker insists on the specificity of writing when ill:

> But sometimes when I am ill or delicate,
> the pinched flame of my match turns unchanging green,
> a cornstalk in green tails and seeded tassel...

Illness causes deterioration: "flame" is negatively qualified by "pinched" and finally by "green", the latter being suspiciously fixed in time. The next line achieves the reification of "green" with "tassel". The negative connotation of "seeded" then dents on its organic connotation and confirms the debasement of writing[16] under the pressure of illness. Only considering the possibility that writing may help to confront insanity is as far as Lowell's poetry goes. In *Day by Day*, one of his last poems entitled "Notice" reproduces a scene between a doctor and a patient at the clinic:

> The resident doctor said,
> "We are not deep in ideas, imagination or enthusiasm–
> how can we help you?"
> I asked,
> "These days of only poems and depression –
> what can I do with them?
> Will they help me to notice
> what I cannot bear to look at?"

The scene synthesizes the ins and outs of the speaker's predicament and the doctor's words sound like the speaker's summary of his own view on the stakes of hospitalization. In his acknowledgment of the speaker's needs, which relies on a romantic definition of the poet, the doctor considers the speaker as poet. But the speaker's answer sets off his needs as an ill poet and stresses that his time in hospital

is equally filled with writing and with his illness. He questions such writing’s ability to provide insight into reality, which is where the violence of his psychological disorders is suggested. Ironically, his answer consists of questions and they remain unanswered. The clause placed in central position in the fourth line sets off the interrogative mode of the speaker’s thinking process. There is no certainty that writing may be of any use to the ill poet speaker.

Sexton’s poetry evidences a more positive discourse on writing. “For John, Who Begs Me Not To Enquire Further” provides a positive answer to the last question asked by the speaker in “Notice”, in an attempt to deny that speaking of the extreme experience of hospitalization amounts to guilty writing. While Lowell' s poetry questions writing and hospitalization’s relation to the author, Sexton’s poem also addresses the issue of the poem’s relation to the reader. Her mentor John Holmes objected to her choice of hospitalization as a theme for her poetry on moral grounds:

> I distrust the very source and subject of a great many of your poems, namely, all those that describe and dwell on your time in the hospital. [...] It bothers me that you use poetry this way. Don't publish it in a book. You'll certainly outgrow it, and become another person, then this record will haunt and hurt you. It will even haunt and hurt your children, years from now. (Middlebrook, p.98)

Holmes’s reaction is based on his subjective distaste for the representation of insanity and is justified in the name of family. It illustrates what Foucault calls the imprisonment of madness “in a moral world”.[17] But the speaker in the poem argues that if the thematization of insanity makes poetry awe-inspiring and may thwart its capacity to connect with readers, it is the reader’s fault, not the speaker’s. Sexton’s speakers often feel ashamed of being mad but the speaker here refuses to endorse shame for speaking about madness. The poem defends the legitimacy of using hospitalization in poetry to help the speaker connect with others, while reasserting the extreme experience of insanity as a central theme:

> in the commonplaces of the asylum
> where the cracked mirror

or my own selfish death
outstared me.
[…]
Then it was more than myself;
It was you, or your house
or your kitchen.

The prefixed verb reinforces the extreme power of "death". Such violence is frightening and recalls the speaker's recoil at himself in "Notice". The poem also expresses how society feels endangered by immoderate drives, perhaps because it fears a contamination by guilt, as stressed by Foucault at the end of his *History of Madness*:

although your fear is anyone's fear,
like an invisible veil between us all...

Sexton's speaker then tells her mentor that his aversion – "And if you turn away" – comes from his fear of facing his own experience of immoderation[18] and she refuses to stop writing about mental illness. The poem – "that narrow diary of my mind" – provides what the diary cannot: "a certain sense of order" and the possibility to resist aversion. In fact, Sexton's ill speakers may be more positive about writing on madness than Lowell's because they are more ambiguous about associating guilt with immoderation. They sometimes even use writing to claim immoderation as in "Suicide Note", from *Live or Die*:

So I will go now
without old age or disease,
wildly but accurately,
knowing my best route,

However, confessional writing itself may grow immoderate.

Poetry fostering immoderation: the threat of formal immoderation

A decade after *Life Studies* and *To Bedlam and Part Way Back*, Lowell and Sexton started working on poems for *Notebook 1967-68* and *The Death Notebooks*. They were faithful to confessional writing's reading contract of self-revelation and the new

works were announced as poetic testaments unveiling ultimate revelations. They were the two poets' most ambitious poetic ventures. The notebook was the perfect form for giving the impression of absolute sincerity and bringing the revelatory stance of confessional poetry to extremes. In *Signes de vie: le pacte autobiographique 2,* Philippe Lejeune underlines the notebook's fundamental link with sincerity and indeed, in a letter to Elizabeth Bishop in 1968 Lowell explained:

> I am writing as if it were my last work. Someone asked me if [I] expected to die when I finished it – no, but trying to write with such openness and not holding back. (Lowell, 2005, p.494)

As for Sexton, as she explained in a letter to Claire S. Degener in 1970, she wanted to write "intense, personal"(2004, p.361) poems but she was aware of the notebook's potential for hubristic self-revelation. Reading Gide's notebooks in 1960, one of his sentences struck her: " 'I must stop puffing up my pride in this notebook' " (Sexton Papers).

In 1967, Lowell embarked on a one year project for writing sonnets recording political and private events on an almost daily basis, short form allowing great poetic reactivity. In 1968, he wrote in a letter to A. Alvarez about "a long poem, Notebook of a Year, in 14 line sections, now about 1500 lines and close to done" (2005, p.501). His approach included a chronology of contemporary historical events at the end of *Notebook 1967-68* and set private themes in historical context, thereby building up the impression of a recording of private experience close to Lejeune's definition of "traces datées"[19]: "I follow the seasons loosely, but the real structure is personal happenings, moods, brushes with the great events etc." (2005, pp.501-502). While setting off the public context, Lowell pushed further than in *Life Studies* the acknowledged revelation of intimate experience denounced by Allen Tate after reading the poems that Lowell planned to publish in 1959:

> But *all* the poems about your family, including the one about you and Elizabeth, are definitely bad. I do not think that you ought to publish them. [...]the poems are composed of unassimilated details, terribly intimate. (Hamilton, p.237)

Almost fifteen years after this comment, Lowell inserted portions of his former wife's letters in his sonnets. By doing so, he imitated some diarists' collage habit – well-documented by Lejeune – of pasting personal objects of all sorts, like newspaper clippings or fragments of letters as in "In the Mail":

> "I love you, Darling, there's a black black void,
> as black as night without you. I long to see
> your face and hear your voice, and take your hand–". (Lowell, 2003, p.671)

He seems here to reduce the formalization of the "terribly" private experience of divorce to the mere use of quotation marks. This poetic act was viewed in terms of its private implications, even by his poet friends who had been enthusiastic about his work. It was condemned as an immoderate gesture. In a letter, Bishop used the same moral arguments as Holmes had against Sexton's poems about madness: "I can't bear to have you publish something that I regret and that you might live to regret, too". Her "shocking" echoed Tate's "terrible" and she reproached Lowell for the "mixture of fact and fiction". However, she willingly admitted, in a letter to Lowell, that what she could not face were the revelations about her friends' intimacy: "I can't bear to have anything you write tell – perhaps – what we're really like in 1972" (Bishop, pp.561-562). Besides, the lack of structure of the notebook cumulative process made Lowell vulnerable to excessive writing drives. He gradually expanded his one year project into six years' writing and revising punctuated by the publications of the first version of *Notebook 1967-68* in May 1969, its second version in July 1969, *Notebook* in 1970 and finally *History*, *For Lizzie and Harriet* and *The Dolphin* in 1973. A couple of years after initiating his poetical project, he added up sonnet after sonnet without being able to stop, as shown by the following remarks from his letters: (to Hannah Arendt in August 1969) "I fear I have been adding new poems.[...] This must end" (2005, p.523); (to Elizabeth Bishop in November 1969) "During the summer, I could do nothing else. So, against intention, I added 20 or so new poems. Scattering them through the book, so it's hard for me to judge their effect or effectiveness" (2005, p.525). The verb "scatter", recurs in the letters written between the 1967-68 versions and the *Notebook* version and such repetition testifies to a

growing sense of disorganization: the new poems are "scattered" over the old ones.[20] Lowell seemed to yield to the notebook's immoderate pressure for what Lejeune calls the "pan-optic" approach, or the diary's ability "to focus on a small surface the whole image of the reality around it".[21] The poet was trapped in the clash highlighted by Lejeune between the fight against time (to write the ultimate work) and the defeat against time (by yielding to the present). The overwhelming loss of control that Lowell then felt reminded of the "explosions" and "enthusiasm" that he had identified as fits of mania years earlier. It called for even more writing in order to impose structure. His attempts at ordering are summed up if only in the succession of published versions. Ultimately, his synthesizing and structuring efforts led, after six years, to the publication of the triptych, his "magnum opus", his "huge, perhaps exhausting package", his "great load".[22] Lowell had at long last mastered the poetic design that he had created. But it had carried him far away in time and had grown out of its planned proportions. He seemed to have achieved his poetical pan-optic and wrote to Stephen Spender about his "book's highly-wrought, bumpy short scope" before adding: "But to me it's a world" (2005, p.523).

The Death Notebooks were started in 1970. They were first meant to be released after Sexton's death. Like Lowell with his notebook, she repeatedly insisted in letters that *The Death Notebooks* was the work in which her true self would be shown. One may almost say that she wished to trademark the book: "I plan to start another book called *The Death Notebooks* where the poems will be very Sexton..." (2004, p.363). The work was bound to accompany her throughout her life until her death when it would live on and offer the poetic image of herself. Simultaneously and in contrast with her immoderate project, she started another book whose finiteness was clearly envisaged: "The book of poems that I shall work on all my life is entitled *The Death Notebooks*. The one I shall work on until it's finished is *The Book of Folly*" (ibid., p.368). The project for *The Death Notebooks* clearly voiced an anguished relation to time. It was the immoderate and desperate attempt at countering the passing of time, a gesture similar to Lejeune's "archi-cahier":

> Ces gestes, qui étendent au-delà du cahier le désir qui l'a fait choisir, disent quelque chose d'essentiel : la peur de la mort.[...] Il faudrait pouvoir écrire sur un cahier qui n'ait pas de fin. (p.75)

But while Lowell's project seemed to grow immoderate by getting out of control, Sexton claimed immoderate writing possibilities, like the speaker in "The Death Baby":

> Max and I
> two immoderate sisters,
> two immoderate writers,
> two burdeners,
> made a pact.
> To beat death down with a stick.

In this fifth section of the poem marked by the fascination for death, the speaker seems to admit her need for immoderate writing against immoderate death drives. Where Lowell's notebook sequence comes close to Lejeune's "archi-cahier" which emerges as a consequence of the diarist's inability to stop writing, Sexton's is an "archi-cahier" planned from the start. Contrary to Lowell's succession of titles towards the blend of relatives' names, concept and metaphor in the triptych, the title of *The Death Notebooks* sets the poetic program. It organizes the book around a concept and the irony of its aporia detaches poetry from realistic experience. Sexton also endorsed the notebook's discontinuity and in her diaries written years before she wrote *The Death Notebooks*, she differentiated between a journal and a notebook, borrowing the latter word from Gide: "I suspect I have stolen this thought from someone, but it is now mine also...I will not call this a journal – it will not be a journal – my thoughts are not defined. This will be a notebook" (Sexton Papers). We are then to understand *The Death Notebooks* as a succession of sequences each representing one aspect of her self, focusing on her fascination for death. In this mosaic, contrary to Lowell's notebook avatars anchored in present personal life and contemporary history, Sexton works at offering a mythologized image of the self, drawing on literature and religious tradition. Her diaries from 1960 introduce Gide's notebooks as her first model for writing autobiographical prose. Gide's texts must therefore

have influenced her definition of the notebook form and may have imprinted on her mind this format's self-mythologizing power. As a matter of fact, Lejeune quotes Gide' s notebooks written between 1887 and 1951 as an outstanding example of longevity among others. He then underlines such texts' mythological dimension:

> Réguliers, étendus sur des dizaines d'années, parfois plus d'un demi-siècle, traversant l'histoire collective, accompagnant l'essor puis le déclin d'un individu, interrompus seulement par la mort, ces journaux malgré tout exceptionnels donnent une image mythologique du genre, admirable et écrasante. (Lejeune and Bogaert, p.125)

In her poetical fake notebooks, Sexton takes a shortcut towards the mythological dimension by inserting her personae in mythological contexts as in "Making a Living". In the poem, Jonah decides to relate his death: "This is my death, [...] I will make a mental note of each detail." Jonah's story is then an allegory for the confessional writer's enterprise, as established by the very first lines:

> Jonah made his living
> inside the belly.
> Mine comes from the exact same place.
> Jonah opened the door of his stateroom
> and said, "Here I am!" and the whale liked this
> and thought to take him in.

Sexton uses the same strategy as for her reinterpretation of fairy tales in *Transformations*. She ironically deflates the myth by introducing elements from a twentieth century context. Comic irony deflates the myth in order to let tragic irony step in and place the speaker at the center of the myth, as often in poems from *The Death Notebooks* using liturgy or religious texts:

> At this point the whale
> vomited him back out into the sea.
> […]
> Then he told the news media
> the strange details of his death
> and they hammered him up in the marketplace

and sold him and sold him and sold him.
My death the same.

The passage echoes Sexton's explanations in her letters about the project of *The Death Notebooks* with its contract of self-revelation, the focus on death and the speaker's foreshadowing reference to posthumous publication which is an encasement of Sexton's plan. Jonah the story-teller turns into a Christ-like victim. Becoming his story, he is finally objectified like a slave. Through the comparison, the speaker becomes the heroin in the new tragic myth of alienation created by Sexton. The sense of tragedy is emphasized by a short, contrasting one-sentence line which announces her death as well as her alienation. The poem finally illustrates Sexton's immoderate design to anticipate on the image of herself after her death, which is carried out throughout the book in the poems' staging of the speaker's death. This device is the extreme and final step in her confessional strategy which originates in the manipulation of the poetic image of the self. Tragically, she published the book a few months before her death, revealing the excessive hubris of her plan. Ironically in the light of "Making a Living", it seems that her motivations for publishing were partly financial.[23]

Lowell's and Sexton's poetry thrives on the confrontation with immoderation. The poets' relation to form in the poems written for *Life Studies* and *To Bedlam and Part Way Back* is motivated by a strategy of moderation, whether it is against the immoderate self for Sexton or against past immoderate form for Lowell. Moreover, many speakers in their poetry are subject to painful immoderate drives. Madness is associated with guilt, thus illustrating the nineteenth century moral condemnation of immoderation. Such disapproval threatens to silence poetic discourse and Lowell's speakers are doubtful about writing that is unable to help them face immoderation. There is nevertheless in Sexton's poetry a claim for writing about madness which defeats moralizing attempts at silencing the expression of immoderation. Finally, both poets' writing may be yet another form of immoderation understood in its ancient relation to hubris. Indeed, an ambitious reading contract of self-revelation may lead to formal immoderation, as exemplified by Lowell's and Sexton's works

that rely on the notebook form. Lowell's inclination towards formal immoderation was Sisyphean. He conceived a one-year project but toiled at the poems for six years. When he eventually asserted his mastery, the initial work had led to six publications and had finally grown into three books. Moreover, he had to face opposition to what was resented as excessive self-revelation. Although he had succeeded in his ambitious plan, he felt exhausted and unable to write any more, just as years before he had felt that he could not write any more of his excessively elaborate verse that had won him a Pulitzer Prize. On the other hand, Sexton followed a Nietzschean route towards tragedy. Her verse is often positive about immoderation and more confident than Lowell's about writing's immoderate powers. With *The Death Notebooks,* she had a twofold ambition: she purported to control the poetic image of herself beyond death and she aimed at unlimited writing. The publication of the book in February 1974 signaled the failure of her plan. In October 1974, she yielded to immoderate suicide drives as if to make reality catch up with her immoderate artistic design.

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NOTES

[1] Rosenthal, 1959.
[2] As defined in *Webster's Third New International Language Dictionary*.
[3] Patricia Marx, "Interview with Anne Sexton", in McClatchy, p. 39.
[4] Ibid., p.40.
[5] Sexton Papers. All the indications/annotations are Sexton's.
[6] Barbara Kevles, "Interview with Anne Sexton", in McClatchy, p. 14.
[7] See Lowell Papers, Austin.
[8] See letter to R. W. Flint (1948) in Lowell, 2005, p.96.
[9] See Lowell Papers, Harvard.
[10] Barthes writes: "Dès l'instant où l'écrivain a cessé d'être un témoin de l'universel pour devenir une conscience malheureuse (vers 1850), son premier geste a été de choisir l'engagement de sa forme, soit en assumant, soit en refusant l'écriture de son passé. L'écriture classique a donc éclaté et la Littérature entière, de Flaubert à nos jours, est devenue une problématique du langage"(Barthes, p. 8).
[11] See letter to William Carlos Williams (December 3, 1957), in Lowell, 205, p.307.
[12] See Freud, 1990, p.15.
[13] For Rosenthal, "his speaker is unequivocally himself", but this paper keeps the distinction between the speaker and the author.
[14] See Middlebrook, p.16.
[15] From Lowell, *Notebook*.
[16] This is all the more obvious if we compare this version from the *Selected Poems* with a former version published in *Notebook*:

> Sometimes when I am ill or delicate,
> the pinched flame of my match turns living green,
> the cornstalk in green tails and seeded tassel...
> ("We Do What We Are; 1-The Nihilist as Hero")

[17] "Elle est pour longtemps, et jusqu'à nos jours, emprisonnée dans un monde moral" (Foucault, p.623).
[18] According to Diane Middlebrook, John Holmes "had been a Jekyll-and-Hyde alcoholic, and his first wife had committed a gruesome suicide, slashing her wrists and bleeding to death over all his papers, which she assembled for that purpose on his desk. [...] By the late 1950s, Holmes had stopped drinking and was happily remarried; his life was outwardly peaceful and secure" (Middlebrook, p.100).
[19] See Lejeune, p.80 and Lejeune and Bogaert, p.22.
[20] The word also appears in the "Afterword" to the 1970 edition.
[21] "[P]ouvoir concentrer sur une faible surface l'image totale de la réalité qui l'entoure" (Lejeune, 2005, p.79).
[22] See letter to Elizabeth Bishop, February 6, 1972 (2005, p.583), letter to Stanley Kunitz, March 1, 1972 (ibid., p.585) and letter to Christopher Ricks, March 21, 1972 (ibid., p.589) respectively.
[23] See Middlebrook, p.361.

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