Reframing Confession:
Parodying Childhood Trauma in Sylvia Plath and Louise Bourgeois

Natasha Silver
UCL

Thesis Submitted for PhD in Comparative Literature

Declaration
I, Natasha Katie Silver, confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.
Abstract

This thesis examines how childhood trauma is aesthetically mediated in the works and ego documents of Sylvia Plath and Louise Bourgeois, departing from a biographical approach in order to reconceive confession as an aesthetic genre. In particular, I explore the extent to which parody — as an intertextual, self-reflexive and playful mode — provides a means of framing an experience that resists symbolisation. Equally, I consider how the parodic mode might enable the artists to situate themselves in the male canon.

Giving a cultural history of confession, Chapter 1 identifies a convergence between confessional practices and narratives of victimhood in contemporary western discourse. However, the art forms analysed in this thesis (namely, journal, poem and sculpture) actively manipulate confessional strategies, inviting critical reflection on audience enjoyment of the aestheticisation of suffering. Chapter 2 discusses how trauma can distort linear time and memory, drawing some key distinctions between traumatic temporalities that are frequently elided in trauma theory. By contrast, I propose that parody may enable the traumatised subject to establish reflective distance from overwhelmingly painful affect by localising the experience in time.

Arguing that Plath’s journals produce (rather than reveal) a traumatised subject, Chapter 3 explores how they both inhabit and exceed the figure of melancholic poet, ironising the conception of trauma as a wellspring of genius. Chapter 4 situates Plath’s so-called ‘Holocaust poems’ in the context of debates about the possibility of poetry after Auschwitz, showing how they parody cultural assimilation of the Holocaust and engage critically with the potential allure of victimhood narratives. Reading Bourgeois’ archival documents as a multivalent and figurative art form, Chapter 5 analyses how the Freudian Oedipal complex (as it is applied to the little girl) is constructed and critiqued via identification with literary daughters in the French canon. Chapter 6 observes how Bourgeois’s ‘cell’ installations deploy Gothic narrative techniques, foregrounding the fundamental epistemic uncertainty at the heart of Freud’s theory of the ‘primal scene’ and mocking the viewer’s desire to uncover a secret trauma.
Impact Statement

This thesis hopes to bring benefits to the disciplines of Literary Studies and History of Art by opening up new approaches to the oeuvres of Sylvia Plath and Louise Bourgeois. Presenting an alternative to interpretative strategies founded on reading the works of Plath and Bourgeois autobiographically, I focus on a range of aesthetic techniques by which they fabricate rather than unveil a subject. More widely, my study seeks to contribute towards scholarship that re-conceptualises confessional art as a discursive and self-reflexive genre, particularly drawing attention to the overlooked dimension of parody.

My project also contributes to debates about the representability of trauma in Literary and Cultural Trauma Studies. In line with emerging scholarship challenging the widespread assumption that trauma is inherently unrepresentable, my analysis of the works of Plath and Bourgeois highlights the ways in which traumatic experience is culturally and symbolically mediated. In particular, I aim to bring greater clarity to theoretical discussions about the relation of trauma and time, with a view to emphasising the particularity of traumatic experience. Moreover, I suggest the pertinence of analysing the ways in which traumatised subjectivity is constructed in a culture that makes increasing reference to the language of trauma and victimhood. The potential academic impact of my thesis could be brought about by publication, either in the form of journal articles or a monograph.

This thesis may have benefits that extend to theoretical literature relating to clinical practice, especially within discourses of psychoanalysis and psychotherapy. As I propose, confessional art offers a reflexive and multivalent aesthetic object that permits an examination of the complex relation of language and trauma, and the ways in which childhood traumatic experience might be incorporated within a temporal framework. Performing how parody might contribute towards processes of mourning or working through childhood trauma, the works of Plath and Bourgeois produce insight that might fruitfully be explored with therapeutic practitioners. Such an interdisciplinary dialogue could be promoted through a conference, round table discussion or seminar series bringing together clinicians and academics.

Finally, my research might also be put to beneficial use through public engagement events. For example, the works of Plath and Bourgeois could provide a productive departure point for thinking collaboratively about the ways in which we build narratives about our childhood experiences.
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Acknowledgments

I would like to thank my brilliant supervisors, Mererid Puw Davies and Stephanie Bird, for giving so generously of their time, expertise and advice. I have greatly enjoyed working with you on this project and benefitting from your exceptional eye for detail. I would also like to thank everyone at the Sylvia Plath and Louise Bourgeois archives for their invaluable assistance, and my tutors at the Tavistock and Portman and British Psychotherapy Foundation for sharing their wealth of clinical experience. I am very grateful for the unceasing support of my therapist, Julie Walsh, and of my wonderful family and friends. Finally, thank you to Andy for bringing me tea in the morning and generally keeping me sane; and to Mara, for your company during the final phase.
Introduction

Appropriating the Bell Jar

The image of the bell jar features in the work of both Sylvia Plath (1932-1963) and Louise Bourgeois (1911-2010), independently so far as we know. A culturally rich symbol, the bell jar evokes associations of scientific experimentation and the preservation of objects for study or display. Here, I would like to suggest that it offers a preliminary approach to conceptualising confessional art. As a transparent container, the bell jar signifies a lack of privacy, even a submission to surveillance through self-exposure. However, the way in which Plath and Bourgeois appropriate the means of display, actively manipulating the rhetoric of revelation, offers a feminist renegotiation of the private-public divide.

In Plath’s novel *The Bell Jar* (1963), references to the bell jar chart the narrative arc of the protagonist Esther Greenwood’s depression. The first mention appears when Esther is travelling from a psychiatric ward in a city hospital to a private asylum:

Wherever I sat […] I would be sitting under the same glass bell jar, stewing in my own sour air. […] The air of the bell jar wadded around me, and I couldn’t stir (2005: p. 178).

The narrator again refers to the bell jar after her first session of electric shock therapy. Feeling ‘surprisingly at peace’, she describes how:

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1 While Plath and Bourgeois spent a period of overlap living in the US, there is not (yet) evidence to suggest that the two artists were aware of each other’s work. Bourgeois is more likely to have encountered the work of Plath than *vice versa*, since she was a peripheral figure in the art world until a major retrospective of her oeuvre at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1982. Coincidentally, 1982 was also the year in which Plath became the first person to win a posthumous Pulitzer Prize.
The bell jar hung, suspended, a few feet above my head. I was open to the circulating air (p. 206).

Then, towards the end of her six months at the asylum, Esther reflects on her mother’s remark that “we’ll act as if this were a bad dream”:

To the person in the bell jar, blank and stopped as a dead baby, the world itself is the bad dream (p. 227).

The bell jar is mentioned a final time as Esther leaves the hospital:

How did I know that someday — at college, in Europe, somewhere, anywhere — the bell jar, with its stifling distortions, wouldn’t descend again? (p. 230).

Significantly, this question is immediately followed by the narrator’s memory of Buddy, Esther’s former boyfriend, saying “I wonder who you’ll marry now, Esther”. The association is just one example of the way in which the novel shows how mental illness is inextricable from the social expectations on women in nineteen-fifties America. Indeed, Sarah Churchwell characterises *The Bell Jar* as ‘an acidic satire [...] exploring the impossibility of living up to the era’s contradictory ideals of womanhood’ (2016). As Esther had told Buddy earlier in the novel:

If neurotic is wanting two mutually exclusive things at one and the same time, then I’m neurotic as hell. I’ll be flying back and forth between one mutually exclusive thing and another for the rest of my days (p. 90).

During Esther’s internship with *Mademoiselle* in New York, when the bell jar begins to descend, this impossible predicament of women is figured by the analogy of a fig tree:
I saw my life branching out before me like the green fig tree in the story. From the tip of every branch, like a fat purple fig, a wonderful future beckoned and winked. One fig was a husband and a happy home and children, and another fig was a famous poet and another fig was a brilliant professor […] I saw myself sitting in the crotch of this fig tree, starving to death, just because I couldn't make up my mind which of the figs I would choose (p. 73).

For Esther, such a sense of paralysis also describes the sensation of being inside a bell jar.

The protagonist's feelings of stagnated sterility, as though she were 'blank and stopped as a dead baby' (p. 227), are foreshadowed by a tour of the hospital in which Buddy is studying to become a doctor. In one scene:

Buddy took me out into a hall where they had some big glass bottles full of babies that had died before they were born. The baby in the first bottle had a large white head bent over a tiny curled-up body the size of a frog. The baby in the next bottle was bigger and the baby next to that one was bigger still and the baby in the last bottle was the size of a normal baby and he seemed to be looking at me and smiling a little piggy smile.

I was quite proud of the calm way I stared at all these gruesome things (p. 59).

The ultimate symbol of life, a baby, is therefore turned into an object of scientific study, with the glass display bottles notably anticipating the metaphorical associations of the bell jar. Esther's attempt to maintain a calm exterior implies the necessity of situating herself outside the bottles in this male-dominated environment, despite identifying with the baby within. In the
next scene, she witnesses a live childbirth, which is also the first delivery of an obnoxious medical student. She describes how:

The table where they were lifting the woman [...] looked like some awful torture table with these metal stirrups sticking up in mid-air at one end and all sorts of instruments and wires and tubes I couldn’t make out properly at the other (p. 61).

Clearly horrified, Esther reflects on the power differential in the medicalisation of labour:

Later Buddy told me the woman was on a drug that would make her forget she’d had any pain and that when she swore and groaned she really didn’t know what she was doing because she was in a kind of twilight sleep.

I thought it sounded just like the sort of drug a man would invent. Here was a woman in terrible pain, obviously feeling every bit of it or she wouldn’t groan like that, and she would go straight home and start another baby, because the drug would make her forget how bad the pain had been, when all the time, in some secret part of her, that long, blind, colorless and windowless corridor of pain was waiting to open up and shut her in again (pp. 61-2).

This passage constitutes a powerful critique of the dehumanising treatment of women, used to ‘shut her in’ the confines of a patriarchal society. Ironically, pregnancy and motherhood disrupt the very binary between inside and outside that such a society seeks to sustain. Showing how Esther’s depression stems from social pressures, *The Bell Jar* indicates the porousness of private and public life, while attesting to the way in which the deprivations of privacy were distributed unevenly in nineteen-fifties America. Plath’s novel thus suggests the bell jar as a symbol of women’s simultaneous containment and subjection to self-exposure.
Remarkably, the bell jar is also a motif that recurs in several of the prints and sculptures of Louise Bourgeois. The first example, an untitled ink drawing on pink paper from 1943, depicts a bell jar in which a woman’s head is adjoined to a scalloped torso shape with a curved base (Lorz: 2015, p. 18). Alluding to a classical bust supported by a plinth, the image suggests the function of a bell jar as a display case; the woman inside is thus treated as a delicate specimen or decorative object. Notably, there is a strange oval outline surrounding her face. The shape might evoke a magnifying glass or lens, replicating the magnifying properties of the bell jar itself due to the curvature of its glass. The viewer is thereby invited to examine the woman’s face: confined, isolated and cut-off from society, she is disconnected from her body and therefore helpless. However, subverting the power relation of audience and artwork, the oval shape also suggests a vanity mirror, held up to the viewer. Furthermore, the woman’s wide-open eyes and smiling mouth seem to animate the inanimate, typifying a reversal often achieved by Bourgeois’s work whereby the art looks back at the viewer.
In 1998, Bourgeois made a sculpture comprising a bell jar on a steel base. At the front, two steps lead up to the base, and inside the glass there is a doll’s house-sized chair. While portraying a scene of isolated confinement, the sculpture also mimics the arrangement of a stage, as though inviting the viewer to sit and be examined. In another sculpture made the same year, five miniature chairs are placed around a glass orb, in which another chair faces a mirror standing menacingly above. This scenario can be conceived as a model of the viewing encounter, with the chairs on the outside laid out like an audience indicating the enjoyment that might be gained from watching someone forced to confront themselves, a frequent trope in Bourgeois’s work. Indeed, the artist often angles mirrors to capture the viewer, as though wanting to instigate a moment of self-scrutiny. Bourgeois reflected that ‘mirrors can be seen as a vanity, but that is not all their meaning. The act of looking into a mirror is really about having the courage it takes to look at yourself and really face yourself’ (cited by Lorz: 2015, p. 30). In Bourgeois’s art, the bell jar extends this reflective function of the mirror, reversing the viewer’s gaze so that we are caught in the very act of viewing.

Louise Bourgeois: *Untitled (Chair)*, 1998
The elements of bell jar and mirror are combined again in *I Do, I Undo, I Redo* (2000), a large-scale installation created for the Turbine Hall in Tate Modern, London. This work features three steel towers with spiralling staircases, in which mirrors either surround viewers or are placed directly opposite seats meant for them. While others can watch, the seated person is confronted by their mirror image; they are ‘projected’ and thereby integrated into the work. In each tower Bourgeois placed a bell jar containing sculpted figures of a mother and child. For example, in *I Redo* a naked woman sits on a chair; pulling upwards, like the string of a kite, an umbilical cord comes out of her navel with a small baby attached at the end. A sketch of this scene made in the same year, entitled ‘Do Not Abandon Me’, likewise portrays a tension between togetherness and separation in the mother-child dyad. Interestingly, the image of new life subverts the bell jar’s connotations with death, much like the woman’s streaming hair in a drypoint entitled *Hair (Red Bell Jar)* (2000). Equally, the buoyancy of the baby counteracts the idea of a vacuum; indeed, it almost seems as though the baby is floating in water, reconfiguring the bell jar as amniotic sac. Consequently, the bell jar ceases to be a symbol of oppression, as in Plath’s novel in which the protagonist feels ‘blank and stopped as a dead baby’, and instead becomes a space of protection, vitality and growth.

Bourgeois’s exploration of maternal space is in fact figured by the bell jar itself, evoking the fine line between protection and confinement — a common theme in the artist’s works, most famously her monumental steel structure, ‘Maman’ (1999). Indeed, Bourgeois often created sculptural spaces doubling up as shelter and trap that permit the viewer varying degrees of physical or visual access, from her cocoon-like Lairs of the early sixties to her architectural series of Cells (1991-2008). The artist thereby transforms the bell jar image, showing the permeability of inside and outside represented by the mother’s body, while also drawing attention to the act of viewing itself. Indeed, the reflective surface of the glass reverses the viewer’s gaze, exposing us in turn. As I would like to suggest, speaking through and with the bell jar exemplifies the way in which Bourgeois’s art appropriates the rhetoric of confession. This thesis considers how a feminine form of creativity might be particularly attuned to the interrelation of public and private life, and the processes by which subjectivity is constructed in relation to its symbolic milieu.

Significantly, the artists’ use of the bell jar image arose in the context of cold war America, in which the metaphor of ‘containment’ governed foreign policy seeking to tackle the threat of Soviet expansion (Nelson: 2002, p. xii). Applied to both domestic ideology and its effects on literary and mass culture, containment as a metaphor and as material practice shaped debates about privacy that began in the late nineteen-fifties. As Deborah Nelson observes, during this time vigilant protection of the private sphere was considered to be the most significant difference between democracies and totalitarian states (p. xiii). Giving rise to increased levels of surveillance, the result was that privacy was paradoxically penetrated. Thus, as Nelson notes, anxiety was provoked not only by the intrusion of the state into private life, but also by the leaking of private life into public discourse that marked the first appearance of ‘confessional culture’ (p. xiv). Indeed, the opening up to exposure of the
sphere of intimacy accelerated demands to establish and defend the boundaries of privacy.

As I discuss in Chapter 1, the apparent self-disclosures of the confessional poets were seen as socially shameful, attesting to a sense of anxiety about the blurring of the private-public divide during the cold war period. Often couched in terms of self-indulgent narcissism, the particularly misogynist aspect of this critique has continued to be prevalent in scholarship on the confessional mode. By contrast, a key premise of this thesis is that the distinction between public and private is based on the gendered assumption of abstract, universal categories founding lyric subjectivity. As I argue, by situating ‘personal’ stories within wider historical, social and political contexts, confessional art highlights the interrelatedness of private and public life. Furthermore, the works of Plath and Bourgeois draw attention to the ways in which the presumed intimate revelations of confessional art are self-reflexively staged. Indeed, simulating sincerity through artifice, their art fabricates rather than unveils a subject, such that the confessional ‘I’ is an effect of aesthetic form rather than originating in the artist.

Parodying Trauma

This thesis examines how the traumatised subjectivity in the art of Plath and Bourgeois is assembled from materials of the cultural environment, drawing attention to the ways in which narratives of trauma and victimhood are symbolically mediated through a range of literary and psychoanalytic intertexts. Thus, my analysis departs from autobiographical approaches that conceive the works of Plath and Bourgeois as a window into the artists’ childhood trauma. Indeed, rather than reading their artworks as the product of direct self-revelation, a method that problematically places the reader or critic in a position of power, this thesis explores a range of aesthetic techniques deployed by the artists in their portrayal of traumatic experience. In particular, I highlight the overlooked dimension of parody in the oeuvres of Plath and
Bourgeois, diverging from a vein of critical earnestness that runs through scholarship on these artists. Always standing in relation to a prior text or discourse, parody is a form of imitation characterised by ironic inversion (Hutcheon, 1985). As I propose, the artworks under study in this thesis establish a double voice by simultaneously inhabiting and exceeding narratives of trauma and victimhood.

My investigation into parody in this thesis is twofold. Firstly, I consider how use of the parodic mode in the works of Plath and Bourgeois prompts reflection on the politics of victim-identification. Examining the ways in which traumatised subjectivity is constructed is particularly pertinent in a time when the language of trauma has become ubiquitous. As Didier Fassin and Richard Rechtman note in *The Empire of Trauma: An Inquiry into the Condition of Victimhood* (2009), ‘trauma is not confined to the psychiatric vocabulary; it is embedded in everyday usage’ (p. 6). Indeed, the concept has become a habitual means of representing our relationship to the past in contemporary culture. However, using trauma as a general way of expressing suffering is likely to result in a dilution of its meaning. Equally, the rise of trauma terminology can be seen as part of a culture that pathologises difficult emotions. An unfortunate consequence in either case is to detract from systemic inequalities that require political intervention. It is therefore worth acknowledging that, as Fassin and Rechtman suggest, ‘social agents are not passive recipients of the label “traumatised”’ (p. xi). Analysing ways in which the works of Plath and Bourgeois perform identification with the victimised subject position, this thesis explores how parody might de-naturalise narratives of trauma and victimhood, demonstrating how they are actively shaped. Furthermore, I suggest that the parodic mode may pose a challenge to un-reflected identification with those who suffer.

Secondly, and simultaneously, this thesis considers whether parody might not nonetheless also provide a means of representing trauma, and in that way contribute to processes of mourning and working through. Offering an
opportunity for examining the complex relation of trauma and representation, the works of Plath and Bourgeois indicate how appropriating another text or idiom may provide a means of framing an experience that resists symbolisation. From a temporal perspective, parodying a pre-existent narrative can perhaps give form to an extreme event (or series of events) that disrupts linear time, or that remains altogether elusive to conscious recollection. The parodic mode might therefore permit indirect access to traumatic affect, which otherwise threatens to overwhelm the ego (notably, the root of parody is para-, meaning ‘beside’). Establishing a temporal interval between then and now, the self-reflexivity of parody may enable the traumatised subject to gain an appraising distance from the painful past and thereby reorient toward the future. Thus, as I propose, parody can perhaps provide an antidote to the widespread view in literary theory that trauma is beyond all knowledge and representation. Furthermore, by restoring the indeterminacy of language through creativity and play, it may give the traumatised subject a renewed sense of agency. Marking the intersection of invention and critique, the mode may analogously allow the confessional artist to situate herself with respect to the male canon.

**Chapter Summary**

Giving a cultural history of confession, Chapter 1 identifies a convergence between confessional practices and narratives of victimhood in contemporary western discourse. However, the art forms analysed in this thesis (namely, journal, poem and sculpture) actively manipulate confessional strategies, inviting critical reflection on audience enjoyment of the aestheticisation of suffering. Chapter 2 discusses how trauma can distort linear time and memory, drawing some key distinctions between traumatic temporalities that are frequently elided in trauma theory. By contrast, I propose that parody may enable the traumatised subject to establish reflective distance from overwhelmingly painful affect by localising the experience in time.
Arguing that Plath’s journals produce (rather than reveal) a traumatised subject, Chapter 3 explores how they both inhabit and exceed the figure of melancholic poet, ironising the conception of trauma as a wellspring of genius. Chapter 4 situates Plath’s so-called ‘Holocaust poems’ in the context of debates about the possibility of poetry after Auschwitz, showing how they parody cultural assimilation of the Holocaust and engage critically with the potential allure of victimhood narratives. Reading Bourgeois’ archival documents as a multivalent and figurative art form, Chapter 5 analyses how the Freudian Oedipal complex (as it is applied to the little girl) is constructed and critiqued via identification with literary daughters in the French canon. Chapter 6 observes how Bourgeois’s ‘cell’ installations deploy Gothic narrative techniques, foregrounding the fundamental epistemic uncertainty at the heart of Freud’s theory of the ‘primal scene’ and mocking the viewer’s desire to uncover a secret trauma. My project overall considers the extent to which the parodic mode might contribute towards processes of working through childhood traumatic experience, while also offering the woman artist a means of responding to her patrilineal aesthetic inheritance.
Chapter 1
The Art of Confession

Nor do we find him forward to be sounded.
But with a crafty madness keeps aloof
When we would bring him on to some confession
Of his true state.

*(Hamlet, Act 3 Scene 1, lines 7-10)*

**Introduction: Confessing Trauma and Victimhood**

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines the action of confessing as ‘the disclosing of something the knowledge of which by others is considered humiliating or prejudicial to the person confessing; a making known or acknowledging of one's fault, wrong, crime, weakness, etc.’ (2019, 1. a.). However, marking a departure from religious and legal uses of the term, the term ‘confessional’ is applicable to a range of practices in contemporary western culture that do not necessarily cast the confessing subject in a negative light. Furthermore, acts of self-disclosure that were historically made to a court or priest are increasingly made to the general public. Outlets for confession have proliferated with technological development, from chat shows, reality television and radio, to podcasts, social media and blogs. Genres of written confession, such as life writing, memoir and autofiction, are also becoming more and more marketable. The concept of confession as self-revelation in the public domain partly stems, as this chapter suggests, from the so-called ‘confessional’ form of poetry that arose in nineteen-fifties America. As I will argue, a study of this poetic genre highlights the ways in which confessional practices destabilise the distinction between private and
public life, as we project a selective self-image into the social arena that is then reflected back to us. Thus, despite the rhetoric of authenticity, acts of confession do not reveal an unmediated self but rather participate in the dialectical construction of selfhood.

Although confession traditionally has connotations of wrongdoing, the mode is now frequently used for expressing vulnerability and victimhood. Indeed, there is a notable convergence between confessional practices and narratives of trauma and suffering in contemporary western culture. These narratives have met with growing demand, as exemplified by the flourishing genre of ‘misery lit’ that tends to hinge on a traumatic event or period of the past. Interestingly, the intimate, disturbing nature of such material relocates guilt from the confessing individual to the society in which the trauma occurs. Modern subjectivity might be seen in light of this shift from the sinful self to the traumatised self, whereby confession provides a platform for those who have been oppressed, marginalised or maltreated. Arguably, then, the confessional subject has become the victimised subject par excellence, with the traumatic subject matter of confession increasingly informing concepts of individual selfhood. The ubiquity and indeed profitability of trauma narratives in contemporary culture has been met with a range of sceptical responses. For example, writing on The Jeremy Kyle Show (2005-2019), which was recently cancelled following the suicide of one of its guests, the media editor Amol Rajan asks: ‘is it right to allow private trauma to become public spectacle? And is the ultimate result nothing less than the exploitation — for commercial gain at ITV, and for voyeuristic viewers — of highly vulnerable people?’ (2019). Equally, those who self-identify with the subject position of victim are liable to the accusation of exploiting the social currency of victimised status.

An article by the columnist Brendan O’Neill, entitled ‘Confessional culture: The costs of our prurient fascination with decades-old abuse’ (2011), exemplifies the hostile backlash against confessional trauma culture. Responding to a BBC1 documentary entitled Abused: Breaking the Silence (2011) about
sexual abuse in the Catholic Church, O'Neill writes polemically that ‘we live in a warped therapeutic era’, in which ‘we are urged to redefine ourselves as emotional basket cases, permanently screwed up by some sad or humiliating event in our childhood.’ O'Neill complains that such an era encourages passivity, whereby victims ‘relinquish responsibility for their adult experiences’, and criticises entertainment industries that ‘make money from terrible deeds and pornographic, tell-all memoirs.’ Problematically, O'Neill’s denunciation of confessional culture exhibits classist and misogynistic prejudices:

What really shone through in the BBC documentary […] is that the contemporary Cult of Revelation is now so powerful that it can even tempt well-bred, well-spoken men to weep for the cameras and advertise their wounds.

Sustaining the sexist charge of effeminacy, O'Neill adds that he is less shocked by the ‘alleged foul behaviour’ of the priests than ‘by the willingness of these otherwise decorous men to make an emotional spectacle of themselves.’ He concludes that ‘they would be better off keeping it private, rather than letting it all hang out on BBC TV.’ Thus, O'Neill’s article indicates the way in which a critique of the cultural apparatus of exploitation can turn on the victims themselves.

Interestingly, the views propounded in O'Neill’s article echo critical responses to confessional poetry, a genre that dealt with subject matters such as childhood trauma, mental breakdown and suicidal depression. O'Neill’s sense of disgust toward ‘letting it all hang out’ expresses anxiety about the extrusion of private emotion into the public sphere — anxiety that, as my literature review will show, is reflected throughout scholarship on confessional poetry. However, as this chapter suggests, confessional poetry, and confessional art more generally, interrogates this assumed divide between private and public, especially from a gendered perspective. Crossing boundaries between interior
and exterior, self and world, this chapter draws attention to the complex ways in which traumatised subjectivity is constructed. The prevalence of confession in contemporary culture indicates the timeliness of thinking about what we are doing when we are ‘confessing’, particularly in the context of increasing reference to the language of trauma and victimhood in shaping our sense of self and the past. My analysis of confessional art does not aim to repudiate articulations of suffering, but rather to bring attention to the way in which such articulations are formulated within a specific set of cultural and political circumstances.

A hazard of first-person narratives of trauma is that they can generate competing claims of victimisation, not all of which are justified. As Susan Brison observes in her own account of sexual assault, emphasising individual stories can undermine critical evaluation. Yet, Brison argues, ‘the solution to this problem is not to silence (or stop listening to) all those claiming to be victimised, but to allow ourselves to evaluate their claims’ (2002, p. 34). This thesis suggests that confessional art affords an opportunity of exploring the constructed nature of traumatised identity, with a particular focus on the politics of victim self-identification. Performing how, as Didier Fassin and Richard Rechtman point out, ‘social agents are not passive recipients of the label “traumatised”’ (2009, p. xi), the first-person voice of confessional art rejects the supposed dichotomy between victimisation and agency. As I will argue, the works analysed in this thesis provide an antidote to trends within modern confessionalism, situating ‘personal’ stories within wider historical, social and political contexts in a way that also offers a feminist renegotiation of the distinction between private and public life. This chapter begins by discussing the historical resonances of the term ‘confession’ with a view to drawing out the paradoxes of applying this term to confessional art. Then, taking confessional poetry as my case study, I give a review of critical scholarship on the mode, observing a tendency to approach the poetic text as the product of cathartic release. Finally, I point to the ways in which confessional art actively exploits the rhetoric of revelation. Ultimately, as I will
argue, catharsis is shifted from artist to audience, prompting critical reflection on the possible enjoyment derived from depictions of traumatic suffering.

Confessional Contexts: From Sin to Trauma

This section discusses two key contexts of confession, religion and psychoanalysis, noting how the practice shifts from an acknowledgment of sin or sinfulness to an acknowledgment of trauma. Correspondingly, the objective changes from reconciliation with God and the community of believers, to reconciliation with oneself or an aspect of one’s unconscious; the absolution of sin thus becomes the lifting of repression. Certainly, a structural equivalence can be observed between Christian and Oedipal stories, ‘the fall’ and ‘the primal scene’, both of which attempt to explain the origin of guilt. As I will observe, the notion that confession brings cathartic relief runs through both Catholic and psychoanalytic contexts. This section then turns to Michel Foucault’s commentary on the spreading of confessional practices in western society (The History of Sexuality: 1976). For Foucault, confession is a major means by which modern states exercise power, imposing a ‘law of truth’ and depriving the individual of privacy. However, as I will discuss, confessional poetry subverts this power dynamic by using confessional rhetoric self-reflexively. Contextualising the term ‘confession’ shows both the associations accompanying the application of this term to confessional artists and, significantly, the way that confessional artists resist such an application.

Catholicism

Referring to the acknowledgement of sin in the Judeo-Christian tradition, the sacrament of confession is determined to be of ‘divine origin and necessary for one’s spiritual salvation’ (Brooks: 2001, p. 18). A detailed confession to a bishop or priest appeared early in the church’s history. In the fifth-century discipline of the Roman Church, confessions were heard at the beginning of Lent and penitents reconciled on Holy Thursday. Gradually, however, the
practice of reconciling sinners immediately after confession and before fulfilment of penance was introduced. By the end of the eleventh century, only infamous sinners were reconciled on Holy Thursday, and there was a growing tendency of those guilty of serious sins to put off penance until death (‘Confession’, 2018). To correct this abuse, in 1215 the fourth Lateran Council prescribed annual confession and penance for the faithful, making it a condition for receiving Easter communion (Bossy: 1985, p. 45). As John Bossy notes, the sacrament represented a moment of critical transition for both the community and the individual: ‘a passage from a baptised but sinful condition into a supernatural state of “grace”, as passage from particularity towards membership of the whole body of Christ, a reconciliation to God and the neighbour’ (p. 46). From around 1400, the notion of frequent confession — a monthly or otherwise regular event outside a ritual context — began to be proposed to the laity. In the sixteenth century, challenges to ideological, spiritual and material dominance of the Roman Church in the west began to rise and new Protestant practices emerged. In response, the Council of Trent (1545–1563) took the fundamental step of codifying the place of Catholic confession.

In his article, ‘The Practice of Confession in the Catholic Church’ (1899), the Reverend R. F. Clarke makes an apologia for confession that offers a gauge of contemporaneous ideas about confession. Addressing Protestant antipathy to the practice of auricular confession, he summarises the objections of such a hypothetical critic:

He regards it as an unwarrantable invasion of the privacy of the individual conscience, an intrusion into the sacred domain of domestic life; as dangerous, demoralizing, a source of weakness to the will, and destructive of the habit of independence and mental self-reliance (p. 829).
Defending against the dual concern that confession invades privacy and weakens the will, Clarke proceeds to set out what he sees are the benefits of confession for both the individual and society, and remove ‘some of the misconceptions which prevail respecting it’ (p. 829). Interestingly, he suggests that the natural origin of confession is an instinct of human nature to communicate strong emotion, the suppression of which is painful. As he writes, ‘shame, self-reproach, fear, remorse, disgust at the thought of the past, and despondency at the prospect of the future, all combine to make life almost intolerable’. Conversely, externalising one’s sense of guilt via self-revelation affords inexpressible relief to ‘the heavily burdened soul’ (p. 831). Clarke’s focus on ‘the natural advantages of the confessional’ rather than its ‘supernatural benefits’ notably anticipates the psychoanalytic concept of catharsis (p. 842).

*Psychoanalysis*

Like Catholic confession, psychoanalysis involves the disclosure of one’s inner life to a partner, performed by means of a speech act. The ‘cathartic method’ developed by Breuer and Freud (1880-95) particularly echoes the reasons for confession given by Clarke. A Greek term meaning ‘purgative’, in psychoanalysis catharsis refers to the discharge of pathogenic affects that were originally tied to a traumatic experience that has undergone repression. In ‘Psycho-analysis’ (1926), Freud writes that ‘recovery would be a result of the liberation of the affect that had gone astray and of its discharge along a normal path (“abreaction”)’ (2001, p. 264). Emphasising the cathartic force of verbal expression, Freud and Breuer write in *Studies on Hysteria* (1895) of the ways in which:

Language serves as a substitute for action; by its help, an affect can be “abreacted” almost as effectively. In other cases speaking is itself an adequate reflex, when, for instance, it is a lamentation or giving utterance to a tormenting secret, e.g. a confession (2001, p. 8).
While religious confession aims to bring about reconciliation with God and community, however, psychoanalytic confession hopes for ‘reconciliation [Versöhnung] with the repressed material’ (Freud, ‘Remembering, Repeating and Working Through’ (1914): 2001, p. 152). Moreover, the psychoanalyst does not claim, like the priest, to offer divine redemption, but rather to help the analysand discover the source of their feeling of guilt. Catholicism and psychoanalysis thus espouse a different relation to the law, whether of God or the social order respectively.

In The Question of Lay Analysis (1926), Freud imagines that he is asked by an ‘Impartial Person’ whether psychoanalysis is a confession, on the grounds that in both cases confessing a secret is said to relieve ‘oppression’ (2001, p. 189). Freud responds:

We must reply: ‘Yes and no!’ Confession no doubt plays a role in analysis — as an introduction to it, we might say. But it is very far from constituting the essence of analysis or from explaining its effects. In Confession the sinner tells what he knows; in analysis the neurotic has to tell more (p. 189).

Freud thus implies that the neurotic’s speech reveals unconscious as well as conscious material. When Lacan is asked the same question at a press conference in 1974, he replies more emphatically:

Absolutely not! They are not at all alike. In analysis, we begin by explaining to people that they are not there in order to confess. It is the first step of the art. They are there to talk – to talk about anything (2013, p.63).
One of the many implications of Lacan’s reply is that the unconscious can hide precisely in the minor details that are seemingly of no interest whatsoever.

However, the psychoanalyst Theodor Reik’s 1959 text, *The Compulsion to Confess*, circumvents the distinction between confessional and psychoanalytic speech by using the term ‘confession’ to denote unconscious confession. In terms reminiscent of Clarke’s discussion of the instinct to confess, Reik writes that ‘most symptoms also have the character of an unconscious confession and […] their purpose is to mitigate the pressure of guilt feeling’ (1959, pp. ix, x). Reik argues that the unconscious need for self-punishment is ‘one of the most important emotional forces shaping the destiny of man and that the future of mankind will depend on whether we succeed in reducing the power of this unconscious force that threatens us all with extinction’ (1959, p. x). Reik’s thesis on the universal, unconscious phenomena of confession attests to an increasing attempt in this period to understand powerful unconscious forces, such as the ‘urge for expression’, which threatened to ‘shape the destiny of us all’ (pp. 195; xi). The apocalyptic character of Reik’s language reflects a sense of anxiety about the destructive capacity of human nature in the political climate of the cold war. Significantly, Reik’s discourse was circulating at the time in which confessional poetry arose, and the notion of a ‘compulsion to confess’ or uncontrolled outpouring of affect is prevalent in much of the literary criticism on the mode. However, as this chapter suggests, confessional poetry is the product of aesthetic craft rather than an unconscious (or indeed conscious) expression of guilt, often engaging intellectually with the ways in which personal and political life are mutually implicated.

*Foucault: ‘a singularly confessing society’*

For Foucault, the obligation to confess is central to the workings of religious and civil power. Tracing a historical trajectory in *The History of Sexuality*
(1976), Foucault draws attention to the way in which the scope of confession had continually increased. He proposes that the Counter-Reformation marked a crucial moment in which increasing importance was attributed to penance: ‘to all insinuations of the flesh: thoughts, desires, voluptuous imaginings, delectations, combined movements of the body and the soul’ (1978, p. 19). Meticulous self-examination was encouraged: from ‘a shadow in a daydream’ to ‘an image too slowly dispelled’, everything had to be told. Significantly, the moment of transgression was shifted in the practice of confession ‘from the act itself to the stirrings – so difficult to perceive and formulate – of desire’ (pp. 19-20). Thus, Foucault suggests, ‘an imperative was established: Not only will you confess to acts contravening the law, but you will seek to transform your desire, your every desire, into discourse’ (p. 21).

As Foucault points out, one confesses in the presence, or virtual presence of an authority that ‘intervenes in order to judge, punish, forgive, console, and reconcile’. Confession is thereby ‘a ritual in which the truth is corroborated by the obstacles and resistances it has had to surmount in order to be formulated’ (p. 61). Thus, sexuality is not so much discovered as constituted by self-examination; passed through ‘the endless mill of speech’ (p. 21), it is governed by the categories in which the confession is required. Noting how religious confession was recodified in terms of ‘therapeutic operations’, Foucault suggests that ‘the sexual domain was no longer accounted for simply by the notions of error or sin, excess or transgression, but was placed under the rule of the normal and the pathological (which, for that matter, were the transposition of the former categories)’. Thus, analyst and analysand replace priest and penitent in the production of ‘truth’ (1981, p. 67).

Observing the secular adaptation and expansion of religious techniques of self-knowledge, Foucault argues that:

The confession has spread its effects far and wide. It plays a part in justice, medicine, education, family relationships, love relationships,
and love relations, in the most ordinary affairs of everyday life, and in
the most solemn rites; one confesses one's crimes, one's sins, one's
thoughts and desires, one's illnesses and troubles; one goes about
telling, with the greatest precision, whatever is most difficult to tell (p.
59).

Thus, Foucault proposes, ‘Western societies have established the confession
as one of the main rituals we rely on for the production of truth’ (p. 58). For
Foucault, the fact that ‘whatever is most difficult to tell’ is now public property
signals the deprivation of private life. Crucially, as he writes in ‘The Subject
and Power’ (1982), confession is a form of power that ‘categorises the
individual, marks him by his own identity, imposes a law of truth upon him
which he must recognise and which others have to recognise in him’ (p. 780).
For Foucault, confession is a double-edged sword in the production of self. As
suggested by his example of the Panopticon, the development of a subject
that is capable of scrutinizing its actions is an ambivalent legacy of the
Enlightenment. This subject is not only the rational self formed through self-
revelation but also the prisoner who, through subjection to surveillance, learns
to monitor themselves. Foucault suggests that the obligation to confess is now
so deeply ingrained that ‘we no longer perceive it as the effect of a power that
constrains us’ (1976, p. 60). Following Foucault, cultural criticism routinely
portrays confession as always already solicited, coerced by an authority who
intercepts, sanctions and legitimises the confessional subject. For example,
Peter Brooks asks: ‘if contemporary culture appears to insist on a generalised
transparency, in which each of us is fully open to all others without
dissimulation, doesn't the generalised confessional requirement also
constitute a tyranny, a policing of the very privacy that selfhood requires?’
(2000, p. 9).

Foucault’s understanding of confession as a form of subjugation draws
attention to the way in which acts of self-disclosure are constitutive of
subjectivity, emphasising the extent to which the obligation to confess
corrodes privacy in western societies. However, Foucault’s writing has been critiqued for being ‘empirically absolutely unreliable’ (Wehler: 1998, p. 91), and there is a notable lack of differentiation in his sweeping account of confession. Significantly, he does not distinguish between verbal and written confession, even though the latter is often intended for a public audience. The *Confessions* of St Augustine (397-398 CE), which represents the major instance of literary confession in antiquity, is addressed to God but also to ‘the many who will read it’ (1961, p. 20). Encouraging conversion into the Christian faith, Augustine employs rhetorical strategies such as repeated use of apostrophe that recur in secular forms of confession. In the sixteenth century, the Reformation gave rise to new forms of confession as Protestant practices began to emerge. Often understood as a private, written form of self-examination, these practices can be seen to anticipate confessional writing of the modern age. Indeed, Ian Watt’s study on the rise of the novel notes the influence of the Protestant tradition of ‘self-scrutiny’ and ‘introspection’ on the writing of Daniel Defoe and his contemporaries, and thus its importance to the growth of ‘a literature of self-exploration’ (2000, pp. 74-75; cited by Gill: 2005, p. 13). Such a sense of the value and distinctiveness of the self is crucial to Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *Confessions* (1781). Furthermore, as Jo Gill notes, Rousseau’s text offers ‘an early exemplar of strategies of evasion, denial and self-conscious artfulness to be found in much recent confessional writing’ (2005, p. 14).

Notably, the artifice of literary forms of confession implies a manipulation of confessional techniques that accords the confessional subject a greater degree of agency than was accorded by Foucault. As this thesis observes, the genre of confessional poetry self-reflexively performs the power-inflected construction of subjectivity, making space for a more critical evaluation of the codes that have been inscribed by society and culture. Nevertheless, as discussed in the next section, scholarship often reproduces the power dynamic Foucault identified in religious and therapeutic contexts of
confession. Conversely, reframing confession as an art form challenges assumptions of sin or pathology in the critical literature.

Confessional Poetry: Review of Scholarship

Making a startling departure from poetic and social decorum, from the late nineteen-fifties the so-called poetry of ‘confession’ covered previously taboo topics of personal life such as mental illness, intra-familial conflicts and resentments, childhood traumas, sexual transgressions and intimate feelings about one’s body. Elizabeth Gregory describes how ‘the transgression involved in naming the forbidden gives rise to the term “confession”, which, via its religious, psychoanalytic and legal associations, summons up ideas of sin, mental breakdown and criminality’ (Gill (ed.): 2006, p. 42). M. L. Rosenthal claims to have initially applied the term in his review of Robert Lowell’s poetry anthology, *Life Studies* (1959). As Rosenthal writes, ‘because of the way Lowell brought his private humiliations, sufferings, and psychological problems into the poems of *Life Studies*, the word “confessional” seemed appropriate enough’ – ‘sexual guilt, alcoholism, repeated confinement in a mental hospital’ are among themes explored (1976, p. 26). Thus, the term was used to refer both to the explicit subject matter of the poems, and to an alleged equivalence between poet and speaker.

Poets who have been associated with the confessional genre include W. D. Snodgrass, Robert Lowell, Anne Sexton, Sylvia Plath, John Berryman, and also Beat poets such as Allan Ginsburg. However, as Miranda Sherwin points out, ‘critics cannot seem to agree whom to include and exclude’ (2012, p. 13). It is nevertheless uncontroversial that Plath was intimately connected with this emergent current in American poetry – in 1959 she joined a poetry class taught by Lowell at Boston University, which was also attended by Anne Sexton. Lowell would later write in his foreword to Plath’s *Ariel* (1965): ‘everything in these poems is personal, confessional, felt, but the manner of
feeling is controlled hallucination, the autobiography of a fever’ (cited by Brain: 2001, p. 6). (This seemingly contradictory description of Plath’s poetry, combining raw feeling with aesthetic control, notably uses the vocabulary of illness that pre-empts a pathologising critical approach toward her work.) At the time, the direct and personal style of confessional poetry was seen as a form that disrupted or escaped earlier orthodoxies. For Al Alvarez, one of the form’s earliest advocates, confessional poetry had the revolutionary potential to break the mould of what he termed ‘the accepted Academic-Modern style’ (1968, p. 4).

Elaborating their contrastingly ‘personal’ approach, confessional poets particularly drew on discourses of psychoanalysis and psychotherapy that were gaining currency in the US. As Alvarez suggested at the time, the subject matter of the poetry is ‘largely the kind of material that is dug up in psychoanalysis’ (1968, p. 14). For Alvarez, the confessional poet is ‘the modern descendent of the Romantics’, who ‘is involved not simply in his emotions but in their sources, in his hidden motives and compulsions, in his own internal power politics and the roots of his own violence’. Writing this new form of poetry is therefore seen as a form of self-analysis (p. 13). Diane Middlebrook notes that the confessional poets (in her grouping, Lowell, Berryman, Plath and Sexton) had ‘all been through psychological breakdowns and treatment’, and ‘understood the dynamics of family life in terms of Freudian psychoanalysis’. As Middlebrook observes, a principal theme of confessional poetry is the ‘mental disorders that follow from deep emotional wounds received in early life’ (1993, p. 662). Likewise, Miranda Sherwin asserts that ‘the most significant bond shared by the confessional poets was an interest in the applications of psychoanalysis to poetry’ (2011, p. 19).

However, the application of a psychoanalytic paradigm to confessional poetry has facilitated an unfortunate trend in scholarship that pathologises the confessional poet on the basis of a supposed identity between poet and speaker. The poetry is thus often read as unmediated self-expression,
providing the poet with cathartic relief of traumatic affect. Notably, this notion of uncontrollable emotion overflowing into the public domain has given rise to a discernible desire to impose barriers. Two broad trends can be identified in the critical literature. On the one hand, the confessional poet is appraised as a Romantic figure for the modern age, whose suffering allows privileged insight into the true nature of the world. Confessional poetry is thereby seen to reflect both the poet’s own ‘crack-ups’ and ‘the symptoms of crack-up in the society around him’ (Alvarez, p. 14). On the other hand, the poet’s self-disclosure is seen as socially shameful, especially when comprising unpalatable ‘feelings of disgust, self-hatred and despair’ (Lerner, p. 56). Middlebrook notes how the confessional poets’ ‘subject matter made critics publicly recoil’ [1993, p. 662]. As Deborah Nelson observes, ‘confessional poetry with its taboo subjects like mental illness, sex, alcoholism, infidelity, rage and domestic conflict was deemed altogether too private’ (chapter, p. 26; italics Nelson’s). In each case, emphasis on the extremity and exceptionality of experience can serve as a means of othering the confessional poet, defending against a possible failure to control overwhelming affect. The literary review that follows draws attention to this pathologising thread in traditional scholarship, before suggesting that confessional poetry in fact interrogates the assumed line between private and public discourse.

In his review of Lowell’s *Life Studies*, Rosenthal sets out a series of assumptions about confessional poetry that set the agenda for subsequent criticism on the mode. The poetry is thought to be inherently autobiographical, whereby the first-person voice is ‘intended without question to point to the author himself’. As Rosenthal writes, ‘Lowell’s poetry has long been a struggle to remove the mask, to make his speaker unequivocally himself’ (1960, p. 226). Foregoing poetic personae, *Life Studies* is read as unflinchingly truthful, featuring ‘uncompromising honesty’; the poet’s ‘private humiliations, sufferings, and psychological problems’ are considered to be integral to the poem. Rosenthal’s review notably typifies ambivalence towards this new form – ‘an impure art, magnificently stated but unpleasantly egocentric’, in which
the ‘self-therapeutic motive is so obvious and persistent’ (p. 232). Revealing the gender bias of his critique, Rosenthal suggests that ‘it is hard not to think of Life Studies as a series of personal confidences, rather shameful, that one is honour-bound not to reveal’; he goes on to express particular concern over Lowell’s ‘public discrediting of his father’s manliness and character’.

Nevertheless, for Rosenthal, Lowell’s personal disclosures are justified insofar as they ‘carry the burden of the age within them’. As he suggests, they provide a ‘window of psychological breakdown’ through which to look at the breakdown of society: ‘they are poems of violent contradiction, a historical overture to define the disintegration of a world’.

Rosenthal’s metaphor of confessional poetry as a psychological ‘window’ echoes through the spatial imagery in C. B. Cox and A. R. Jones’s article, ‘After the Tranquilized Fifties: Notes on Sylvia Plath and James Baldwin’ (1964). Conceiving the confessional poet as a tragic hero, the authors suggest that ‘the poet’s madness, like that of Lear, enables him to attain a vision of truth beyond the horizon of ordinary mental states’ (p. 107). Confessional poetry is perceived to permit special access into uncharted psychic territory, as ‘what is private and secret is made public and accessible to the reader’. Thus, the spatial metaphors function to reinforce a line between pathological and normal, poet and reader. Expanding on this theme in a subsequent article, ‘Necessity and Freedom: The Poetry of Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton’ (1965), Jones writes that ‘the intolerable compulsion to confess is irresistibly tied to a free-floating and neurotic guilt, so that the world into which we as readers are drawn is, in the end, phantasmagoric, intensely personal and painfully private’ (p. 14). The pathologising nature of his language is notably redolent of Reik’s recent concept of the ‘compulsion to confess’ (1959). In this kind of criticism, the biographies of poet and speaker are wholly entwined — for example, Cox suggests that ‘there is no doubt that in Ariel Sylvia Plath submits herself entirely to this destructive element, or equally that her creative mind realized
in poems of burning intensity what her suffering self experienced as tormenting desolation’ (p. 24).

Similarly idealising the confessional poet, Alvarez (1868) declares that ‘his inner world is more substantial, variable and self-renewing than that of ordinary people’ (p. 15). For Alvarez, ‘a major test of originality is not a question of form but of psychic exploration, not of artifact but of the artist’s identity’. He thus espouses the view that the poet’s ‘identity’ could somehow be known before encountering the ‘artifact’ of the poem. As a result, ‘a poem succeeds or fails by virtue of the balance and subtlety of the man himself’. In this new movement of poetic ‘Extremism’, conceived as a Romantic form of poetry for the new age, the poet ‘pursues his insights to the edge of breakdown and beyond it, until mania, depression, paranoia and the hallucinations that come with psychosis or are induced by drugs become as urgent and as commonplace as Beauty, Truth, Nature and the Soul were to the Romantics’ (p. 12). Again, writing on Plath, Alvarez sees no distinction between poet and speaker, describing how ‘she went to the extreme, far edge of the bearable and, in the end, slipped over’. Alvarez concludes by commending Plath for ‘the courage it took to gamble in this way’ (p. 17).

Robert Phillips also admires the confessional poets’ ‘moral courage’ in the first monograph dedicated to the genre, The Confessional Poets (1973). He sees confessional poetry as stemming from the writers’ desire to share pain and suffering, as though they were crying out: ‘let me tell you about my wound… Let me tell you about my scars and deformities’ (p. xi). For Phillips, ‘a true confessional poet places few barriers, if any, between his self and direct expression of that self, however painful that expression may prove’; indeed, he is understood to ‘eschew personae altogether’ (pp. 16-17). A product of direct expression, the mode is considered ‘antielegant’; using the language of ‘ordinary speech’, it is thereby closer to ‘the realities of American life’ (p. 9). In line with previous critics, Phillips attributes confessional poetry with ‘therapeutic’ value, a means of ‘killing the beasts which are within us’ (p. 2).
implying potentially cathartic effects for the reader as well as the poet. Defending against criticisms of confessional poetry as ‘too nakedly embarrassing’, Phillips argues that the subject matter simply reflects the times, citing Wallace Stevens (1957): ‘as life grows more terrible, its literature grows more terrible.’ Thus, Phillips suggests, ‘multiple marriages and miscarriages, war atrocities and suicides can now be seen as just as valid subjects for the poet as, say, an imperfect rose or a perfect lady’. The confessional poet is again figured as a modern Romantic, whose expression of anguish allows ‘a heightened perception of the way we really live here and now’ (p. xiii).

The critical approaches discussed so far characterise the poet as a passive conduit of an ‘intolerable compulsion’, driven by ‘uninhibited autobiographical impulses’. Moreover, trauma and suffering are often romanticised, even attributed with a higher moral status, as though the damaged psyche offers a privileged vantage point on reality. Notably, the assumption that confessional poetry originates in the extremes of experience allows the critic to maintain distance from those heightened states attributed to the poet. Such a distancing device also characterises a more critical strand of scholarship on confessional poetry that accuses poets of self-indulgent emotionalism. Indeed, a corollary of the notion that confession is poured from a fount of subjective experience, unmediated by form, is that it becomes susceptible to the criticism of lack of poetic craft. For example, reviewing the work of Sexton, Charles Gullans writes that ‘these are not poems at all, and I feel that I have, without right or desire, been made a third party to her conversations with her psychiatrist. It is painful, embarrassing and irritating’ (Colburn [ed.]: 1988, p. 148). Similarly implying equivalence between moral and aesthetic control, Patricia Meyer Spacks asserts that ‘art requires more than emotional indulgence, requires a saving respect for disciplines and realities beyond the crying needs, the unrelenting appetites, of the self’ (cited by Gill: 2004, p. 430).
More recently, several critics have observed the gendered nature of such criticism. In ‘Confessional’ Writing and the Twentieth-Century Literary Imagination (2011), Sherwin notes that, while value judgments inflected almost all of the early criticism of the confessional poets, the worst seems to have been reserved for Sexton and Plath. She observes that it was a rare review of their first books that did not comment derisively on their autobiographical character or the pathological nature of the subject matter (2011, p. 11). Indeed, the genre of confession has often been associated with stereotypically feminine tropes, considered to be ‘raw’, ‘narcissistic’ and ‘unformed’ (Keitel: 1996, p. 334; cited by Gammel: 1999, p. 4). Thus, Irene Gammel asserts that ‘women have become the confessional sex par excellence’. As she points out, ‘a history of confessional readings has created the perception of women obsessively confessing their secrets, reinforcing stereotypes of the female psyche as fragmented and, what is perhaps even worse, as “needy”’ (1999, p. 4). Similarly, Gill observes that ‘in its own time and since, “confessional” has been used as a pejorative adjective and applied disproportionately to poetry written by women’ (2008, p. 20). Unfortunately, the initial reception that held confessionalism to be ‘personal yelps rather than universal cries’ (Lehmann-Haupt: 1971), the poetry of ‘monstrous self-indulgence’ (Gullans (ed.): 1988, p. 148) and as ‘domestic and…“anti-poetic”’ (Dickey: 1963) is an impression that has lingered.

Gill demonstrates how the charge of narcissism in particular has been applied unequally to women confessional writers. In her extensive work on Sexton, she notes how the poet has been condemned by Spacks for her ‘shrill narcissism’ and ‘insistent mirroring’, and, as Joyce Carol Oates summarises, for ‘the intensity of her preoccupations: always the self, the victimized, bullying, narcissistic self’ (cited by Gill: 2004, p. 62). The prevalence of the critique of narcissism that Gill identifies in scholarship on confessional poetry problematically pushes discourse that feminism has come to understand as political back into the personal realm. Such a de-politicization of confessional
poetry furthermore reveals a disturbing set of beliefs about what can and cannot constitute art. As Nelson writes in her study of the cold war context,

> When confessional poetry started to admit history, biology, and society into the sacred confines of the poem and releasing the details of private life to the scrutiny of an anonymous reading public, it was suddenly unclear whether it was poetry at all’ (2001, p. 111).

But, in fact, as I would like to emphasise, confessional poetry often challenges the notion of an ‘original’ or ‘true’ self-present subject, on which that very distinction between personal and political, private and public relies. Indeed, by playing with this distinction, such poetry performs subjectivity as a discursive production, flouting the tacit limits of public discourse.

Evidently, the qualities that conventional criticism attributes to the poet, whether moral courage or self-indulgent narcissism, could just as well be a successful act of deceit or subterfuge. As Gammel argues in *Confessional Politics: Women’s Sexual Self-Representations in Life Writing and Popular Media* (1999), ‘if the term [‘confession’] implies women’s subjection to confessional readings, it also serves to explore women’s active manipulation of confessional conventions’ (p. 3). Thus, rather than driven by an ‘intolerable compulsion’, women poets use confessional conventions self-consciously. Gammel therefore stresses the bi-directionality of the term confession for women: ‘women actively and strategically negotiate their positions and identities within the larger domain of confessional politics’ (p. 7). It is noteworthy that none of the confessional poets made any claims to autobiographical truth telling; in fact they all rejected the confessional label. As Plath records in her journals, with considerable irony: ‘my supercilious attitude about people who write Confessions has diminished. It takes a good tight plot and a slick ease that are not picked up overnight like a cheap whore’ (2014, p. 549). However, it is noticeable that she identifies here with the masculine subject position, aligning writing with male desire and thereby
indicating the difficulty of forging an identity as a woman poet. Consequently, the next section considers how confessional art challenges the distinction between private and public, particularly by drawing attention to the gendered nature of the universal, abstract categories founding lyric subjectivity.

*Exposure as Disguise: Domestic Politics*

In *Pursuing Privacy in Cold War America* (2001), Deborah Nelson situates confessional poetry in the context of cold war debates about surveillance. As Nelson notes, the sanctity of the private sphere was generally perceived to be the most significant point of contrast between democracies and totalitarian states, so that ‘the potency of American democracy in cold war rhetoric was its vigilant protection of private autonomy’. The resulting paradox was that, ‘in the interests of preserving the space of privacy, privacy would have to be penetrated’ (p. xiii). Interestingly, Nelson demonstrates how this paradox was embodied by the new suburban home, which, while supposedly constituting ‘an opportunity to live out the democratic dream of privacy in postwar America’, was also associated with ‘a profound deprivation of privacy as well – especially for women’ (p. 85). As Betty Friedan argued in her groundbreaking work *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), the design of these homes forced women ‘to live the feminine mystique’ (that is, to pretend they were fulfilled by their roles of housewife and mother). Friedan describes how ‘there are no true walls or doors […] She need never feel alone for a minute, need never be by herself. She can forget her own identity in these noisy open-plan houses’ (1983, p. 246).

Nelson observes that this correlation between the physical architecture of the house (with its absence of privacy) and the psychic structure of women (their loss of personal identity) governs confessional poetry as well. An illustration is provided by the portrayal of suburban life in Sexton’s poem, ‘Self in 1958’:

> I live in a doll’s house
with four chairs,
a counterfeit table, a flat roof
and a big front door (lines 11-14).

In the last stanza, the speaker is expected to ‘spring the doors open in a wholesome disorder / and have no evidence of ruin or fears’ (lines 34-35). Permitted ‘disorder’ but only if it is ‘wholesome’, she must sustain a fiction of sincerity; as she exclaims earlier in the poem, ‘they think I am me!’ (line 27). Interestingly, Nelson interprets the open door of Sexton’s last stanza as a symbol for the suburban mandate to be open — the most effective surveillance insofar as the housewife who makes an exhibition of openness monitors herself. In these terms, Nelson argues, ‘confessional poetry would seem to be the open door, and as such, a submission to surveillance through self-exposure’. At the same time, however, Sexton can be seen to turn this openness inside out and instead use it as her most effective disguise. As Nelson then suggests, ‘the confession that appears to “tell all” hides all the more effectively for telling only some, and so renders a paradoxical privacy’, thus dismantling domestic ideology through the act of exposure itself (p. 89).

Sylvia Plath’s corpus reflects an ongoing engagement with nineteen-fifties housewife ideology, and the restrictions placed upon women artists by the expectations of a patriarchal society. ‘My God, I’d love to cook and make a house, and surge force into a man’s dreams, and write,’ she records in her journal not long after her arrival in England (2014, p. 209). This line expresses a desire to play the socially accepted role of supportive wife; interestingly, however, it also implies an early claim to creativity, for it is notably her force that surges. As a result, the writer implicitly identifies with the figures of both artist and muse. Nevertheless, writing features last on the list of explicitly stated priorities — a fact that meets with a more ambivalent attitude some years later, when the reality of domestic life pushes her writing to the margin. In 1960, ten weeks after childbirth, Plath writes a letter to her mother: ‘the baby’s feedings and keeping the house clean, cooking, and taking care of
Ted’s voluminous mail, plus my own, have driven me so I care only for carving out hours where I can start on my own writing’ (2018, p. 477).

The stereotypes governing perceptions of masculine and feminine creativity are figured spatially in a journal entry of 1956. Plath describes the desk she shared with Ted Hughes on their honeymoon in Benidorm, under the heading ‘Mr. and Mrs. Ted Hughes’ Writing Table’. ‘Divided lengthwise down the centre’, the two sides of the table seem to replicate the perceived gender binary of the time. Plath writes how Ted sat at ‘the head of the table’, in ‘a squarely built grandfather chair’. ‘His realm was a welter of sheets of typing paper’, with pages ‘scrawled across with his assertive blue-inked script’, and a ‘bottle of blue ink, perpetually open’. By contrast, ‘the other half of the table, coming into my premises, was piled with tediously neat stacks of books and papers, all laid prim and four-squared to the table corners.’ Next to a ‘brown covered Thesaurus’ and ‘Ted’s red covered Shakespeare’, there is ‘a bottle of jet black ink, scrupulously screwed shut.’ Thus, Plath characterises herself in pejorative terms as a conscientious student, deferential to her husband’s self-assured mastery. And yet, the drily humorous self-reflexivity of this passage also situates the writer in excess of the space she ostensibly assigns herself. Perhaps comprising a mischievous act of defiance, she refers to ‘an open cookbook lay at Ted’s right elbow, where I’d left it after finishing reading our recipes of stewed rabbit’ (the image of the rabbit notably becomes associated with patriarchal violence in Plath’s poem, ‘The Rabbit Catcher’ (1962)). Thus, she brings domesticity both into the writing space, and into space of writing itself, drawing attention to the very mode of production.

Indeed, self-reflexivity, irony and play often offer Plath a means of ‘carving out’ space, both foregrounding and circumventing constraints on women in a culture of heightened surveillance. In a scene in Plath’s novel, The Bell Jar (1963), the protagonist Esther Greenwood is forced to spend ‘summer in the suburbs’ after failing to get a place on a writing course at Harvard (2005, p. 110). The suburbs are conceived as a distinctly maternal space; as the
narrator notes, ‘the motherly breath of the suburbs enfolded me’ (p. 109). Esther lies in bed listening to dishes clinking downstairs, and then the wheels of a pram screeching on the street outside. Crawling to the window, she describes how her next-door neighbour ‘spent an inordinate amount of time peering from behind the starched white curtains of her windows’. Bringing out the comedic aspect of the scene as the two women spy on each other, she recounts how ‘with great care, I raised my eyes to the level of the windowsill’ (p. 111); and subsequently, ‘I felt her gaze pierce through the white clapboard and the pink, wallpaper roses and uncover me, crouching there behind the silver pickets of the radiator’ (113). The image of ‘pickets’ notably brings the outside inside, signifying a further invasion of privacy insofar as the border between private and public is itself internalised. Such themes of interrogation, spying and policing often inform the metaphors of Plath’s poetry. For example, the speaker in ‘Eavesdropper’ (1962) discusses the ‘mirror talk you love to catch me at’ (line 36), while returning the voyeuristic gaze by watching the person watching her: ‘How you jumped when I jumped on you!’ (line 37). Again, ‘my visibilities hide/I gleam like a mirror’ (lines 17-18), the speaker of ‘Purdah’ (1962) declares, pointing to the way in which the glare of apparent self-disclosure can paradoxically function to shield privacy.

Louise Bourgeois also explores the tropes of the home and housewife in her oeuvre, highlighting and subverting domestic confines through her art. For example, in a personal document written in November 27, 1951, Bourgeois railed against the relegation of women artists in a patriarchal culture. Discussing a commission for a piece of set design for the choreographer Erick Hawkins (1909-94), she writes:

I work for Hawkins at the rate of $25 for 3 figures. He calls me a housewife. I could twist the neck of the world. I am leaving my gallery, my husband and when the figures are done I will tell him what I think of him. What can cure you of frustration and hate. Is it to sleep with a man
is it to work… [SIC] When you work you could run in joy carrying the house on your shoulders (2012, p. 27)

Louise Bourgeois: *Femme Maison* (1946-1947)

The image of a woman carrying a house on her shoulders was given visual form in a series of paintings entitled *Femme Maison* (1946-47). French for ‘housewife’ or, more literally, ‘woman house’ or ‘house woman’, the title also puns on *femme fatale*, comically merging the roles ascribed to women in a patriarchal society. Combining the female body with an architectural façade, the series might be placed in a playful dialogue with Virginia Woolf’s feminist text, ‘A Room of One’s Own’ (1929), which drew attention to the literal and figurative restrictions inhibiting women artists. As the art historian Mignon Nixon notes, the figure of the ‘*femme maison*’ was invented when Bourgeois’s children were young, and portrays ‘the predicament of a woman artist and mother […] trying to make it as a surrealist in New York’ (p. 56). Moreover, nude from the waist down with her sex exposed, the *femme maison* seems to
replicate the masculine gaze characteristic of surrealist art, further delineating the absence of a subject position for the woman artist in this period. Nevertheless, by continuing to communicate in spite of her encumbrance, the *femme maison* also demonstrates the way in which humour was already beginning to offer Bourgeois a means of ironising stereotypical narratives of femininity and establishing a place for herself in an artistic tradition dominated by men.

Significantly, the transformation of the woman into the house in the *Femme Maison* paintings suggests an internalisation of the threshold of the home. As a result, the only private space available to her is that which is within the body. Since all spaces outside the body are public, her speech is of a necessarily confessional nature; in other words, it would be impossible not to transgress the public-private divide. The ‘*femme maison*’ thus reflects the way that any entry by a woman into the public domain might be perceived as a kind of exposure. Meanwhile, the audience is explicitly instructed to become a voyeur. As this thesis observes, Bourgeois explored the dynamic of looking and being looked at throughout her oeuvre — for example, the wire mesh exteriors of her ‘cell’ installations both shut the work in and open it to view. As a result, the viewer is exposed in turn, our own privacy penetrated. Thus, Bourgeois’s work epitomises the way in which confessional art appropriates the means of exposure, turning the gaze back onto the viewer.

*Sincerity as Artifice*

Against the traditional view that confessional poets are offering autobiographical testimony, a number of theoretical approaches have emerged in more recent years that conceive confession as a trope. *Modern Confessional Writing* (2004), a critical survey of the genre edited by Jo Gill, brings together a collection of essays that aim to bring the term ‘confessional’ under scrutiny. The essayists in this collection point to procedures of evasion, displacement and obfuscation, whereby confessional
writing explores possibilities of non-disclosure or self-invention. As Gill notes in her introduction, the agenda of this volume is ‘to liberate confessional writing from the misconception that it provides easy authorial release and is instead read as a discursive and self-reflexive genre’ (p. v). Cited by Tracey Brain in her chapter on the problem of reading Plath biographically, David Yezzi suggests that what sets confessional poems apart are a ‘sense of worn-on-the-sleeve self-revelation and their artful simulation of sincerity’; the poet thereby ‘makes an artifice of honesty’. Thus, as Brain reflects, confession is a style that can be deliberately, even cynically assumed (p. 21). Indeed, as Gill writes in her chapter on Ted Hughes’s *Birthday Letters*, confessional poetry paradoxically ‘hides more than it tells […] veils its truths in enigmatic images’ (p. 88).

Similarly, in her study of confessional writing, Sherwin asserts that ‘confessional poems conceal even as they purport to reveal, endlessly deferring guilt, shifting blame, and resisting closure’ (2011, p. 166). In fact, on this basis, Sherwin queries the very value of the term ‘confession’, objecting to both its connotative and methodological implications. As she suggests, the confessional label ‘locates the poets within a larger literary tradition based on a structure of penitence, whether religious or purely rhetorical’, which in turn places the reader in the role of judge. Thus, the term ‘confession’ superimposes fundamentally misleading connotations of guilt and repentance. Opposing this reading, Sherwin insists that, while sexuality, sin, and guilt are subjects that are confronted by the poetry, ‘both the formal approach and the attitude of the poets are exploratory and not even perfunctorily organized around a ritual of apology or remorse’ (p. 6).

In another volume of collected essays, *Representing Sylvia Plath* (2011), the editors Sally Bayley and Tracey Brain also suggest that the term ‘confession’ is misleading, here in the specific context of Plath’s poetry. Their introduction states that the volume contributes to ‘a growing movement in Plath studies that is suspicious of an older but still lingering school of Plath criticism that
sees her as a “confessional” writer’. Instead Bayley and Brain are interested in exploring ‘Plath’s own paradoxical notions of self-representation’; in ‘what Plath’s many poetic speakers hide, veil, and leave out, as well as what they say directly’ (p. 1). Taking Plath’s poem ‘Purdah’ as illustrative of Plath’s awareness of the ‘slippery nature of representation’, Bayley and Brain read the poem as ‘a ceremonial initiation into Plath’s theatre of ambivalence about display and concealment’ (p. 2). They argue that the narrator of the poem ‘provides a show of confident yet ultimately misleading confession’, such that ‘nothing is truly told’. The trope of the veil thus becomes a central lens through which to view Plath’s poems: ‘what has the tone of starkly open self-confession turns out to be a way of hiding’ (p. 3).

However, a tendency of this reading — and the critical emphasis on deception in the scholarship more widely — is to posit a subject beyond the representation, albeit someone the reader cannot see. For example, Bayley and Brain write in their analysis of Purdah that ‘it is hazy behind [the speaker’s] veil’. Emphasis on the veil might simply invert the binary of authenticity and artifice in a way that upholds the conventional paradigm of confessional poetry. It is notable that critical literature has often used the language of nudity: Rosenthal appraised the emerging form as ‘the most naked kind of confession’ (1967, p. 109), while Dickey complained of ‘so much naked suffering’ (Colburn (ed.): 1988, p. 63). Bayley and Brain, by contrast, write of ‘the various versions of Plath we think we encounter’ (p. 5); but this formulation might inadvertently reinstate one true version of Plath behind the veil. Plath herself thus becomes synonymous in Bayley and Brain’s reading with the ‘enigmatical’ speaker of her poem, Purdah. Instead, this thesis is attentive to the ways in which confessional poetry, and confessional art more generally, might disrupt the binary between subjectivity and self-representation. In other words, it aims to shift the focus from the multiplicity of representation (which might imply a singular subject beyond) and towards the multiplicity of subjectivity itself (which is constructed by the text). The ‘cloak of holes’ that the speaker of Plath’s ‘Purdah’ shows the reader at the end of the
poem, which can also be interpreted as a metaphor for the poetic text and subjectivity itself, therefore becomes the object of study.

This thesis analyses how confessional art constructs subjectivity, as an effect of poetic discourse rather than originating in the poet. Indeed, the works under consideration reflect poststructuralist insight into the indeterminacy of language and subjectivity, undercutting the reliability (and desirability) of the distinction between truth and artifice. In particular, I want to explore the ways in which confessional art enacts the relation of language and experience in the aftermath of a trauma (itself an effect of the artwork), in which fragmentation and rupture are as likely as coherence and closure. As I propose, the works of Plath and Bourgeois dramatise the processes by which traumatic experience might be integrated within a narrative frame, while at the same time displaying the limits of this framing device for representing affect.

Conclusion: Confessional Art, Trauma and Victimhood

This chapter has brought to light the way in which the power differential between confessor and confessant, analyst and patient in religious and psychoanalytic contexts of confession is replicated in critical scholarship on confessional poetry. However, as I have indicated, confessional art often subverts the historical associations of the term ‘confession’. Traditionally, confession involves the acknowledgment of guilt or repression, and is thought to have effects that are redemptive or cathartic. By contrast, confessional art fabricates rather than unveils a subject, and does not seek forgiveness or a cure. Moreover, while religious and psychoanalytic practices of confession are dialogic, confessional art is crafted by the artist and then available to a general audience. Nevertheless, my rationale for keeping the term ‘confession’ for this genre of art is that it identifies precisely the set of assumptions that confessional art calls into question. Indeed, exploiting the rhetoric of revelation, confessional art often interrogates notions of privacy and authenticity, as well as the distribution of guilt and blame across self and
society. Reframing confession as an aesthetic genre opens up a range of interpretative possibilities. Through analysis of the works and writings of Plath and Bourgeois, this thesis extends the concept of confessional art to include visual and plastic media; it also argues that these artists’ diverse ego documents can be approached as an art form in their own right.

The particular focus of my project is the capacity of confessional art for constructing traumatised subjectivity. Offering an alternative to psycho-biographical readings of artists’ oeuvres, I demonstrate how tropes of childhood trauma are used self-reflexively, creating an ironic distance that resists simplistic diagnostic readings. My analysis thereby challenges the assumption of passivity that accompanies the conception of confessional subject as victimised subject, instead observing how the art works problematise victim self-identification. It can be noted how the dual response to confessional art in conventional criticism — namely, moral courage or self-indulgent narcissism — is comparable with ambivalent attitudes toward victimhood claims discussed at the start of this chapter. However, as I demonstrate by focusing on formal properties, the confessional works analysed in this thesis draw on a range of literary and psychoanalytic texts and idioms, showing how concepts of trauma and victimhood are symbolically and culturally mediated. In particular, I draw attention to the role of parody in their depictions of the shattering of identity brought about by a traumatic experience, and the processes of remaking the self in the aftermath of trauma. As I discuss in the next chapter, the parodic mode emerges as a means of gaining distance from traumatic experience, allowing the traumatised subject to establish perspective from which to (re)construct the past.

Importantly, the parodic mode also engages with the ethics of appropriating the traumatic experience of others. Tegan Jane Schetrumpf has recently suggested that the reader of confessional poetry becomes ‘immersed in the trauma of the poet’s personal experience’ (2015, p. 118) — this is, moreover,
‘the trauma inherent in postmodernist, post-Holocaust life [that] damages everyone’ (p. 121). She thereby isolates a thematic that both Plath and Bourgeois interrogate: that is, audience identification with traumatic suffering and universalisation of victimhood. As I discuss, their works prompt reflection on the enjoyment derived from depictions of traumatisation. Indeed, viewing confession as an art form, it can be seen how the cathartic effects of the artwork are transferred from artist to audience. Since this chapter has returned the concept of catharsis to an aesthetic context, it may be useful finally to refer to Aristotle’s reflections on tragic pleasure in the Poetics (c. 335 BC). For Aristotle, tragedy aims to evoke pity and fear, defined as reactions to ‘an action that involves destruction or pain (e.g. deaths in full view, extreme agony, woundings and so on)’ (p. 19). Catharsis involves the purification of surplus pity and fear, bringing ‘pleasurable relief’ for those excessively prone to these emotions. Confessional art might be conceived as a form of modern day tragedy, producing cathartic effects on the spectator. At the same time, precisely by playing with notions of authenticity and artifice, it questions the sense of relief that might be gained from personal accounts of trauma and victimisation.
Chapter 2
Trauma, Time and Parody

Central debates within the field of trauma studies concern the possibility of representing trauma in language and the role of memory in shaping individual and cultural identities. Though itself the object of critique, the concept of trauma is generally understood as a shattering experience that disrupts the self’s emotional organisation and perception of the world. Recent surveys of trauma theory differentiate between ‘classic’ and ‘pluralistic’ models of trauma (Balaev: 2014; Mambrol in Richter: 2018, pp. 360-371). Combining discourses of psychoanalysis and poststructuralism, the classic model holds that trauma lies beyond the limits of representation, confronting language with its insufficiency. A key premise of this chapter is that, despite stressing the severity of extreme events, this model problematically tends towards abstracting trauma from subjective experience, turning it into a universal category. Additionally, as I will discuss below, the privileged epistemological status attributed to trauma as an event that transcends knowledge can risk detracting attention from ethico-political engagement in the systemic causes of violence.² That classic model has been challenged by more recent, pluralistic approaches that recognise the particularity of trauma, and the way that traumatic experience can be located through a range of representational modes (Mambrol: 2018, p. 366). However, despite emerging criticism that places renewed emphasis on trauma’s specificity, the notion of trauma as

² For an incisive discussion of these abstracting tendencies within trauma theory, see Dominick LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (2001) and Wulf Kansteiner, ‘Genealogy of a category mistake: a critical intellectual history of the cultural trauma metaphor’ (2004).
inherently unrepresentable maintains hegemony in literary criticism (Balaev: 2014, p. 5).

This chapter scrutinises the trope of unrepresentability in trauma studies, drawing attention to the way that this trope is based on a particular conception of traumatic time as a rupture in subjective experience. Indeed, the alleged atemporal dimension of traumatic experience lies at the heart of claims that trauma is permanently unavailable to consciousness and memory. The following passage from the work of the psychoanalyst Dori Laub illustrates how the unrepresentability of trauma is conceived in terms of temporal unlocatability:

The traumatic event, although real, took place outside the parameters of normal reality, such as causality, sequence, place and time. The trauma is thus an event that has no beginning, no ending, no before, no during and no after. This absence of categories that define it lends it a quality of ‘otherness’, a salience, a timelessness and a ubiquity that puts it outside the range of associatively linked experiences, outside the range of comprehension, of recounting and of mastery (1992, p. 69).

By this account, the radical otherness of trauma is registered as a disturbance of time. Trauma is considered to be both outside of time and perpetually present for the traumatised subject, as such refusing to be integrated within a narrative framework of past, present and future.

Based on his research into Holocaust testimony, Laub’s understanding of trauma as ‘an event eliminating its own witness’ (p. 200) has become widespread in trauma theory. The notion that trauma is essentially unknowable is again inextricably linked to traumatic time in literary theorist Cathy Caruth’s seminal text, Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History (1996). According to Caruth’s highly influential formulation:
Trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual’s past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature — the way it is precisely not known in the first instance — returns to haunt the survivor later on (p. 4).

Synthesising psychoanalytic theory with poststructuralist discourses in literary criticism and philosophy, Caruth’s understanding of trauma notably equates the idea of trauma as a missed encounter with the deconstructive insight that the meaning of language is always already deferred. Problematically, this metaphorical transformation of trauma into a rupture of signification might risk obscuring the experience of real victims. Furthermore, positing a traumatic unknowable may come at the cost of ongoing pathology, precluding processes of mourning or working through traumatic experience.

For the historian Wulf Kansteiner, that deconstructive trauma paradigm generates ‘an aestheticized, morally and politically imprecise concept of cultural trauma, which provides little insight into the social and cultural repercussions of historical traumata’ (2004, p. 194). Moreover, Kansteiner and Harald Weilnböck observe that while proponents of this paradigm refer extensively to psychological studies of trauma, ‘this interdisciplinary gesture is immediately undermined by a very selective and often decontextualized appropriation of the empirical literature’ (see their chapter in Eril and Nünning: 2010, p. 231). Instead, therefore, this chapter seeks to cultivate an approach of interdisciplinary curiosity, precisely in order to interrogate critically the view that trauma is irrevocably outside of time and language. Indeed, I draw on a range of research suggesting that traumatic impact results from the interaction between an event and the individual’s environment. By developing an embedded concept of traumatic time, I highlight the significance of contextual factors that shape the experience and recollection of trauma.
Contesting the claim that trauma is inimical to thought and language, this chapter draws particular attention to the way in which traumatic experience is symbolically and culturally mediated. I highlight the continuity between a range of perspectives, including psychoanalysis, psychiatry and attachment theory, in acknowledging the aetiological significance of the meaning with which an event is attributed. The therapeutic implication is that the meaning of traumatic events can be re-interpreted in a way that is less harmful to the psyche. This situated understanding of trauma suggests that language, which is by definition communal, can act upon traumatic affect and alleviate distress. Accordingly, traumatic experience can feasibly be brought into a temporal framework, especially through the social process of articulating narratives. Notably, this process involves restoring relational links that may have been severed by the traumatic event.

As I discuss in the first part of this chapter, the work of memory may be integral to processes of healing individual and collective wounds. Seeking to counter abstracting tendencies in cultural criticism on trauma, I draw attention to theoretical interventions that recognise the therapeutic and political imperative of locating trauma in time. Emphasis on the historicity of trauma also helps to avoid the generalisation of victimhood as a subject position with which everyone can identify, opening up the possibility of responsible engagement with the systemic causes of traumatisation. Nevertheless, as I note, trauma may cause confusion in the subjective experience of time, posing an obstacle to the work of memory. So, evaluating different perspectives on traumatic time, this chapter argues that while trauma may bring about a temporal disturbance, it does not altogether foreclose the possibility of psychical integration within a narrative framework of past, present and future.

The second part of this chapter revisits Sigmund Freud’s observations on traumatic time, which are often homogenised within literary trauma theory. As I note, the multifaceted, aporetic and at times contradictory nature of Freud’s
writings thwarts attempts to formulate a universal definition of trauma and its effects. However, I propose that two predominant temporal models can be identified in these texts, Nachträglichkeit (or ‘deferred action’) and the compulsion to repeat, both of which subvert a linear concept of time. Significantly, as I argue, the amalgamation of these temporalities in the classic notion of trauma’s ‘inherent latency’ (Caruth: 2001, p. 187) forms the basis for the claim that trauma is unrepresentable. Conversely, disentangling these temporalities draws attention to the role of representation in determining the effects of a (potentially) traumatic event. Of course, the view that trauma is not intrinsically atemporal supports the clinical goal of psychoanalysis to bring traumatic experience into conscious thought.

Drawing on insights from psychiatry, neurobiology and attachment theory, the third part of this chapter develops an understanding of the way trauma is embedded within time and the subsequent repercussions for clinical intervention. The fact that only some individuals exposed to extreme events develop symptoms of PTSD means that greater attention needs to be given to risk factors determining an individual's vulnerability and resilience. Such risk factors include socio-economic status and prior lifetime trauma exposure, as well as a lack of social care in the aftermath of the traumatic event. At the forefront of current research, these risk factors are often systemic, ingrained in daily life rather than lying outside of time. Furthermore, as I stress, the impact of trauma depends on the way the individual categorises it as an event. Indeed, recent research into PTSD highlights the importance of cognitive brain processes involved in sense making, whereby the meaning of an event determines the resulting activation of alarm that may characterise traumatic experience (Shalev in Kirmayer et al.: 2008, p. 220).

Adding greater nuance to a straightforward causal model, new clinical approaches see trauma as a type of situation or outcome rather than a discrete order or single pattern of injury and response (Kirmayer et. al.: 2008, p. 4). As I propose, early relational trauma in particular calls for a radical
rethinking of traumatic temporality that takes account of the cumulative impact of a ‘traumatic atmosphere’ (Mucci: 2013, p. 2). Complex trauma refers to harm sustained over time, causing long-term effects on psychological, neurological and physical development. Recognition of the relational roots of the psyche indicates that communal solidarity is crucial to recovery from the ruptures created by trauma. Notably, according to an attachment model of trauma, emphasis is often placed on the value of narratives told by the sufferer, which are witnessed and acknowledged by others.

Returning to issues in aesthetics, the fourth part of this chapter proposes that confessional art provides a unique theoretical object for exploring the complex relation of trauma and representation. As I suggest, the sustained first-person voice of confessional art helps to counteract abstracting tendencies within cultural criticism by instantiating trauma within subjective experience. Furthermore, I consider how the innovations of the different aesthetic forms examined in this thesis — namely, life writing, poetry and sculpture — depict temporal upheaval as well as attempts to remake the shattered self in the aftermath of trauma. I am particularly interested in exploring the ways in which confessional art enacts complex processes of remembering and (re)constructing the past in relation to childhood trauma. As I discussed in Chapter 1, this thesis departs from biographical readings of confessional art that tend towards pathologising the artist, instead examining the aesthetic construction of traumatised subjectivity. This chapter further suggests that the portrayal of working through traumatic experience in the works of Sylvia Plath and Louise Bourgeois might in turn contribute toward theoretical literature informing clinical practice.

Specifically, I consider how the works analysed in this thesis enact a means of responding to the particular difficulty of integrating childhood trauma within a temporal framework. Occurring prior to the development of a conceptual apparatus, traumatic experience from childhood may be registered only as a confusing set of vivid sensations and images. Producing fragmented and
poorly contextualised memories that are difficult to control, it thereby poses a particular challenge to memory and representation. Setting out my approach to the works of Plath and Bourgeois, the fifth and final part of this chapter thus proposes parody as a means of framing an experience that cannot be consciously remembered, giving indirect access to affect that might otherwise be too painful to bear. I provide my definition of parody as a mode that is intertextual, self-reflexive, trans-contextualising and playful, and sketch some preliminary research questions. For example, might parody, as a double-voiced discourse, help the traumatised subject to gain temporal distance from the intense present of traumatic affect? Equally, by simultaneously inhabiting and exceeding narratives of trauma, what critical perspectives could the use of parody open onto the politics of victim (self-)identification?

**The Ethics of Representation**

Delineating the severity of traumatic suffering, the ethical position implied by the classic model of trauma is that traumatic events should remain abhorrent to thought, insofar as assimilation is tantamount to acceptance. However, the conferral of such an elevated status risks universalising trauma as an infinitely displaceable cipher of absence at the referential limits of language and history. Consequently, the characterisation of trauma as intrinsically unrepresentable might foreclose ways in which traumatic experience may be reconfigured and transformed in the present or future. For Kansteiner, ‘the most severe abuses of the trauma concept currently occur in the abstract, metaphorical language of cultural criticism’ (2004, p. 215). While a number of more recent approaches acknowledge the particularity of traumatic experience, nevertheless the notion that trauma is unrepresentable continues to be prevalent in the field of literary theory. It is therefore worth stressing that, as Kansteiner observes, ‘just because trauma is inevitably a problem of representation in memory and communication does not imply the reverse, i.e., that problems of representation are always partaking in the traumatic’. That is to say, ‘the dilemmas of representation and the distress of trauma never carry
the same effects, intensities and risks’ (p. 205). Naomi Mandel further argues that the concept of trauma as unrepresentable is in fact a ‘discursive production’ that evades moral responsibility in representing atrocity by privileging the ‘problems inherent in speech’ rather than addressing the ‘ethical obligations involved in such representations’ (2006, pp. 4-5).

Bringing much-needed specificity into theoretical discourses on trauma, Dominick LaCapra emphasises the therapeutic and political necessity of differentiating between what he terms ‘historical’ and ‘structural’ trauma (2001). As LaCapra suggests, structural trauma is in some way constitutive or originary, applying to everyone. Examples come from the discourses of psychoanalysis and deconstruction, including separation from the (m)other, entry into language, and the absence of undivided origins. By contrast, historical trauma involves particular events, such as the death of a loved one, or, on a broader scale, the losses brought about by apartheid or the Shoah. Importantly, while we are all ‘victims’ of structural or transhistorical absence, we are not all victims of historical loss. LaCapra argues that structural trauma, as well as being differentiated from historical trauma and its attendant losses, should also be correlated with absence in contrast to loss, notably the absence of absolute foundations or perfect, totalising solutions to problems. Failure to make these distinctions, he suggests, ‘eventuates in a misleadingly hypostasised notion of constitutive loss or lack which may well be a secular variant of original sin’ (p. xxxiv). Furthermore, particular losses cannot be adequately addressed when they are absorbed in an overly generalised discourse of absence. Crucially, it is only when acts of violence are specified in terms of their precise, historically differentiated incidence that they can be engaged with ethically and politically.

Distinguishing between structural and historical trauma, absence and loss, facilitates localising trauma in time, which may be vital for healing individual and collective wounds. Arguing for the importance of the ‘work of memory’ in relation to trauma, the philosopher Paul Ricoeur aligns the Freudian concepts
of melancholy with acting out, and mourning with working through. For Freud, melancholia characterises an arrested process in which the self-reproaching subject, trapped in a compulsion to repeat, remains narcissistically identified with the lost object. Mourning, conversely, brings the possibility of engaging with trauma and achieving a reinvestment in life that allows a reorientation towards the future. As Ricoeur argues, ‘it is as a work of remembering that the work of mourning proves to be liberating’ (2000, p. 72). Similarly, LaCapra notes that:

Through memory-work, especially the socially engaged memory work involved in working through, one is able to distinguish between past and present and to recognize something as having happened to one (or one's people) back then that is related to, but not identical with, here and now’ (2001, p 66).

The political and therapeutic desirability of the work of memory is a point of departure for this thesis. Nevertheless, as this chapter highlights, the temporal elusiveness of trauma may pose an obstacle to mourning and working through, such that intense affect refuses to be tied to a particular event and located firmly in the past. Indeed, the event may be difficult to retrieve, with the result that mourning turns into endless melancholy in which, as Freud suggests, ‘one cannot see clearly what it is that has been lost’ (Freud: 2001, p. 245). Consequently, the distinction between structural and historical trauma may not be clear-cut from the perspective of the traumatised subject. Similarly, absence and loss may be blurred experientially amid traumatic confusion, so that particular time-specific losses are swept up in a generalised, all-pervasive sense of absence. However, while trauma may cause temporal confusion, the next section of this chapter challenges the view that trauma is irreparably excluded from time, arguing for the necessity of finding ways of bringing trauma into narrative expression. As my thesis will suggest, the first-person perspective of confessional art allows insight into complex processes of mourning and working through traumatic experience,
opening up the possibility of an interdisciplinary dialogue between literary criticism and clinical research.

Temporalities of Trauma

Freud’s insights into psychical trauma continue to shape the field of trauma studies. For Freud, trauma is notably characterised in distinctly temporal terms as a disruption to chronological time. However, Freud’s reflections on traumatic time are more diverse than is commonly recognised in literary trauma theory. This section identifies two prevailing temporalities, Nachträglichkeit and the compulsion to repeat, that confuse the past and present in different ways. A key argument of this section is that is that the classic notion of trauma’s inherent latency is based on an amalgamation of these temporal models. As I will note, Freud’s insight into the belated or deferred effects of trauma is taken up by the deconstructive trauma paradigm in a way that problematically abstracts trauma from subjective experience. As I will argue, renewed attention to the complexity of traumatic time in Freud’s writings demonstrates that trauma is not necessarily synonymous with a recurring absence, but rather intricately interwoven within the fabric of the subject’s life.

Temporality 1: Nachträglichkeit

The term Nachträglichkeit is frequently invoked in Freud’s writings in connection with his view on psychical causality, according to which, as Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis summarise, ‘experiences, impressions and memory traces may be revised at a later date to fit in with fresh experiences or the attainment of a new stage of development’ (1973, p. 248). According to the temporality of Nachträglichkeit, trauma is attached not straightforwardly to the event itself but to a memory of it, which when triggered releases traumatic affect. A distinctive notion of causality is thus entailed,
whereby an event is subsequently endowed, not only with a new meaning, but also with psychical effectiveness or pathogenic force – thus, the event only becomes traumatic retroactively. As Ruth Leys highlights in her discussion of Nachträglichkeit, Freud’s stress on the role of a latency period of psychic elaboration make the traumatic experience irreducible to the idea of a purely physiological causal sequence (2000, p. 18).

As Laplanche and Pontalis observe, human sexuality, with the peculiar unevenness of its temporal development, provides Freud with an eminently suitable field for the observing the phenomenon of Nachträglichkeit. In Studies on Hysteria (1895), co-authored with Josef Breuer, and even more explicitly in ‘The Aetiology of Hysteria’ (1896), Freud argues that it was not the original experience itself that acted traumatically, but rather its delayed revival as a memory after the individual had entered sexual maturity and could grasp its sexual meaning. As Leys describes, trauma is thus constituted by a dialectic between two events: ‘a first event that was not necessarily traumatic because it came too early in the child’s development to be understood and assimilated, and a second event that also was not inherently traumatic but that triggered a memory of the first event that only then was given traumatic meaning and hence repressed’ (2000, p. 20). Rejecting a causal understanding of traumatisation, this model notably underscores the instability of traumatic memory owing to the way that meaning is conferred by unconscious motives.

Freud’s departure from his theory of seduction towards a theory of infantile sexuality in 1897 does not make the temporality of Nachträglichkeit redundant, as his reliance on that concept in the ‘Wolf Man’ case study of 1916-18 demonstrates. Now thought by Freud to take place in the earliest years of childhood, Nachträglichkeit lies at the core of Freud’s analysis of his patient’s dream in relation to the ‘primal scene’. As Freud writes, the dream ‘brought into deferred operation [his patient’s] observation of intercourse’ (2001, p. 109). However, due to the difficulty of establishing the historical veracity of the
primal scene, Freud notably introduces in its stead the notion of primal phantasy – that is, a structure which is phantasy’s ultimate foundation, transcending both the subject’s lived experience and his or her imaginings. *Nachträglichkeit* thus facilitates the substitution of the memory of supposedly real events with the power of fantasy and the Oedipus complex. Werner Bohleber exemplifies criticism of Freud for interiorising trauma by focusing on its psychosexual meaning when he argues that psychoanalysis, while originally undertaken with a view to discovering repressed childhood memories, is at risk of becoming a treatment that actually ‘fades out history’ (2010, p. 109).

It is notable that the temporality of *Nachträglichkeit* is taken up by poststructuralist discourses that feature a structural notion of trauma aligned with absence. For example, in *Writing and Difference* (1978 [1967]), Jacques Derrida draws on the retroactive temporality of *Nachträglichkeit* in developing his concept of *différance*, a concept designating the spacing of time that makes it impossible for anything to be in itself. As Derrida describes, ‘always already: repositories of a meaning which was never present, whose signified presence is always reconstituted by a deferral, *nachträglich*, belatedly, *supplementarily*’ (italics Derrida’s) (2001, p. 266). According to Derrida’s use of *Nachträglichkeit*, subjectivity is conditioned by an inherent alterity that stems from the diachrony of time. The concept of *Nachträglichkeit* is also invoked in Jacques Lacan’s reformulation of the Oedipal complex in terms of symbolic castration in *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* (1978 [1973]), according to which ‘I identify myself in language, but only by losing myself in it like an object’ (2004, p. 86). Trauma thus relates to the absence on which the subject of language is predicated. In both instances, *Nachträglichkeit* is accompanied by a structural (rather than substantive) concept of trauma, which is thereby universally applicable (rather than particular to the individual).
However, Laplanche retrieved the temporality of Nachträglichkeit or ‘afterwardsness’ in his theory of the ‘enigmatic message’, which was initially developed in New Foundations for Psychoanalysis (1989 [1987]). Involving the inscription and a later moment of reinscription or ‘translation’, the concept of the enigmatic message can be seen to re-historicise traumatic experience by challenging the binary between internal and external. Laplanche conceives of the primal scene as ‘a fundamental situation in which an adult proffers to a child verbal, non-verbal and even behavioural signifiers which are pregnant with unconscious sexual significations’ (1989, p. 126). Trauma thus results from the implantation, and at times violent intromission, of enigmatic messages from the other into the primitive body-ego or skin-ego of the infant. For Laplanche, the concept of afterwardsness is inconceivable without a model of translation, insofar as it presupposes that something is proffered by the other, and this is then afterwards retranslated and reinterpreted’ (2001, p. 269). The aim of psychoanalysis is to allow ‘a deconstruction of the old, insufficient, partial and erroneous construction, and hence to open the way to the new translation’ (2001, p. 166). As a result, the repressed no longer acts completely blindly and mechanically but can be reintegrated into in a wider and more significant context. Laplanche’s emphasis on the intersubjective nature of human development is markedly compatible with an attachment model of trauma and healing, as I will discuss later in this chapter.

Temporality 2: The Compulsion to Repeat

The compulsion to repeat is the central topic of Freud’s Beyond the Pleasure Principle (1920), a landmark text in the field of trauma studies. Responding to a tendency of traumatised individuals to repeat painful experiences, Freud acknowledges the existence of a ‘beyond’ of pleasure, or a drive towards death, acting independently of and often in opposition to the pleasure principle. Representing a fundamental shift in Freud’s thinking, the exact meaning of the compulsion to repeat is nevertheless difficult to pin down. While this temporality is discerned in a range of contexts in Beyond the
Pleasure Principle, here I want to focus on two examples that explicitly relate to trauma.

The first example concerns the psychical traumas of childhood that re-emerge during psychoanalytic treatment. Freud initially articulated his hypothesis in an earlier paper, ‘Remembering, Repeating and Working-Through’ (1914), where he writes: ‘the patient does not remember anything of what he has forgotten and repressed, but acts it out. He reproduces it not as a memory but as an action; he repeats it, without, of course, knowing that he is repeating it’ (2001, p. 150). Similarly in Beyond the Pleasure Principle, Freud observes how the patient repeats the repressed material as a contemporary experience instead of remembering it as something belonging to the past. He further argues that:

These reproductions, which emerge with such unwished-for exactitude, always have as their subject some portion of infantile sexual life — of the Oedipus complex, that is, and its derivatives; and they are invariably acted out in the sphere of the transference, of the patient’s relation to the physician (2001, p. 18).

Freud describes transference as a ‘playground’ in which the compulsion to repeat is permitted to manifest itself in almost complete freedom, offering an opportunity for the pathogenic background of the subject to manifest itself openly. Freud’s observation of transference phenomena marked a development in his notion of the psychoanalytic cure, specifically as a means of responding to the difficulty of recovering pathogenic memory.

The second example of the compulsion to repeat in Beyond the Pleasure Principle relates to what Freud terms ‘traumatic neurosis’, which is significantly the principal model to which Caruth refers in elaborating her influential theory of trauma in Unclaimed Experience (1996). In characterising the traumatic neurosis, Freud adopts an economic definition of trauma as a breach of the organism’s protective membrane, whereby an excessive flux of
excitation immediately halts the operation of the pleasure principle. The psychic apparatus is thereby obliged to carry out a more urgent task ‘beyond the pleasure principle’, which consists of binding the excitations in such a way as to allow for their subsequent discharge. According to Freud, the failure of such attempts at binding, owing to the role of fright and the ego’s lack of preparedness, gives rise to the symptoms that characterise the traumatic neurosis. The repetitive nightmares of soldiers returning from the First World War exemplify an attempt to ‘master the stimulus retrospectively, by developing the anxiety whose omission was the cause of the traumatic neurosis’ (2001, p. 32). Writing on this temporality, André Green reflects that ‘the repetition compulsion is in fact the murder of time’, in that time ‘stops short when repeated, it is not transformed and it is not proper to a direct analysis of thought’ (2008, p. 1037).

The related ideas of lack of preparedness and retrospective response in Freud’s account of the compulsion to repeat continue to be central to understandings of trauma. Repetition phenomena are now often understood in terms of the effects of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). As psychiatrist Arieh Shalev et al. note, PTSD is the most frequent psychopathological consequence of traumatic events (2019, p. 77). PTSD symptomology emphasises the idea of a frozen present that repeats itself. Clinical characteristics include recurrent, involuntary, and intrusive memories, traumatic nightmares, and dissociative reactions such as flashbacks and intrusive thoughts; as well as avoidance and negative alterations in cognitions and mood (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM) V: 2013). Psychiatrists Anke Ehlers, Ann Hackmann and Tanja Michael explain how ‘the vast majority of intrusive memories can be interpreted as re-experiencing of warning signals, i.e., stimuli that signalled the onset of the trauma or of moments when the meaning of the event changed for the worse’. They suggest that such re-experiencing symptoms are ‘usually sensory impressions and emotional responses from the trauma that appear to lack a time perspective and a context’ (2004, p. 403). Thus, to the traumatised subject, it can feel like there
is no difference between the past and the present: one feels as if one were back there reliving the event, and distance between here and there then and now collapses. As psychiatrist Bessel van der Kolk observes, survivors of trauma can ‘lose their sense of time and become trapped in the moment, without a sense of past, present, or future’ (2014, p. 69).

Re-temporalizing Trauma

As an overview of Nachträglichkeit and the compulsion to repeat indicates, a fundamental difference between the two temporalities concerns the originary status of the traumatic event. According to the model of Nachträglichkeit, trauma results from a traumatic representation of a scene that was not traumatic for the subject at the time. Thus it arises from the interplay of two scenes, a moment of inscription and later moment of reinscription. By contrast, in the compulsion to repeat, the subject relives the onset of trauma, the moment of their failure to react, in an attempt to redress the lack of preparedness that was the cause of traumatic neuroses. Past and present are thus confused, with the mind thinking it is back in the traumatic situation. Thus, the two traumatic temporalities disrupt time in markedly different ways; moreover, the shifting nature of Freud’s examples in both cases also means that the concepts are internally various. It is peculiar then, that literary trauma theory has tended to cite Freud’s writings on trauma as a monolithic entity (see, for example, recent surveys by Balaev (2014) and Mambrol in Richter (2018)).

Synthesising elements of Nachträglichkeit and the compulsion to repeat, the classic model of trauma in cultural studies draws simultaneously on the ideas that the original trauma is not traumatic at the time and that it is subject to a compulsive repetition. Caruth suggests, for example, that trauma is not known in the first instance but rather returns to haunt the survivor later on (1996, p. 4). Lack of knowledge thereby becomes a defining feature of the traumatic event: ‘the most direct seeing of a violent event may occur as an absolute
inability to know it; that immediacy, paradoxically, may take the form of belatedness' (p. 92). This leads to the conclusion that trauma subsists beyond the limits of understanding in a timeless, wordless state, inimical to integration within memory and narration. Referred to as ‘the Freudian-Caruthian concept of trauma and its deferred impact' (Mambrol: 2018, p. 368), such an understanding of traumatic time has become orthodoxy in the field of literary trauma studies. The widespread application of this temporal framework may reflect a desire to simplify the complexity of traumatic experience. An unfortunate consequence however is the evasion of difficult theoretical and empirical questions about the ways in which individuals experience trauma and respond to the traumatic experience of others. Indeed, an atemporal concept of trauma may be appealing precisely because it creates distance between oneself and moments of extreme human suffering.

Interestingly, there is a leap of logic in Caruth’s reworking of Freud’s writings on the temporality, or rather temporalities, of trauma. Caruth suggests that traumatic impact is not so much a result of ‘the literal threatening of bodily life’, but rather ‘the fact that the threat is recognised by the mind one moment too late.’ Thus, she argues, ‘the shock of the mind’s relation to the threat of death is thus not the direct experience of the threat, but precisely the missing of this experience, the fact that, not being experience in time, it has not yet been fully known’ (1996, p. 62; italics Caruth's). Notably, there is a slippage between noting the idea of a lack of preparedness for the trauma, and the claim that the experience is missing. As I propose, this slippage is facilitated by an amalgamation of the two Freudian models of traumatic time.

On the one hand, Nachträglichkeit entails an event that is not consciously registered in the first instance, and as such could be described as a ‘missed experience' that is only subsequently endowed with pathogenic force. (Caruth takes the notion of ‘missed encounter’ from Lacan’s Seminar XI (1973), where it is notably used in relation to Lacan’s reading of the Oedipal complex and the structural trauma of subjectivity – a trauma that did not
happen to the subject, because there was not yet a subject for it to happen to (2004, p. 69-70).) On the other hand, the compulsion to repeat entails an event that, at least on Freud's view, is in some way experienced at the time as a ‘floodling of the psychic apparatus’, even if the activity of binding the traumatic stimuli is deferred. The contrast between the two models might be illustrated by observing the function of the dream in each case. In Freud’s discussion of Nachträglichkeit in the ‘Wolf Man’ case study, the Wolf Man’s dream plays a retroactive role in bringing the so-called primal scene into deferred operation. The repetitive nightmares of traumatised soldiers, however, are seen as a retrospective attempt to anticipate the influx of overwhelming stimuli. Significantly, in the latter case, repetition is the direct result of an original, rather than missed, experience of the traumatic event.

While this section has made a case for distinguishing between Nachträglichkeit and the compulsion to repeat, the two temporalities may feasibly interact — for example, in the repetition of an experience that became traumatic retroactively and was subsequently repressed. Indeed, noting the complexity of traumatic aetiology and time in Freud’s writings indicates the significance of the individual’s particular history for understanding trauma and its effects. Importantly, the concept of trauma is not confined to the notion of an external event that ruptures the psyche’s defenses, for these defenses can also be flooded by ‘excitations from within’ (Freud: 2001, p. 28). The implication that a concept of trauma needs to take account of the interaction between an event and its meaning for the subject is corroborated by more recent approaches to trauma, as the next section of this chapter will discuss. Indeed, the conception of trauma as temporally embedded that has emerged from a re-evaluation of Freud’s writings is corroborated by contemporary research that underscores the significance of the context in which traumatisation occurs.

Trauma in Context
This section draws attention to the range of contextual factors determining the extent of traumatic impact, opposing the assumption of an innate causality between a traumatic event and its effects. Evidently, the notion that trauma is not directly ‘known’ in the classic model means that proof is needed to establish a casual relation between the experience and the symptoms of post-traumatic stress. As critics have noted, Caruth’s view that the ‘blankness of trauma’ is ‘paradoxically what precisely preserves the event in its literality’ relies on a questionable neurobiological model that conceives traumatic memory as the direct, if delayed, sequela of an external trauma (Leys: 2000, p. 271). Such a conception of traumatic experience and memory makes it seem as if trauma remains permanently barred from subjective experience. By contrast, more current models of trauma instead suggest that, at least in the case of a single traumatic event, the event is typically experienced at the time and remembered from that time, although the full emotional impact of the trauma takes time to absorb and work through.

Indeed, critiquing a literalising view of memory that assumes an identity between the involuntary and truthful nature of traumatic recollection, an alternative trend in trauma theory indicates the centrality of representation to the way in which trauma is both experienced and remembered. Attention is redirected toward the way in which the meaning of the traumatic event is symbolically mediated, categorised according to the culturally available models and metaphors. As philosopher Susan Brison observes, the fact that there is an inevitable gap between an event and the experience of it often seems to be overlooked by trauma theorists who emphasise the literal character of traumatic memory. Brison also challenges the view that traumatic memories are simply given, and retained as snapshots. As she suggests, ‘traumatic memory, like narrative memory, is articulated, selective, even malleable, in spite of the fact that the framing of such memory may not be under the survivor’s conscious control’ (2003, p. 31).
Similarly, in an interdisciplinary volume that integrates biological, clinical and cultural perspectives, Laurence J. Kirmayer, Robert Lemelson and Mark Barad observe that:

> We have a variety of learning and memory systems that extract details, meanings, and associations from the stream of experience according to specific needs, the ongoing deployment of attention, and cognitive and perceptual salience or relevance.

The authors add that ‘memories are changeable over time; that is to say, they are not fixed or perfect copies of experience but undergo repeated revision and transformation with each attempt at recollection’ (2007, p. 8). These facts about memory undermine claims that re-experiencing phenomena involve the replaying of indelible records, suggesting that more complex processes of reconstruction must be at play (Laney and Loftus: 2005). The types of memories that are labelled ‘flashbacks’ may reflect obsessional worry or vivid imagination instead of veridical recall (Kirmayer et. al.: 2007, p. 8). While it is certainly possible that traumatic memories have unique characteristics that reflect the intensity of emotional arousal during their encoding and later retrieval (Brewin, 2005), nevertheless reconstructions always occur in social contexts that make certain types of story more or less credible (Kirmayer et. al: 2007, p. 9). Thus, by their very nature, dissociative symptoms are culturally shaped and highly malleable.

Enquiring into the cause of intrusive recollections, Shalev integrates a representation-driven understanding of the construct of trauma with standard views of post-traumatic stress. He points out that symptoms such as intrusive recollections are a normal occurrence in the early aftermath of traumatic events, and thus defines PTSD as a ‘disorder of recovery’ (Kirmayer et. al.: 2007, pp. 207-223) in which symptoms do not subside with time. Shalev argues that these early reactions are related to the attempt to process events that are beyond imagination, so overwhelming and grotesque that they could
not possibly have occurred. Invasive memories reflect the converging of two different systems — fear conditioning and post-traumatic rumination — attesting to the way the survivor attempts to solve incongruity and intense novelty. As Shalev explains:

The survivors cannot extinguish conditioned fear responses because the latter are rekindled and reinforced by repeated intrusive recall. They are also unable to lead the experience of incongruous novelty to resolution, possibly because of avoidance, associated with the forbidding conditioned response (p. 217).

These two mutually perpetuating processes constitute a trap in which the survivor is caught between the need to remember and the imperative to avoid. As Shalev points out, these ideas imply that:

[t]he ways in which events are construed, named, or appraised by the public, or by a relevant social group, may have major effects on the way in which they will be processed by individuals, indeed, by the brain where linguistic and semantic cues readily initiate a top-down appraisal of the emotional relevance of an event (p. 220).

Thus, Shalev argues, emphasising these top-down or cognitive brain processes, in which the meaning of an event strongly affects the resulting activation of alarm, may hold the key for better understanding resiliency and recovery. Shalev’s research points to the significance of representation in determining the impact of traumatic effects, as well as the resources made available to the traumatised subject for articulating their experience.

The significance of the circumstances in which traumatisation occurs, and the role of the individual’s environment in the aetiology of trauma, have become dominant themes of researchers in the field of PTSD. Interestingly, epidemiological research shows that the rate of exposure to trauma far
outweighs the prevalence of PTSD. As psychiatrists Sehrish Sayed, Brian M. Iacoviello and Dennis S. Charney note, ‘indicating that most people do not develop PTSD following a traumatic event, this phenomenon has led to an interest in evaluating risk factors to determine who develops PTSD’ (2015, p. 2). Sayed et al. group these risk factors for the development of psychopathology following trauma exposure into three categories: pre-trauma, peri-trauma and post-trauma factors.⁷ These categories attest to the way in which a temporally embedded model of trauma guides current research on trauma. Indeed, individual and collective vulnerability and resilience have emerged as crucial dimensions in any understanding of the impact of trauma. Clinical studies emphasise the importance of a combination of biological and biographical factors, such as genetic inheritance, child abuse, education and lifetime occurrence of mental disorders, among others (Brewin, Andrews and Valentine: 2000, p. 748). Equally, factors that follow the traumatic event, such as lack of social support and continuous adversities, are shown to increase the likelihood of developing PTSD after exposure. It follows that reparatory connections need to be established in order to reduce a sense of hidden threat that may follow from a traumatic experience.

Taking account of the interaction between event and context opens up possibilities of addressing the risk factors of traumatisation. This approach also presents a more optimistic prognosis for engaging therapeutically to help the subject work through traumatic experience, since trauma’s meaning is locatable rather than permanently lost. Indeed, if subjective, historical influences play a role in reconstructing traumatic memory, the subject's experience of a traumatic event might be psychically integrated through a gradual process of re-establishing associative links. Affirming the social and semantic aspects of trauma may be an essential part of these processes of

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⁷ The authors note that: 'pre-trauma factors can include age, gender, race/ethnicity, education, prior psychopathology, and neurobiological factors. Peri-trauma factors can include the duration/severity of trauma experience and the perception that the trauma has ended. Post-trauma factors can include access to needed resources, social support, specific cognitive patterns, and physical activity' (p. 1).
healing and reconnection, which involve localising the event, or series of events, in the intersubjective fabric of time.

_Early Relational Trauma_

Attention to the multiplicity, complexity and distributional variation of PTSD risk indicators suggests a shift away from the event-based model of trauma, which takes account of the complex human and social predicament in which traumatisation occurs. Increasingly, trauma is seen as a type of situation or outcome, rather than a discrete disorder of injury and response (Kirmayer et al.: 2007, p. 4). Nowhere is this more evident that in research into early relational or ‘complex’ trauma. As The National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN) website explains:

Complex trauma describes both children’s exposure to multiple traumatic events—often of an invasive, interpersonal nature—and the wide-ranging, long-term effects of this exposure. These events are severe and pervasive, such as abuse or profound neglect.

Thus, complex trauma disrupts many aspects of a child’s development and the formation of a sense of self, impacting the development of affect regulation, attention, cognition, perception, and interpersonal relationships.

So, while trauma has typically been discussed in terms of a single excessively disturbing event, recent research informed by an attachment model of childhood trauma instead conceives of a traumatic condition established over time between child and caregiver. Directly opposing the view that trauma is experienced as temporal rupture, current approaches draw attention to the ways that traumatic experience may be embedded in everyday reality. As psychotherapist Clara Mucci writes, clinicians are now more likely:
to think of a traumatic climate or situation perduring in time in which psychological, physical or sexual abuse might be perpetrated even without overt dramatic features being immediately noticeable but whose pathological effects can be nonetheless very serious (2013, p. 1).

Similarly, psychiatrist Antonello Correale defines traumatic experience as:

not exclusively a single experience capable of determining a destructuring of cognitive capacities according to a mechanism concentrated in time, but in a wider sense the reiterated exposition to disturbing or incomprehensible aspects of the signifying other (2006, p. 135; cited by Mucci, p. 2).

Correale’s location of traumatic cause in the signifying other is notably reminiscent of Laplanche’s concept of the enigmatic message, and indicates the way traumatic harm may be transmitted and sustained through long-term relationships.

Such renewed interest in attachment theory in clinical discussions of trauma in recent years has led to a re-evaluation of the relational roots of the construction of the mind and the awareness of how the human relation is the basis for the creation of meaning and the formation of being and the subject. Since traumatic events often occur with a caregiver, they interfere with the child’s ability to form a secure attachment; many aspects of a child’s healthy physical and mental development rely on this primary source of safety and stability. Benedetto Farina and Giovanni Liotti (2011) observe how:

the relationships in which those who habitually take care of a child expose her also to maltreatment, abuse, or severe emotional neglect, affect in a stable way her mental development and are considered capable of causing vulnerability to an ample variety of simple
disturbances, not only during childhood but also in the adult age (cited and translated by Mucci, p. 6).

A wealth of clinical research identifies in disorganised attachment a vulnerability to future trauma and pathologies (see, for example, Liotti: 2006, Fonagy and Target: 2002, or van der Kolk: 1987). Recent studies into Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) clearly demonstrate the cumulative effects of trauma and abuse on both mental and physical health throughout the individual’s life (Anda, Felitti, Bremner et al.: 2006; Hughes, Bellis, Hardcastle et al.: 2017).

Van der Kolk has drawn attention to increasing documentation of the effects of adverse early life experiences on brain development. Physiological and bimolecular studies are increasingly establishing how childhood exposure to chronic stress results in impaired cognitive, social, and emotional functioning and chronic physiological damage (Danese and McEwen: 2012). Early stress causes changes in brain circuitry and hormonal systems and these can become patterns, or as Bruce D. Perry and colleagues write, ‘states can become traits’ (1995). As Graham Music (2010) observes, trauma victims often have inhibited capacities for executive functioning, and struggle to plan for the future, to manage strong emotions or be aware of the consequences of their actions. Traumatised subjects may therefore live in an affective present with a temporal perspective on their experience. Clinical work thus involves practices that specifically aim to develop the brain functions associated with the cerebral cortex, such as being more self-aware (Music: 2010, p. 205). The development of reflective functioning proves to be a major resilience factor, whereby cognitive tools enable the subject to form coherent accounts of the past and integrate painful and fearful affect (p. 208).

At this juncture, it is worth noting that the distinction LaCapra makes between structural and historical trauma may not apply to early relational trauma, in that historical trauma structures the psyche, just as the psyche is structured
through historical experience. As a result, childhood trauma poses a particular obstacle to temporal localisation, giving rise to questions about the possibility of representing traumatic experience from childhood. As I will next discuss, this thesis considers the ways in which confessional art might enact the construction of a past that is not necessarily available to narrative recollection, particularly through the device of parody. I propose that the aesthetic portrayal of traumatised subjectivity in the works of Plath and Bourgeois produce insight that might be brought into dialogue with clinical discussions of trauma.

Narrative and Confession

As this chapter has discussed, trauma may cause confusion in the register of time. Current experience may activate the traumatic effect of a past event, or the past may be intrusively re-experienced in the present. Moreover, the structural effects of early relational trauma on brain development may severely impair the ability to organise experience into a linear temporal sequence. The psychic fragmentation brought about by trauma can shatter or inhibit the construction of the self that is formed and sustained in relation to others, obliterating one’s sense of self in time and dislocating the locale of subjectivity. Thus, Brison observes how ‘the undoing of the self in trauma involves a radical disruption of memory, a severing of past from present and, typically, an inability to envision a future’ (Brison, 1999, p. 214). The affective intensity of trauma may preclude a reflexive stance that would allow the subject to assimilate a traumatic event within consciousness. As LaCapra suggests, ‘trauma brings about a dissociation of affect and representation: one disorientatingly feels what one cannot represent; one numbingly represents what one cannot feel’ (2001, p. 42). Stephanie Bird articulates the same bind in temporal terms, as between ‘the here and now of the feeling self and the historical time of narrative’ (2016, p. 40).

However, as I have sought to show, traumatic experience is temporally elusive rather than intrinsically atemporal. The range of perspectives brought
together in this chapter suggest a conception of trauma as a linguistic event (or series of events) that is embedded within an individual’s social and cultural context, indicating the responsibility of the wider community towards those who have been traumatised. Significantly, opposing a singular event model of trauma, renewed attention to traumatic environment indicates a more optimistic approach toward the possibility of integrating trauma within language. Traumatic events can be reshaped or, to use Laplanche’s term, ‘re-translated’ in a way that mitigates their harmful effects. Emphasis on the linguistic and cultural dimensions of trauma calls for a clinical and theoretical activity that includes the interpersonal, the ethical and the social, which is significantly situated on the site of testimony. Communal solidarity, reconnection with loved ones and bonds of social support may be crucial to recovery from the temporal confusion created by trauma. Clinical work thereby often involves eliciting and transforming narratives of trauma, which are witnessed and acknowledged by others (Kirmayer et al. (2008); Mucci (2013).

Bringing therapeutic discourses to bear on my study of the works of Plath and Bourgeois, this thesis examines the aesthetic construction of traumatised subjectivity rather than the historical testimony of trauma victims. As I propose, confessional art may be envisaged as a reflexive and multivalent aesthetic object that allows focus on the complex relation of language and trauma, and the ways in which childhood traumatic experience might be incorporated within a temporal framework. Thus, I explore how the works of Plath and Bourgeois might perform the work of locating trauma in time, enacting processes of (re)constructing traumatic experience into a comprehensible mnemonic chain in which speech and affect can converge. Significantly, the first-person voice of confessional art instantiates traumatic experience within subjective time, enhancing the particularity of trauma rather than abstracting it beyond representation.

Portraying the enduring effects of traumatic effects through time, the sustained ‘I’ of confessional art depicts traumatised subjectivity in relation to
the other, highlighting the temporally embedded, relational aspects of trauma and working through. Notably, it also provides an opportunity to examine the way in which traumatic temporalities might operate in tandem, as well as allowing a traversal of memory backwards and forwards in time. This thesis considers how the range of aesthetic forms employed by confessional art might figure both temporal disruption and the (re)making of subjectivity after a self-shattering experience. Performing the interplay of linear and traumatic time, working through and acting out, the temporality of the artwork both allows space for and counters the temporal confusion of traumatic experience. Through engagement with the works of Plath and Bourgeois, this thesis signals a way in which aesthetic and clinical domains might mutually contribute insight. Demonstrating a form of literary criticism that is informed by clinical questions, I propose that clinical understanding might also be enriched by the study of literature and art.

As my survey of the therapeutic literature on traumatic time has indicated, childhood trauma may pose a particular obstacle to the process of integration within a subjective narrative. The experience may have occurred before the child has developed the cognitive capacities for making sense of it; furthermore, mental functioning itself may be impeded by early relational trauma. As I suggest, the works of Plath and Bourgeois portray in different ways attempts to come to terms with an experience that resists conscious recollection. They particularly propose the role of parody in articulating childhood traumatic experience, whereby the self-conscious appropriation of literary, cultural and psychoanalytic narratives of trauma provides a means of formulating otherwise undetermined affect. This thesis considers the extent to which parodying narratives of trauma enables the traumatised subject to gain reflective distance from a painful past. At the same time, the device of parody also signals how such narratives are symbolically mediated, by framing ‘personal’ stories within broader historical, social and political accounts. Below, I will outline my fourfold definition of parody and then set out some
preliminary research questions with regards to parody as a mode of working through trauma.

*Four Features of Parody*

Intertextuality, referring to the ‘mosaic of quotations’ (Kristeva: 1986, p. 37) through which texts absorb each other and are constituted, is commonly cited as the defining feature of parody. As Beate Müller puts it, ‘intertextuality is a decisive – if not the ultimate – characteristic of parody’ (1997, p. 8). Emphasising parody’s intertextuality, especially against broad uses of the term, Linda Hutcheon insists that ‘parody’s “target” text is always another work of art or, more generally, another form of coded discourse’ (1987, p. 16). Indeed, Margaret Rose points out that it was largely from the analysis of parody, specifically Bakhtin’s work on the ‘carnival’ or ‘carnivalesque’, that Kristeva derived the concept of intertextuality in the first place (1993, p. 185). Importantly, the presence of another text in the background exposes the artifice of textual construction and works against the ‘usual harmonious totality of meaning’ (Hutcheon: 1987, p. 1). The composer Peter Maxwell Davies provides the useful image of ‘a progressive splintering’ of what is extant in the original work, with ‘magnification and distortion of each splinter through many stylistic “mirrors”’ (cited by Hutcheon: 1987, p. 15). As I will show, the different media in the artworks of Plath and Bourgeois present a similarly prismatic picture, with their multiplicity of angles and perspectives. Thus, as Robert Phiddian suggests, ‘parodic texts cannot be tied to determinate meanings’; through paradox, pun and allusion, textual fragments collide and multiply dissonances (1995, p. 5). As a result, absolute textual authority is undermined, as well as the subject as a coherent source of signification. Thus, parody calls into question not only its relation to other discourses but also its own identity.

Secondly, parody is a markedly self-reflexive mode: it draws attention to its own representational act and displays its own framing. Rose’s work on parody
in particular emphasises that certain kinds of parodic fiction act as ‘metafictions’. That is, in parodying one text or discourse, the parody holds up a mirror to its own fictional practices. Similarly, Hutcheon writes of the way in which, ‘overtly imitating art more than life, parody self-consciously and self-critically points us to its own nature’ (1987, p. 69). And as Ziva Ben-Porat points out, a parody is ‘a representation of a “modelled reality”, which is itself already a particular representation of an original “reality”’. Thus, parodic representations expose the model’s conventions and lay bare its devices (cited by Hutcheon: 1987, p. 49). Exposing the contingent relation of representation and ‘reality’, parody can then be a means of putting a particular representation into question.

Moreover, the self-reflexivity of parody often carries an ironic tone. Hutcheon goes as far as to suggest that parody as a form of imitation is characterised by ‘ironic inversion’, claiming that in fact ‘irony is the major theoretical strategy deployed by the genre’. Characterised by double voice, irony allows the simultaneous holding of different, even contradictory positions: ‘irony’s patent refusal of semantic univocality matches parody’s refusal of structural unitextuality’ (pp. 54-55). Similarly, Rose observes that, ‘in parody the complex function of the dual meaning of the irony is matched by that of the dual text or code’ (1993, p. 87).

Thirdly, parody is ‘trans-contextualising’, to use a neologism coined by Hutcheon to denote the ironic recoding of the parodied text (p. 29). The parodic function requires us to situate texts in their cultural contexts (Phiddian: 1995, p. 4), and by juxtaposing two different moments of time, parody allows perspective of one through the other. Thus, through its gesture of historicizing, parody can revise, replay and invert the text from which it draws. In so doing, it generates a dialogue with the past, giving altered significances to previous works. By ‘trans-contextualising’ or crossing context, parody is thereby a way to reflect on truths constructed in each text’s own historical moment, unveiling the errors that have been made into necessary ‘facts’ by any given time
period – two (con)texts can ‘actively and mutually illuminate one another’ (Bakhtin: 1981, cited by Hutcheon: 1987, p. 161). Parodic imitation functions like a costume or prop, exposing the way symbolic identity is constructed.

Moreover, parody’s frequent interaction with satire overtly makes room for added social dimensions (Hutcheon: 1987, p. 110). Hutcheon stresses that parody can be used to critique contemporary culture rather than the parodied text: ‘many parodies today do not ridicule the background texts but use them as standards by which to place the contemporary under scrutiny’ (p. 57). Therefore their satirical intent can cut both ways – as I will suggest, the works of Plath and Bourgeois parody portrayals of trauma in ways that satirise victimhood culture. The traversal of contexts through parodic imitation is a way of marking time – the interval between precursor text and the new situation – that is important, for example, in relation to modern-day attempts to remember the Holocaust.

The fourth and final characteristic that constitutes my definition of parody is playfulness. For Rose, this characteristic is linked to parody’s comic effect. She argues that it is ‘the structural use of comic incongruity which distinguishes the parody from other forms of quotation and literary imitation, and shows its function to be more than imitation alone’ (1993, p. 31). Wanting to broaden the scope of parody, however, Hutcheon argues that it need not be comic: ‘parody can be a whole range of things – it can be serious criticism, not necessarily of the parodied text; it can be a playful, genial mockery of codifiable forms’ (1987, p. 15). Hutcheon writes that the ‘pleasure of parody’s irony comes not from humour in particular but from the degree of engagement of the reader in the intertextual ‘bouncing’ […] between complicity and distance’. However, there is nothing to say that comedy itself cannot be serious; and what Rose and Hutcheon both emphasise is a sense of play achieved by the juxtapositions of texts or discourses.
In his book *On Humour* (1988), Mike Mulkay highlights a contrast between the serious and comic modes of discourse. He argues that while in the serious realm we normally employ a unitary mode of discourse, within which ‘ambiguity, inconsistency, contradiction and interpretive diversity are potential problems’, humour, by contrast, ‘depends on the active creation and display of interpretative multiplicity’. Thus, humour allows us to ‘temporarily inhabit not a single, coherent world, but a world in which whatever is said and done necessarily has more than one meaning’ (p. 3). Parody, as a subcategory of comedy, is particularly suited to showing up incongruities and discrepancies across contexts. As a result, it performs the indeterminacy of language – as described by Roland Barthes, the (parodic) text creates a ‘multidimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash’; a ‘tissue of quotations drawn from innumerable centres of culture’ (Barthes: 1977, p. 146).

The jostling nature of language in the parodic mode can lay bare encrusted conventions, making parody a potentially subversive discourse, notwithstanding examples of ‘conservative’ parodists (Hutcheon: 1987, p. 103). Parody can thereby act as ‘a consciousness-raising device, preventing the acceptance of the narrow, doctrinaire, dogmatic views of any particular ideological group’ (p. 103). Simon Dentith similarly points to examples of parody ‘debunking […] sacred and official rituals and languages’, threatening beliefs that are held to be absolute (2000, p. 22). As Mulkay suggests, interpretative multiplicity can question assumptions of the ‘serious’ world, via a simultaneous co-presence of other languages that can challenge it. For Mulkay, ‘the final significance of humour lies in what it tells us about the serious mode and about the recurrent failure of that unitary form of discourse to cope with the multiple realities which are generated by the processes of social life’ (1988, p. 6). (Notably this application of parody might be effective in de-sublimating trauma from its elevated status in discourses of traumatic unrepresentability.) Mulkay’s insight into serious and comic modes of
discourse counters the possible objection that parody is an inappropriate mode for representing trauma.

Parody and the Work of Memory

Discerning these four traits of parody in the art and writings of Plath and Bourgeois, this thesis explores how those works respond to the mnemonic aporia of childhood trauma. I consider how parody might contribute towards what Ricoeur calls the ‘work of memory’, on the part of an active rather than passive confessant. As my analysis highlights, in the works of Plath and Bourgeois narratives of trauma are assembled from a range of texts and idioms, giving form to affect via a tangible cultural object. Showing how inhabiting a narrative involves externalising the experience, parody splits the self into active and passive voices: one that narrates and one that is the object of the narrative. This thesis particularly considers how the temporal interval thus established by the parodic mode might offer a way of representing trauma, one that is capable of enabling the subject to gain critical distance from traumatic experience. The sense of historicity produced by parody might help to contextualise a traumatic experience and give a perspective on it as something that happened in the past.

As such, parody can be seen as a response to the difficulty of localising a traumatic event in linear time from the perspective of the traumatised psyche. Establishing a double voice of the parodied and parodying perspectives, parody is able to instate two time zones running in parallel, which might be termed the ‘time of representation’ and the ‘time of affect’. This thesis considers the extent to which parody’s double voice might create distance from the traumatic event and the intensity of its affect, imposing a limit on – or operating simultaneously with – the disruptive temporalities of trauma. Thus, I explore parody’s potential contribution towards breaking the temporal cycle of trauma, of allowing an exit from the affective intensity of a perpetual present via symbolisation.
Consequently, the play of parody, already suggestive of repetition and time, might emerge as a means of facilitating processes of mourning, resisting the insistence of suffering that characterises melancholia. While trauma implies fixation or blockage in the order of representation, language is that which allows for substitution and displacement. Parody might help set language in motion again, both by allowing the subject to gain distance from a traumatic event in a way that re-establishes a sense of sequential time, and by participating playfully in the indeterminacy of language. The traumatic cause may therefore be impacted upon, and brought into the realm of subjectification. Exploring these aspects of playfulness in the work of Bourgeois and Plath, I want to suggest parody as an antidote to the view that trauma is ‘beyond’ all knowledge and representation. Indeed, the comedic aspect of parody might suggest a way of situating oneself in relation to the traumatic experience that does not result in total deadlock. Characteristics of indeterminacy and the play of signification might then offer a renewed way of coming to terms with childhood trauma, as well as giving the subject a sense of agency. As Hutcheon suggests, parody can mark the intersection of creation and re-creation, of invention and critique (1987, p. 10).

Notably, too, parody politicises narratives of trauma and victimhood by enacting the ways in which memory is shaped from the expressions that are culturally available. Knowledge of the past is inevitably constructed out of representations. What distinguishes parody, however, is that it is markedly cognizant of this constructedness, and thereby able to cast light on how events may have been mediated for social, ideological or commercial reasons. By drawing attention to the very process of representation, parody can unsettle narratives that have come to dominate. Constructing trauma narratives from pre-existing literary formulae and intertexts, the works of Plath and Bourgeois highlight the fact that trauma and victimhood are not ahistorical concepts. The dual voice of parody dislodges formalised narratives whilst also retaining the reality of affect, thus allowing engagement with trauma without
surrender to the sheer pathos of the story. Thus, this thesis will consider the extent to which the double voice of parody can disengage traumatic affect from the subject position of victim posited by narratives of trauma, contesting conflation of traumatic suffering with victim identity and reopening the possibility of agency.

Finally, this thesis considers how parodying narratives of trauma foregrounds the ethics of aestheticisation of suffering, drawing critical attention to the pleasure the audience might take in scenes of traumatisation. Indeed, the artifice of parody might produce a moment of reflection, and thus hold up a mirror to the audience’s desire to identify with victimhood. Parody may thereby function to satirise laying claim to someone else’s pain, challenging any facile assumption of particular identities and moral positions. As I will suggest, the traumatised subjectivities constructed by Bourgeois and Plath simultaneously inhabit victim identity and stand outside of it, creating a wry distance from the very narratives they enact. It is as if the narrative subjects deny themselves a final identification with victimisation: a space for feeling is extended, but then retracted – with the consequence that the audience’s identification with victimhood is also challenged. As narratives of trauma and the victim position they posit are offered and then withdrawn, the parodic mode may interrupt the very process of identification that the works invite. These narratives thereby function on two levels: while they may strike the reader as immediately affecting, they nonetheless leave an unsettling residue that undermines their own authenticity.

At the same time, this intimation of inauthenticity signals the potential limitations of parody in appropriating a narrative that is self-consciously not one’s own. Thus, as I will consider in this thesis, confessional art may challenge the adequacy of others’ narratives for containing and making sense of extremely painful emotion. Parody might then be seen to function as a defense or mask against the overwhelming emotion associated with traumatic experience, possibly closing off a space for mourning. Equally, the distance
established by the parodic mode may be liable to collapse as a result of the instability between parodying and parodied voices.

Finally, I would like to propose that an exploration of parody in the works of Plath and Bourgeois might have pertinent implications for clinical practice. Within psychoanalysis, there is a well-established tradition of turning to literature and art for insight into the human psyche. Indeed, Freud expounded his most fundamental concepts through engagements with literature, frequently drawing illustrations from works such as Sophocles’s tragedies, Goethe’s *Faust* and Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* (Frankland: 2000, p. 6). However, against a critical tradition of ‘applied’ psychoanalysis, in which literature is used to verify psychoanalytic concepts, the intertextual approach of this thesis brings psychoanalytic and literary works into critical interaction. Particularly seeking to avoid a tendency of psycho-pathologising the artist, my analysis of confessional art does not posit a traumatised subject existing independently of the artwork. Rather, I suggest that a focus on the aesthetic construction of traumatised subjectivity in the works of Plath and Bourgeois provides an opportunity for in-depth analysis of a range of representational modes. Mobilising a form of fictional autobiography that allows a long-term perspective, confessional art may be an especially apt genre for enacting the temporal disruption and integration of trauma. As my analysis highlights, the works of Plath and Bourgeois allow reflection on the extent to which parody offers a way of imposing narrative coherence onto traumatic affect, which may in turn be brought to bear on clinical treatment of patients suffering from the effects of childhood trauma.

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4 For a survey of the relation of literature and psychoanalysis, see the editor’s introduction to a collection of essays entitled *Essential Papers on Literature and Psychoanalysis* (1993), edited by Emanuel Berman.
Chapter 3  
Melancholy and Self-Parody in Sylvia Plath’s Journals

As part of my project of developing a conception of confession as an intertextual and self-reflexive aesthetic genre, this chapter represents the first study devoted to a critical analysis of Sylvia Plath’s journals as a literary form in their own right. Plath’s journals have typically been read as an expression of authentic subjectivity, identical with Plath herself. Ted Hughes advocates such an approach in his foreword to the first publication of Plath’s journals in 1982, where he writes that the journals chronicle the emergence of a ‘real self, being the real poet’ (Hughes: 1982, p. xii). As I will discuss below, the journals are then often cited in support of a confessional reading that assumes Plath’s oeuvre springs from the trauma of her father’s death in childhood. Instead, this chapter proposes that reading these writings as a literary text casts light on the ways in which the journals construct rather than reveal a subject, setting in motion the formal ploy of a fictional protagonist contending with her traumatic past.

Undoubtedly, distinguishing between Plath and the narrator of the journals goes against the grain of the manner in which they are presented to the

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5 This reading is typically combined with a pathologisation of Plath. See, for example, the reviews by Michael Sheldon, David Sexton and John Carey in response to the American publication of the unabridged journals in 2000.
reader. The published text is interspersed with editorial commentary pointing to the correspondence with events in Plath's life, and the original manuscripts are archived in Smith College, Massachusetts where Plath studied (1950-55). This chapter refers to the narratorial 'I' of the journals as 'SP', in order to signify both proximity and distance in relation to the poet.

On the one hand, I want to acknowledge the seduction of identifying Plath with her narrator, enhanced by the persuasiveness of the narratorial voice. On the other, I suggest that resisting this seduction, and instead seeing the narrator as a textual effect, offers an opportunity of examining the complex relation of trauma and representation. Observing how traumatised subjectivity is aesthetically constructed by the journals enables a focus on the way in which language enacts processes of (re)making the self in the aftermath of trauma. The text may be conceived as a temporal medium that conveys the twists and turns of the psyche over time, giving insight into the multilayered temporality of traumatic experience. SP is swept back into the past even as she strives towards the future, oscillating between acting out and working through as she seeks to gain a reflective distance from painful affect.

This chapter particularly draws attention to the dimension of parody in the journals' construction of a traumatised subject. As my analysis demonstrates, SP both inhabits and exceeds the figure of melancholic poet, focalised by the intertext of William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (c. 1599-1602), ultimately contesting the conception of trauma as a wellspring of poetic genius through ironic imitation. On one level, SP identifies with a melancholic subject position, haunted by a sense of indefinable loss that, as for Hamlet, stands for both more and less than the dead father. Shakespeare's tragic hero offers a model for the way in which the journals perform melancholy, combining artfulness and affect, method and madness. But at another level, SP expresses ironic distance from the Hamlet figure, scorning the self-indulgent solipsism of melancholic suffering, and thereby stripping it of tragic grandeur. Indeed, the pragmatism with which SP mines her past for literary fodder generates scepticism on the romantic notion of trauma as a spontaneous source of inspiration. As I propose, by parodying the idea of melancholic genius the
narrator of Plath’s journals also offers a feminist perspective on what Harold Bloom terms the ‘anxiety of influence’ (1973).

As I suggest, the journals instigate a literary *mise en abyme*, constructing the persona of a writer who is herself involved in the process of fictionalising her life. Indeed, the text portrays SP’s persistent attempt to turn her life into prose, dramatising the process of converting the self into a fictional character, ‘I’ into ‘she’ or even ‘you’. Significantly, the way in which SP treats her own past as material for her writing emerges as a means of contending with loss, such that self-parody seems to function as a defense against affect. Crucially, affect is invoked precisely by this defensive gesture, rather than pre-existing the text. The sense of urgency in SP’s desire to become a published writer places her in a bind, whereby gaining distance from the past involves revisiting the site of trauma. The journals thereby indicate the precariousness of SP’s attempt to transform her life into prose, as the narratorial ‘I’ teeters between past and the present, affect and representation. At times, the language is highly stylised as the narrator adopts a particular idiom, whether ironic and detached or self-consciously melodramatic. At others, the tone becomes more desperate as she struggles to impose a temporal form onto her experience.

The first part of this chapter draws attention to the self-reflexivity of Plath’s narrator, displacing the locale of subjectivity. As I propose, the parodic mode establishes a dual register, at once earnest and self-mocking, despairing and humorous, that seems to function as a means of relativising extreme emotion. The second part observes how SP parodies the figure of melancholic poet whose art proceeds directly from traumatic loss. Notably, a parodic stance allows SP a way of responding to her poetic inheritance, whereby she situates herself in relation to the patrilineal canon. The third part of this chapter comprises close analysis of a selection of passages, under the three themes of ‘cultivating craft’, ‘experimenting with voice’, and ‘the “work” of psychoanalysis’, which in different ways perform the narratorial gesture of self-parody. I consider how the act of transposing the self into a literary persona, causing a split between the first and second or third person, might attest to an effort to dissociate from traumatic affect. Allowing SP to gain a
provisional distance from the past, the parodic mode might constitute the only means of articulating trauma, and, equally, of negotiating a place for herself in a tradition of male writers.

The Text and its Critical Reception

Plath began keeping diaries and journals at the age of eleven and continued the practice until her death at the age of thirty. The manuscripts, mostly taking the form of hand-written volumes and typed sheets, are held in the Neilson Library at Smith College and the Lilly Library at Indiana University. In 1982, a selection of the Plath’s journals (1950-1962) was published in the US, edited by Frances McCullough with a foreword by Plath’s widower, Ted Hughes. Containing ‘perhaps a third of the whole bulk’ (Hughes, p. xiii), this selection is the result of substantial editing. As the editor notes, there are ‘quite a few nasty bits missing’, along with cuts of ‘intimacies’ that have ‘the effect of diminishing Plath’s eroticism, which was quite strong’ (p. x). An unabridged version of the journals, entitled The Journals of Sylvia Plath 1950-1962, was subsequently published in 2000, edited by Karen Kukil. Two of the journals that were previously sealed by Ted Hughes are presented here for the first time, including Plath’s notes on her private therapy sessions with the psychiatrist Ruth Beuscher. As Kukil writes in her preface, the goal of the new edition is to present a ‘complete and historically accurate text’, with ‘no omissions, deletions, or corrections of Plath’s words’ (pp. ix-x). Along with unpublished juvenilia stored in the archives, it is to this edition that my chapter refers.6

The Journals of Sylvia Plath 1950-1962 is a transcription of twenty-three manuscripts in the Plath Collection at Smith College, covering Plath’s student years at Smith College and Newnham College, Cambridge, her marriage to Hughes, and two years of teaching and writing in New England; there are also a few journal fragments from 1960 and 1962. Kukil stresses that, apart from

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6 For a comparison of these editions, see ‘Sylvia Plath’ in Jackson: 2010, pp. 93-113
general biographical information on the appropriate half title for each of the eight principal journals, ‘every effort has been made in this edition to give the reader direct access to Sylvia Plath’s actual words without interruption or interpretation’ (p. x). Textual features of the physical journals, including spelling, capitalization and grammar, and the way Plath underlined certain words and passages, are carefully preserved. However, the publication does not feature the two bound journals that Plath wrote during the last three years of her life. One of these ‘disappeared’, according to Hughes in his foreword to the 1982 edition, and is still missing. Hughes admits to destroying the second ‘maroon-backed ledger’, which contained entries to within three days of Plath’s suicide. As he writes in his foreword, ‘I didn’t want her children to have to read it (in those days I regarded forgetfulness as an essential part of survival)’ (p. xiii). The imperative (‘to have to’) implies that the very existence of the last journal would have been damaging, even life-threatening.

Interestingly, in a subsequent version of this text, Hughes turns himself into the third person, such that ‘I destroyed’ is reformulated as ‘her husband destroyed’ (‘Sylvia Plath and Her Journals’: 1982). Thus, the language of both versions of the foreword directs attention away from Hughes’s agency in destroying the journal, either by suggesting that he was compelled by the need to protect his children, or by placing him in the role of editor as opposed to husband.

Given the quantity of scholarship on Plath, it is surprising how little attention has been given to her journals. This deficit is perhaps due to ‘a growing movement in Plath studies that is suspicious of an older but still lingering school of Plath criticism that sees her as a “confessional” writer’ (Bayley and Brain: 2012, p. 1). Indeed, since their publication, the journals have been read as a direct manifestation of Plath’s subjectivity, with Plath being identified with the subject constructed by the journals as a ‘martyr of self-consciousness’ (Breslin: 2001, p. 675). The presentation or ‘packaging’ of the journals has endorsed this assumption of exchangeability between Plath and her personae (Brain: 2001). For example, the inside cover of the 1982 American edition suggests that the journals reveal Plath’s ‘deep psychic crack that left her open
to frequent depression, anxiety, and panic – as she described in *The Bell Jar* (1982). Notably, this quote implies that Plath’s novel about mental breakdown can be read as another document of autobiography. The journals are likewise read as a prequel to Plath’s poetry: ‘what is electrifying in these pages is Plath’s voice itself: the brilliant, clear voice of the late poems, heard so hauntingly in this logbook of a terrifying journey in which she was the only traveller’ (1982, inside back cover). They are thereby considered as context against which to interpret Plath’s poems, with the result that both forms are viewed through a reductive biographical lens.

This sense of continuity between the subjectivity of Plath’s journals and that of her poems is supported by Hughes’s foreword to the 1982 edition. Hughes characterises Plath’s creative development as a ‘process of alchemy’, proposing that ‘her apprentice writings were like impurities thrown off from the various stages of the inner transformation, by-products of the internal work.’ For Hughes, the journals are a manifestation of this alchemical process, where Plath ‘set down her day to day struggle with her warring selves’ (p. xiii). The journals are read as an authentic expression of Plath’s psychic struggle to strip away ‘those lesser and artificial selves’, in order to reach ‘her real self, being the real poet’ (p. xii). Hughes’s account of Plath’s ‘inner transformation’ is couched in markedly sexist terms: ‘she showed something violent in this, something very primitive, perhaps very female, a readiness, even a need, to sacrifice everything to the new birth’ (p. xi). Dubiously equating Plath’s emergence as a poet with rebirth, Hughes also betrays an essentialist approach that couples femininity with masochism, implying a process outside Plath’s creative control. As he writes in a second version of this foreword, the ‘slow transformation of [Plath’s] inner crisis […] gave the impression of being a secret crucible, or rather a womb, an almost biological process – and just as much beyond her manipulative interference’ (1982b, p. 90). By this account, it would seem that the poems arose in spite of the poet, the organic metaphors implying that Plath only needed to surrender to the forces of nature, particularly those related to childbirth.
Hughes’s foreword is omitted from Kukil’s 2000 edition of the journals, which generally seeks to avoid steering the reader. Nevertheless, Kukil’s preface opens with the assertion that ‘Sylvia Plath speaks for herself in this unabridged edition of her journals’ (p. ix), implying, like the earlier edition, that here Plath’s voice can be heard in an unmediated form. Contemporary reviews of this publication, which likewise tend to assume that the journals speak directly for Plath, reveal the pathologising underside of Hughes’s celebration of Plath’s ‘very primitive, very female’ emergence as a poet. For example, Michael Sheldon’s review suggests they provide ‘evidence of Plath’s hopelessly deranged thinking’, and further characterises them as ‘a thousand pages of Plath’s self-incriminating testimony’, ‘her own suicide note’ (2000). Similarly, David Sexton claims that, as ‘little less than proof of psychosis’, ‘these expanded journals make Plath more than ever terrifying: self-obsessive, raging, living at an unendurable pitch of intensity’. Assuming the role of judge, Sexton continues to assert that the journals ‘go far to confirm Hughes’s helpless version of events’ (2000). The juridical rhetoric running through such criticism is indicative of the way in which critics took sides in the aftermath of Plath’s suicide. The implication here is that Plath’s mental illness made her guilty for the breakdown of her marriage preceding her suicide, such that Hughes’s role is diminished. Thus, John Carey declares that ‘this is a portrait of the artist as a sick colossus’, with the result that Hughes’s ‘account is vindicated, if it needed to be’ (2000). Carey notably uses the title word of Plath’s poetry collection, *The Colossus* (1960), indicating a slippage between Plath and her body of work; the resonance of ‘colossus’ further suggests an attempt to capture the poet in a particular ‘sick’ posture.

Offering a more nuanced perspective, Jacqueline Rose observes in her review, entitled ‘So Many Lives, So Little Time’ (2000), that ‘it is a mistake to see these journals as giving us access to some new or previously hidden “truth” about Plath’. As she suggests:

If the journals are cause for celebration, it might be, bizarrely, because evidence can be found within them to support every single theory that has ever been produced about Sylvia Plath – the never recovered child
of the dead father, the woman oppressed by the small, suffering psychic landscape of her mother, the woman trapped in a domestic life unredeemed by a feminism which arrived too late on the scene, the woman nursed by her husband out of pain into burgeoning creativity, the woman betrayed. They are all here. With each one so vividly and insistently present, and each one just as immediately countered by the energetic presence of another, it becomes clear that none of them, that is, none of them on their own, will, in fact, do.

Rose is right to highlight the multivalency of Plath’s journals. However, she seems to imply that the different theories about Plath – which tend to cast her in a victimised role – might ‘do’ if they are taken all together. Plath is thereby still identified with the subject constructed by the journals, even while this subject is multiple. Rose’s phrasing at the end of this paragraph notably echoes Plath’s poem ‘Daddy’ (which opens ‘You do not do, you do not do’). As such, it provides an example of the way in which Plath’s language is perceived to give privileged access to the poet herself.

Tim Kendall signals a different approach in his review, ‘Showing Off to an Audience of One’ (2000), where he points to the performative nature of Plath’s journals. Warning that ‘anyone hoping for scandalous new revelations will be disappointed’, he suggests that Kukil’s edition is to be welcomed on ‘literary rather than biographical grounds’. As Kendall observes, the writing is often crafted, constituting ‘more than spontaneous and unmediated overflow’. Similarly, Tracy Brain argues in The Other Sylvia Plath (2001) that ‘much of the writing in her Journals is carefully crafted; there is too large a gap between her “real” experience and the mediation of writing for us to use the Journals as simple documentary evidence of her mental state or emotions’ (p. 11).

Building on this insight, this chapter draws attention to the literary artifice of Plath’s journals and the way in which their subject is textually constructed. It thereby seeks to open up a new avenue for reading the journals as a text in their own right.

The Self-Reflexive Self
Whether regarded as a nascent ‘real self’ or, less sympathetically, a ‘sick colossus’, Plath is stripped of aesthetic agency; content is judged with a disregard for form. Contesting this reductive and typically gendered approach that sees Plath’s writing as the product of unmediated emotion, close analysis shows that the journals present a highly crafted literary text, even (or perhaps especially) when they are at their most ostensibly confessional. As Kukil’s edition makes clear, frequent underlining of certain words and passages suggests that the writings were read over, perhaps with a view to reuse – as one entry explicitly states in the context of brainstorming ideas for writing, ‘my diaries to work on, to reconstruct’ (Kukil: 2000, p. 305). Far from being a cathartic outlet, the text comprises a range of forms and functions, in which experimentation with various styles and effects gives the impression of a writer’s notebook. If there is a consistent theme throughout, then it is the expression of a relentless desire to be published – an aspiration that plausibly incorporates the journals themselves. Thus, instead of reading the journals as cathartic self-expression, this chapter differentiates between Plath and the narrative persona (‘SP’) who is constructed by the text. Since this persona is an aspiring writer, the journals mobilise a *mise en abyme* or recursive sequence of the process of textual construction itself.

Moreover, SP self-reflexively plays with her own image, displacing the locale of subjectivity in a way that prevents easy identification with Plath or indeed any singular (or multiple) identity. To illustrate this argument, SP often suggests how essential writing is for her existence: she writes how ‘my life, I feel, will not be lived until there are books and stories which relive it perpetually in time’ (286), implying a sense of the contingency of her life on its reproduction in writing, as well as a desire to be remembered by future generations. Elsewhere, she melodramatically remarks that ‘simply the fact that I write in here able to hold a pen, proves, I suppose, the ability to go on living’ (p. 334). And, later on, the reversal of living and writing is complete: ‘writing, then, was a substitute for myself’ (p. 448). In an article entitled ‘Plath’s Lives’ (2001), Langdon Hammer observes that, in her journals, ‘Plath wrote with a strange urgency, as if her life depended on it’. He then adds that
‘she didn’t want to record a self, but to bring one into being’ (p. 67). The apparent contradiction here – in that writing is both the condition and the product of the self – attests to the difficulty of locating the subject of these writings, as though her ‘I’ is always just beyond reach. As this chapter suggests, the dramatic irony of the enactment of the interplay between living and writing in Plath’s journals is that the life of the subject is, after all, a textual construction.

Indeed, SP appears to be highly image-conscious, describing herself as she might look to an outside observer – for example, she wears a ‘touch-of-genius red lipstick’ (p. 314) and ‘tigress perfume’ (p. 329). The journals are also populated with literary personae whose voices the narrator inhabits. As she herself observes: ‘so ironic: I pick up poetic identities of characters who commit suicide, adultery or get murdered, and I believe in them completely for a while’ (p. 204). This meta-fictional remark indicates how she constructs herself, or selves, precisely out of the language of self-construction, such that her subjectivity is impossible to locate, always at least one remove from the reader. A specific example of an identity she ‘picks up’ is that of Virginia Woolf. As she writes in one entry:

(J)ust now I pick up the blessed diary of Virginia Woolf which I bought with a battery of her novels Saturday [SIC] with Ted […] Bless her. I feel my life linked to her, somehow […] But her suicide, I felt I was reduplicating in that black summer of 1953 (p. 269).

The tone of this identification with Woolf is sincere; at the same time, however, the irony of writing about reading a diary within a diary creates an additional layer, whereby the narratorial voice is again deferred. These lines thus enact a gesture that is no sooner made than undone, exemplifying how the ‘I’ of the journals occupies two positions at once, both heartfelt and self-scoring. As I will propose, the narrator’s tendency to make light of her suffering often functions as a means of defending against painful affect. Notably, the language of ‘picking up’ signals the way in which SP is looking for literary exemplars. Of course, the fact that she is reading Woolf’s published
diary suggests an eye to posterity. Linking her life to that of Woolf, notably by her attempt to commit suicide, demonstrates the way in which she is engaged in a process of mythologising her own past. Suicide significantly becomes a trope in the journals, by which SP binds herself to other such literary identities.

As I observe in the next section of this chapter, the journal’s narrator particularly identifies with the subject position of melancholic genius, taking the character of Shakespeare’s Hamlet as a touchstone. Equally, Hamlet is a play that unsettles the distinction between reality and performance, famously featuring a play-within-a-play that foregrounds the mechanism of theatre. This intertext in the journals thereby enhances a sense of the instability of life and fiction, drawing out the meta-fictional implications of writing a text within a text. Indeed, Hamlet’s mimicry of madness provides a model for conceiving the way in which SP both inhabits and exceeds the melancholy subject position, playing a character in her own fiction. Significantly, the double voice of self-parody subverts a confessional reading strategy that locates the source of the artwork in the artist’s childhood trauma.

Contesting Melancholy

Plath’s journals ironise the myth of the writer as melancholic genius, whose poetry is the product of the traumatic loss of her father. Of course, this myth predominates in traditional confessional readings of Plath’s poetry. As Hughes writes:

The root system of her talent was a deep and inclusive inner crisis which seems to have been quite distinctly formulated in its chief symbols (presumably going back at least as far as the death of her father, when she was ten) by the time of her first attempted suicide, in 1953, when she was twenty-one (1982b, p. 88).

A nature image, the phrase ‘root system’ evokes a basic cause, source or origin of the poems, implying that the death of Plath’s father was the
wellspring of creative genius that produced the *Ariel* collection. It is noticeable
that Hughes formulates this narrative in the vocabulary of Plath's poetry, in
which the 'root' metaphor connects to the poetic 'I’s attempt to locate her
inheritance in the aftermath of her father's death (as I discuss in my analysis
of ‘Little Fugue’ and ‘Daddy’ in the following chapter). Strikingly, Hughes
derives his version of events from Plath's poem, 'Daddy', in which the speaker
of the poem says ‘I was ten when they buried you’, when in fact Otto Plath
died when Plath herself was only eight. Again, when Hughes writes that 'she
would describe her suicide attempt as a bid to get back to her father', he uses
the language of the poem: “At twenty I tried to die/And get back, back, back to
you’. Blurring the distinction between fact and fiction such that myth
supersedes history, this odd conflation points to the shifty nature of
autobiographical truth.

The way in which Plath is mistaken for her literary personae attests to the
persuasiveness of her techniques of characterisation. However, the effect of
the oversimplified narrative in this case is to posit traumatic loss at the origin
of Plath’s poetry – in Hughes’s words, ‘a matrix from which everything later
seemed to develop’ (p. 89). At one level he may be taking care to exonerate
himself from any blame in Plath’s sufferings and death. However, this model
of causality is enforced time and again in response to the journals by other
writers too. For example, in her review of the 2000 edition, Allison Pearson
writes that 'death appears to have taken out a lease on Plath's imagination at
the age of eight, when her father Otto died, and never moved out.' Such a
linear trajectory problematically suggests a life destined for suicide, like the
arrow of Plath’s ‘Ariel’, ‘suicidal, at one with the drive/Into the red/Eye, the
cauldron of morning’. Instead of reading Plath’s oeuvre as a direct window
into her childhood trauma, this thesis draws attention to the ways in which the
works actively manipulate the means of exposure. Counteracting a conflation
of Plath and the ‘I’ created by her artworks, I propose that paying attention to
the parodic dimension in Plath’s journals also opens up a new approach to the
trope of melancholy in her poetry. Indeed, references to the dead father in the
journals anticipate the way in which childhood trauma often functions as a
metaphor of literary (rather than personal) inheritance in Plath’s poems, further ironising the myth of melancholic genius.

Interestingly, after Otto Plath’s death in 1940, the father does not appear at all in the juvenilia contained within the Lilly Library. Moreover, in one passage of the adult journals the narrator seems to forget the death of her father entirely, rhetorically asking in passing: ‘what do I know of sorrow? No one I love has ever died or been tortured’ (p. 33). This unreliability of the narratorial voice inevitably casts doubt on the extent to which the father’s death impacts her psyche. Instead, the father gains prominence as the narrator searches for material for her writing, thus taking shape as a literary trope (the first allusion to the father appears in an entry on May 14th, 1953 (p. 184)). When the father is acknowledged in the journals – typically in relation to the fact he died rather than a specific memory of him – it is in an oddly impersonal way. To give a few of the more significant examples, in one entry the father’s death is used to illustrate a philosophical argument:

Reality is relative, depending on what lens you look through. Each person, banging into the facts, neutral, impersonal in themselves (like the Death of someone) – interprets, alters, becomes obsessed with personal biases or attitudes, transmuting the objective reality into something quite personal (like the death of My Father = tears, sorrow, weeping, dolorous tints, numbing of certain areas of sensation and perception about the stream of life moving about one…) Hence, ‘thinking makes it so’ (p. 121).

This division of objective and subjective reality, the ‘facts’ and the way they are interpreted, privileges the impersonal over becoming ‘obsessed with personal biases’. The highbrow tone of this passage, however, is shot through with irony, as if to mock the pretence of abstract theorising. SP writes in the third person (‘each person’), and uses capital letters and equals signs to presume a universal application. Capitalisation of ‘My Father’ parrots a prayer, thus abstracting the personal father into the divine one; it also suggests the title for a work, a reminder that the narrator is gathering ideas for her writing.
Again, caricaturing an objectifying gesture, SP lists outward signs of affect, ‘tears, sorrow, weeping’, rather than describing the internal feeling of grief. The line trails off as it moves into realm of experience, as though mimicking the numbing of sensation and perception cutting out. Adding a final touch of pomposity, the line from *Hamlet* epitomises the melancholic perspective (as Hamlet remarks, ‘there is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so. To me it is a prison’). The implication is that the father’s death would not otherwise be ‘so’, implying a dissociation of ‘thinking’ and feeling and consequently the cognitive impenetrability of affect. Furthermore, the citation casts light on the way in which the passage as a whole emulates a literary character, rather than constituting authentic expression. Indeed, the literary reference may act precisely as distancing device, by mocking what Sigmund Freud describes as the melancholic’s ‘keener eye for the truth’ (2001, p.246). Notably, the adjective ‘dolorous’ subsequently reappears in several of Plath’s poems, such as the ‘hooves, dolorous bells’ in ‘Sheep in Fog’, demonstrating how the journals are all the while used for building a lexicon.

At the other extreme, reference to the father has the character of melodrama. In the context of receiving a letter from a love-interest, SP records how:

I read his letter and walked the wet pine-dark path tonight, with the warm rain dripping and shiny on the black leaves in the humid blurred starlight, crying and crying with this terrible pain; it hurts, father, it hurts, oh father I have never known; a father, they took from me’ (p. 223).

Interestingly, the source of painful affect shifts in these lines, from the letter of an inaccessible love object (the narrator subsequently writes about ‘a boy who will not let me come’) to the deprivation of her father. The passage thus performs the way in which the father comes to function as a general symbol of loss or absence. Indeed, rather than a sincere expression of affect, the language gives the impression of a writer’s notebook, produced by the adjective-laden imagery and repetition, and the conceit of addressing an unknown person, ‘it hurts, father’. The way in which SP invokes the presence
of her absent father notably anticipates how the speaker of Plath’s ‘Daddy’ replays the moment of his death.

There is an interesting echo of the language in a subsequent entry, ‘I rail and rage against the taking of my father, whom I have never known’ (p. 230), causing emphasis to fall on an absence of knowledge for which the dramatic excess is perhaps meant to compensate. Use of the present perfect tense here implies that the father is somehow still alive, anticipating the way in which the father haunts SP precisely by failing to appear in her memory. At another point in the journals, the father is treated as a metaphor or muse for writing, described as ‘the buried male muse and god-creator’, ‘the sea-father Neptune’. As SP writes:

I shall begin by setting myself magic objects to write on: sea-bearded bodies – and begin thus, digging into the reaches of my deep submerged head, ‘and It’s old and old it’s sad and it’s old and weary I go back to you, my cold father, my cold mad father, my cold made feary father…’ so Joyce says, so the river flows to the paternal source of godhead (p. 381).

The father is thus regarded as a source of creative inspiration; though, as the citation from Joyce suggests, this is just as much a reference to literary paternity, whereby SP situates herself as inheritor of the male canon. Indeed, the writer’s reflections on her father can often be read in relation to her poetic heritage. As I propose in the next chapter, this dynamic is dramatised by Plath’s poem ‘Daddy’, in which the speaker seeks to ‘get back back back’ to the father, ‘a bag full of God’ with ‘a head in the freakish Atlantic’.

In all these references, whether the father’s death is denied, abstracted or converted into a trope, the noun ‘father’ seems to function as a placeholder, carrying little or no substantive information about the dead person. As a result, the personal father is registered only as something that is missing. This is epitomised in a description of a trip to his grave, when SP writes of ‘my temptation to dig him up. To prove he existed and really was dead’ (p. 473),
implying that not only is she unsure of his death, but also of whether he existed at all. Such an absence in place of the father’s memory might be interpreted as a sign of incomplete mourning, a theme that is explored, for example, by Plath’s poem, ‘Little Fugue’. Nevertheless, the tone of this passage is markedly self-mocking. Thus, while SP positions herself in the melancholic subject position (we might think of the graveyard scene towards the end of *Hamlet*), she simultaneously pokes fun at herself for doing so. This duality offers a way of approaching the way in which Plath’s journals both inhabit and exceed the rhetoric of melancholia.

On one level, the narrator of the journals presents a classic picture of what Freud termed ‘melancholia’. Freud writes how, in melancholia, ‘one cannot see clearly what it is that has been lost […] he knows whom he has lost but not what he has lost in him’; in contrast with mourning, melancholia is related to ‘an object-loss which is withdrawn from consciousness’ (p. 245). Such an unidentified sense of loss could be said to characterise the references to the death of the father, placing SP in a comparable predicament with that of Hamlet. Indeed, like the narrator of the journals, Hamlet does not seem to have much to say about his father: when Horatio pays his respects, saying, ‘I saw him once. He was a goodly king’, Hamlet is only able to say: ‘he was a man. Take him for all in all./I shall not look upon his kind again’ (Bate: 2008, p. 38). This contradiction, according to which his father is both like and not like anyone else, seems to imply a blockage in language associated with traumatic loss.

At the same time, juxtaposing the journals with *Hamlet* highlights their sense of theatricality. Indeed, the dramatic soliloquy offers a model for this form of journaling, aptly posing the question of address. As I have suggested, the journals always seem to assume an audience beyond the self, the chance of being read and thereby an eye to posterity. The journals, like Shakespeare’s play, can thus be seen as a stage for playing out the drama of deferred mourning. The performative, self-aware and parodic stance toward the melancholic subject position is discernible in the way SP ruthlessly exploits her own past, as though using trauma as a source of literary inspiration. For
example, she plans to write a novel linked to ‘a girl’s search for her dead father’ (p. 415), emphasising, ‘I must write one about a college girl suicide. THE DAY I DIED’ (p. 495). In one entry she writes:

And now I sit here, demure and tired in brown, slightly sick at heart. I shall go on. I shall write a detailed description of shock treatment, tight, blasting short descriptions with not one smudge of coy sentimentality (p. 212).

These lines indicate the way in which SP transforms herself into a fictional character, in a gesture that is performed throughout the journals. As such, they illustrate the way the narrator appropriates the events of her own traumatic past, using herself, her life, as material for writing.

Parodying the trope of melancholy can be read as SP’s response to her poetic as well as personal patrilineal inheritance. In The Gendering of Melancholia (1992), Julia Schiesari observes that the myth of melancholic genius is traditionally associated with the masculine subject position. For Schiesari, the privileging of male lack is epitomised by Hamlet. As she writes:

It is the question of Hamlet’s sense of lack that makes Shakespeare’s tragedy so compelling for male subjectivity […] The women’s losses are de-legitimated or made to seem insignificant by men’s melancholic display of loss (p. x).

According to a psychoanalytic reading, Hamlet’s melancholy is situated within an Oedipal configuration, whereby the lost object is identified with the mother, Gertrude, and the possibility of narcissistic perfection. For Freud, melancholic subjectivity is characterised by a striving to return to a state of narcissistic perfection, to regain the wholeness of maternal love. Thus, the melancholic’s sense of loss is ultimately linked to separation from the mother. On this Oedipal paradigm, the woman functions as idealised love object, a condition of the patriarchal symbolic order from which she is simultaneously excluded. As I would like to suggest, a similar dynamic might be observed in the literary
canon, in which the prestige accorded to the melancholic artist involves a
devaluation of the feminine.

In Harold Bloom’s theory of the ‘anxiety of influence’, the poet’s sense of
indebtedness to literary antecedents is conceived as ‘a variety of melancholy’
(1997, p. 7). His is furthermore an Oedipal predicament, entailing the desire to
usurp the precursor poet, and ‘the melancholy of the creative mind’s
desperate insistence upon priority’ (p. 13). Thus, for Bloom, the nexus of
Hamlet, Oedipus and poetic influence seems to converge on melancholic
attachment to a paternal figure. It is worth noting that his theory of anxiety
thereby signals a conception of genius passed down the male line. Bloom
writes of the consequent ‘exhaustions of being a latecomer’ (p. 12), but, as I
suggest in this chapter, Plath’s journals highlight how much more exhausting
this might be for a woman poet. Like Bloom, the journals undermine the myth
of originality of poetic vision; however, they also prompt reflection on how this
myth privileges the male artist. Indeed, often assigned the role of muse, the
woman may represent an idealised love object at the base of anxiety
regarding poetic lineage. Calling attention to woman’s marginalisation from
the canon, Virginia Woolf writes that while:

> She pervades poetry from cover to cover; she is all but absent from
> history [...] Some of the most inspired words and profound thoughts in
> literature fall from her lips; in real life she could hardly read; scarcely
> spell; and was the property of her husband’ (2018, p. 58).

In her famous example of Shakespeare’s sister, Woolf considers what would
have been the fictional Judith’s fate if she, like her brother, had decided to
make her living by her wits, and that it would have been tragic (pp. 63-64).

The *Hamlet* intertext in the journals indicates SP’s identification not only with
the play’s protagonist but also with the playwright. The popular idea that the
death of Shakespeare’s son, Hamnet, inspired the tragedy of *Hamlet*
reinforces the interchange between personal and poetic progeny — that is, a
parallel line of descent between father and child, precursor and contemporary
poet. But Plath’s journals draw attention to the way in which the woman writer has a contested place in the line of ‘great poets’. Placed in an eccentric position with regards to the male canon, she is excluded from the melancholy that characterises the anxiety of influence. Parodic identification with a poetic persona might then constitute one of the few means available of claiming a literary inheritance, focusing attention on the ways in which melancholic rhetoric sounds different, indeed implausible, in a woman’s voice. As I will suggest, the journals ironise the melancholic’s narcissistic preoccupation with his own sense of lack. Turning now to a close reading of a selection of passages, the next section considers how the parodic mode might represent an alternative to endless mourning, as well as a way for the woman writer to respond to literary ancestry.

**Parodying the Self: From the Past to Prose**

This section analyses a selection of passages divided into three main themes, ‘Cultivating Craft’, ‘Experimenting with Voice’ and ‘the “Work” of Analysis’. Envisaging the text of the journals as a collage rather than a homogenous entity with a singular narrative arc, I treat these passages as separate prose pieces that showcase a range of styles, idioms and voices. The extracts I have chosen offer a particularly clear illustration of the narrator’s gesture of self-parody that is performed throughout the journals. Enacting the process of transforming the past into prose, the passages analysed by this section show how SP’s expression of suffering is swiftly succeeded by a relativizing gesture, by which she denies, mocks or trivialises her own admission of affect. As I highlight, SP both emulates and exaggerates a melancholic stance, mocking the notion that writing proceeds directly from a traumatic wound.

Observing how SP self-consciously manipulates her experience for literary effect, I argue that the aspiration to become a professional writer both draws her into traumatic affect and represents a way out, pulling her backwards and forwards in time simultaneously. This temporal bind is reflected in the way language wavers between artifice and sincerity, performance and authenticity,
as the journals enact an increasing struggle to give form to painful affect. The journals thereby dramatise the oscillation between the narrative positions of writer and character, subject and object. The moments at which the prose unravels indicate the precariousness of SP’s conversion of her life into fiction, whereby the discrepancy between affect and representation generates a traumatic residue at the edge of the text. As a result, self-parody emerges as SP’s only means of gaining distance from the painful past and, as I will propose, of establishing a place for the woman poet in the literary canon.

1. Cultivating Craft

In an unpublished diary entry written on November 13, 1949, SP’s seventeen-year-old self writes:

Not enough people have that spark of divine insanity that can retwist this crippled frame of existence which deforms all of us so horribly. I think I would like to call myself ‘the girl who wanted to be God’ (Lilly Archive, box 1949).

Writing is thus conceived as a means of gaining power to shape reality; it is also a way of transcribing herself into the third person, ‘I’ becoming ‘the girl’. Earlier in this entry she had written, ‘I want to be affected by life deeply, but never so blinded that I cannot see my share of existence in a wry, humorous light – and mock myself as I mock others’. Thus this gesture of seeing herself from the outside, as a self among other selves, functions as a distancing device, to prevent her from being ‘blinded’ by her feelings. This section analyses two passages in the adult journals, both written in 1950, which develop this thematic. Significantly, the passages operate at (at least) two levels, simultaneously exploring SP’s conception of writing as a way of ensuring invulnerability, and enacting this very procedure of fictional elaboration through their form. Thereby dramatising the act of self-stylisation, SP assumes the roles of character and writer of the text concurrently, alternating between vulnerability and power, authenticity and artifice.
Entry 28 (pp. 21-23) appears in the first journal of the volume, which, as the editor notes, Plath began writing during the summer of 1950 before leaving for her first term at Smith College (p. 3). The entry describes a date with a man named Bob: the narrator recounts how, after seeing a film, the couple ‘walked out in the crowd, up and down the Boston streets for hours’ (p. 21). The account is prefaced by a reflection that ‘I have to hold on to this night, for in three days I’ll be plunged into a new world, and there’ll be confusion, dilemmas, as I fight to find the right equilibrium for myself again’. Anticipating leaving for college, where the journal is resumed, SP seems to use this entry to prepare herself mentally. A sense of vulnerability is thereby indicated behind her repeated assertions of power: she stresses, for example, how ‘I was in command of the whole situation’, and writes of Bob: ‘a boy; he would serve’. Throughout the account, she emphasises a feeling of completeness: she writes that, as they stop on a bridge, ‘I stood there, complete in myself’; and at the end of the date, ‘I let him kiss me. The evening had been lovely, complete. I had been alone more than I could have been had I gone by myself’. SP thus insists on her self-sufficiency, holding Bob at a distance, while her detached, knowing tone – “Oh no,” I told him, wondering if he knew it was all over’ – implies a front of impassivity (p. 23).

Significantly, this entry suggests SP’s investment in writing itself as a means of ensuring invulnerability. Midway through their date, she notes how she said to an apparently bemused Bob, “I have room in me for love, and for ever so many little lives”. Bob ‘did not understand, but he listened, and he liked me’ (p. 22). A little further down, she reflects, this time to herself as she admires a bracelet given to her by someone called Eddie:

You are a dream; I hope I never meet you. But your bracelet is a symbol of my composure…my division from the evening. I love you because you are me…my writing, my desire to be many lives. I will be a small god in my small way. At home on my desk is the best story I have ever written (p. 22).
Like Bob, then, Eddie is held at a distance; the feeling of love that his admiring affection seems to produce is not reciprocated, but channelled into her ambition of becoming a writer. The ellipses in this passage underscore this redirection of energy, as the narrator fixes her sights beyond her male admirers; she reflects in parting from Bob, ‘I can only pass on. Something in me wants more’ (p. 23).

The idea that writing allows SP to become ‘a small god’ echoes the earlier diary entry on November 13, 1949, in which the narrator writes that ‘I would like to call myself “the girl who wanted to be God”. Similarly here, SP characterises writing as ‘justifying my life, my keen emotion, my feeling, by turning it into print’ (p. 22), implying again that writing is a way of objectifying emotion, assuaging a sense of vulnerability by turning herself into a character on the page. At the end of the entry, she writes: ‘perhaps some day I’ll crawl back home, beaten, defeated. But not as long as I can make stories out of my heartbreak, beauty out of sorrow’ (p. 23). Writing is thus seen as necessary for leaving home, integral to her independence. At the same time, this closing remark can be read meta-fictively, for making a story out of heartbreak is of course exactly what this entry does.

Indeed, the passage enacts SP’s very strategy of fictionalising her life. Rereading the entry with attention to form, it becomes clear that the account of the date is highly stylised, bursting with descriptions of sensory experience as the narrator sets the scene of Boston streets by night: ‘the pink, green, and yellow neons flashed on and off with a definite rhythm, each with its own particular tempo. Together they screamed out a syncopated colour rhapsody’ (p. 22). As though wanting to capture this ‘colour rhapsody’ in prose, she experiments with pace: ‘Swift; quick. Red; green. Flash; off. Stop; go.’ In fact, she gives her whole environment the character of a Broadway-style stage set, as ‘the music jazzed out from the street cafés, and the sailors were like extras in a technicolor musical’. SP sees herself playing the central role, “I could polka down the streets,” I told Bob’ (p. 23). The prose is heavily embellished, as she floridly describes, for example, ‘the feathery dark of the weeping willows’, the ‘yellow leaves […] strewn over the surface like confetti on a
marble table-top after a party’. The dialogue between herself and her date is similarly contrived, as though excerpted from a script of a Hollywood romance film: “it always has to end, doesn’t it? We always have to separate.” “Yes,” I said. He was insistent, “But it doesn’t have to be that way. We could be together someday for always” (p. 23). Hyperbolically sentimental, these lines suggest that SP is not taking herself too seriously. The stylistic features of the entry thus combine to give the impression of a writer cultivating her craft, keeping the reader, like Bob, Eddie and the cast of other male figures that come in and out of the writings, at a distance.

As a corollary, SP is a character in her own production. She gives herself a lofty demeanour, superior and removed, writing of her ‘division from the evening’; and notions of ‘division’, splitting and withdrawal are in fact a central thread running through the entry. Much of the imagery suggests the theme of looking and being looked at: ‘so I walked along, loving, narcissus-like, my reflection in store windows, in the chromium on cars, superimposed on all we passed’ (p. 22). Notably, the narrator’s identification with an external object – her reflection in these various surfaces – mirrors the doubling gesture of situating herself and her life in prose. Meanwhile, the reference to Narcissus divides SP a second time, as she looks at herself looking at herself. This mechanism of multiple splitting makes it difficult to pin the narrator down; she is reflected in multiple mirrors such that writing seems to realise her ‘desire to be many lives’. Just as Narcissus was driven by a sense of loss, perhaps the narrator searches for an elusive ideal object, with the text of the journals constituting a reflective pool. Thus, entry 28 formally enacts the process of self-construction, whereby SP doubles up as both character and writer. The way in which she evades the reader thereby provides an excellent example of the artistry of confessional writing.

I now want to draw attention to a second entry that performs the interplay of SP’s dual identity, featuring simultaneously inside and outside the narrative frame. Entry 45 (pp. 40-43) is written during Plath’s first year at Smith College, and again narrates a date, this time with a college student named Bill. The couple meet in his convertible and drive to a fraternity house where a group of
people are sitting; then, to be alone, they go for a walk ‘to a clearing in the pines overlooking the city’ (pp. 40-41). The climax of the account is when Bill attempts to force himself on the narrator sexually, after which she manages to resist and they reconcile. Again, a number of rhetorical devices can be identified in this passage, implying that it cannot be read as a straightforward record of events in Plath’s life. Indeed, the range of literary techniques invokes the presence of a writer in the midst of practising her craft. Moreover, as I propose, the passage foregrounds a dialectical relationship between vulnerability and power, innocence and experience, whereby imposing a narrative structure onto events ultimately reflects the narrator’s attempt to gain control.

A sense of artifice is immediately suggested by the use of the present tense and the second person, established in the opening paragraph:

…Another blind date. This one is older – partly bald, the girls said, and quiet-but-nice. You laugh nervously in the bedroom as Pat gets ready. She didn’t know what she was getting you in for. You make some crack about going for the fatherly type. You [SIC] own father is dead. Pat looks worried, and you love her for it. She’s so beautifully child-like and innocent as a Delicious apple (p. 40).

This passage has the gossipy tone of a story in a teenage magazine, with a nervous girl as its protagonist. Again indicating narratorial contrivance, the main character’s nervousness (‘you laugh nervously’) foreshadows the narrative’s violent dénouement. The second person creates an interval between narrator and character, performing the process of externalising the self; notably, it also appropriates the reader’s perspective, involving us in the scene. This is the first entry in which the father is mentioned, and the editor notes that the reference is to Plath’s father, Otto Emil Plath (1885-1940). However, in light of the fictional devices that I am identifying, this signpost to the poet’s biography potentially misdirects the reader. The tone of the narrator is flippant, creating a persona who seems detached, superior, and emotionally controlled. Nevertheless, the term ‘crack’ carries a sense of violence.
Meanwhile, the line ‘you own father is dead’ would perhaps read more easily as ‘your own father is dead’, creating the shadow of a slippage. Notably, it is the possessive that trips up the rhythm, possibly putting into question the extent to which the death of the father is ‘owned’ by the writer. Enforcing this indication of disavowal, SP’s tone towards Pat is condescending, almost parental in its stance of knowingness, with the biblical image of the intact apple enhancing the contrast with her friend’s relative innocence.

The impression that SP is giving a performance is sustained in the next paragraph. Meeting her date, she comically picks up on the reference to his being ‘partly bald’: ‘you get a side glance as he drives: not bad – hair receding on temples, but manly’. Noting that ‘conversation is bad from the beginning’, she continues her attempt to amuse the reader: “Do you like football?” (This is like highschool: find out her interests.) You don’t, but you can’t squelch him quite so soon. You parry: “Do you?” (The old double-switch.)’ (p. 40). The asides in brackets imply awareness of an audience: it is as though she is telling the reader that she is in a position of effortless dominance, both in relation to Bill (as the baseball reference to the ‘double-switch’ implies) and to the reader herself. This dynamic continues in the fraternity house, where she is the one in power: ‘you are in a chair and he is on a foot-stool at your feet’. Equally, Bill performs the conventional ‘gentlemanly’ behaviour of the time, creating a sense of bourgeois normalcy. Of course, this gesture is only the pretence of subservience within the patriarchal context of this narrative. As in the story of the date with Bob in entry 28, the narrator’s assertion of dominance is a thin disguise for her feeling of vulnerability. The language is informal, in keeping with the style of a magazine story, as she notes how couples are ‘going steady’, ‘old hands’. Again, she displays a dry, scathing sense of humour, which seems intended both to entertain and impress: ‘you’ve had enough of good-looking vacuums and shallow socialites’. Attention to body language as she talks to Bill – for example, ‘you lean forward, elbows on knees, chin propped in hands, eyes level with his’ – gives a perspective of the persona from the outside. When the couple leave to go for a walk imagery is used to set the scene, as if for the benefit of a prospective reader: ‘the night is still, dry, and cold. The air is dry ice’ (p. 41).
The reader is led, with the narrator, ‘up behind the fraternity house’, a location that signals increased intimacy, as the plot builds to a climax. When Bill reveals that his father died two weeks ago, SP pats his shoulder ‘maternally’, saying to herself, ‘there there baby’. Thus, as with Pat, she addresses Bob as a child, while herself assuming the role of parent, able to contain his emotions. She is curious, also wanting to know more about Bill’s experience as a soldier – “tell me [...] tell me. About the war”, she repeats.

Acknowledging her own mercenary approach, she reflects, ‘this is life; material’ – perhaps for her writing – and admits, ‘your curiosity is aflame’. Frequent adverbs suggest that the narrator wants to seem sympathetically detached: “‘Where were you hurt?’ you ask delicately”; and again, “‘When?’ You ask materialistically’, after Bill expresses his desire to sleep with her.

Interestingly, this latter question directly precedes Bill’s sexual assault, unveiling the true power dynamic between the two characters. Bill becomes predatory, saying ‘I want you to be all mine’ as he lifts his leg over hers. He proceeds to force himself on her: ‘he is damn strong. His arms and hands are pushing you down. You roll in the pine needles. You are scared. You think: This is one time your innocence won’t save you’ (p. 42). Thus, her swagger at the start of this account is stripped away, revealed as a front for her underlying inexperience. Toward the end of the entry, she writes that ‘he realises now, maybe, that you are only a kid’ – like Pat who is ‘child-like’ and Bill the ‘baby’ – with their roles now exchanged. The climax of the narrative thus relies on the retrospective construction of the narrator’s vulnerability.

Throughout the passage, the central character of ‘you’ is distinct from the narrative voice, the ‘I’ directing the story from behind the scenes. It is interesting to note how the entry was revised, further signalling a perspective outside the narrative. In the final version, the entry ends with the assertion, ‘And you won’t see him if he asks again’. However, as the editor notes, the original ending was, ‘but you will see him if he asks again. You are a girl’ – lines that were subsequently erased. Similarly, earlier in the paragraph the narrator had initially written, ‘You know that you will see him again if he asks’, but afterwards changed ‘will’ to ‘won’t’ (p. 678). These alterations almost
create an impression of the narrator playing the game of saying ‘he loves me…he loves me not’ while picking petals off a flower one by one. On one level, they seem to reflect the indecision of the ‘you’ character, but on another, they denote the editorial process of deciding what constitutes a better ending for the story. As a whole, the passage performs the act of storytelling, and particularly SP’s transformation of herself into a character. In a double gesture of irony, the protagonist’s calculating, appropriative approach towards the death of Bill’s father also occurs at a meta-fictional level, insofar as the SP exploits her own suffering as material for writing. In the next section, I further explore how this procedure of self-stylisation might itself be a means of responding to painful affect. As I suggest, the passages analysed below indicate that assuming the voice of a literary persona is the condition of SP being able to speak at all.

2. Experimenting with Voice

Entry 154 (pp. 149-151), from Plath’s junior year at Smith College (1952), is very different in style from the passages analysed above: impersonality is replaced with explicit, melodramatic discussion of affect, spoken from the first-person perspective. The entry opens with an address: ‘God, if ever I have come close to wanting to commit suicide, it is now, with the groggy sleepless blood dragging through my veins, and the air thick and gray with rain and the damn little men across the street pounding on the roof with picks and axes and chisels, and the acrid hellish stench of tar’. However, while more ‘confessional’ in tone, this entry is no less crafted. Indeed, uncharacteristic use of religious vocabulary – ‘hell’ or ‘hellish’ appears in the passage six times – suggests that SP is experimenting with voice. ‘To annihilate the world by annihilation of oneself is the deluded height of desperate egoism’, she writes, with an inflated form of expression. In other moments the language is old-fashioned: as one sentence begins, ‘irony it is’. Showing the influence of early modernism, the apocalyptic language includes a direct quotation from W. B. Yeats:
How to justify myself, my bold humanitarian faith? My world falls apart, crumbles, “The center does not hold.” There is no integrating force, only the naked fear, the urge of self-preservation (p. 149).

The disorientation conveyed by Yeats’s poem, in which ‘the falcon cannot hear the falconer’, is parodied by the passage as a whole, which theatrically laments the lack of a meaningful point of reference and, by extension, its impossibility.

The tone of this entry in fact evokes the same sense of despair as the protagonist of novels by Fyodor Dostoevsky, on whom Plath would later write her undergraduate thesis. Assuming a rhetoric of brutal veracity, SP asserts, ‘I want to kill myself, to escape from responsibility, to crawl back abjectly into the womb […] I am weak, tired, in revolt from the strong constructive humanitarian faith which presupposes a healthy, active intellect and will’. This existentialist language of self-responsibility is reminiscent, for example, of Dostoevsky’s ‘underground man’ in Notes From the Underground (2009), characterised by Robert Louis Jackson as ‘a man without faith and foundations who has been caught up in a treadmill of consciousness’ (p. xxxii). As the underground man demands:

Where are my primary causes on which I can take a stand, where are my foundations? Where shall I take them from? I practise thinking and consequently every primary cause immediately draws another in its wake, one that is even more primary, and so on ad infinitum (p. 16).

The narrator of the journals seems to suffer from the same ‘disease’ of consciousness of which the underground man complains (2009, p. 6), as she similarly complains about the absence of a metaphysical foundation and her desire for an external directive:

I do not know who I am, where I am going – and I am the one who has to answer these hideous questions. I long for a noble escape from freedom. There is no where to go – not home, where I would blubber
and cry, a grotesque fool, into my mother’s skirts – not to men where I want more than ever now the stern, final, paternal directive – not to church which is liberal, free – no, I turn wearily to the totalitarian dictatorship where I am absolved of all personal responsibility and can sacrifice myself in a ‘splurge of altruism’ on the altar of the Cause with a capital ‘C’ (pp. 149-150).

The hyperbolic language of this portrayal of suffering demonstrates how comedy is never far away from the surface. Mocking herself for being a crybaby, self-pity is retracted as soon as it is bestowed.

The entry also nods towards Hamlet, who could be seen as a literary forerunner to the underground man (Denby: 2012). Hamlet too suffers, as SP puts it, from a lack of a ‘stern, final, paternal directive’ (cited above). As she states, ‘reality is what I make of it…action nullified’. As I discussed above, in an earlier entry Hamlet is quoted directly, “thinking makes it so”. (p. 121), expressing a sense of the burden of subjectivity. The voice of the journals thereby emulates Hamlet’s extreme self-consciousness, which, as Jonathan Bate writes, ‘makes it agonisingly difficult for him to perform the action that is demanded of him’ (2008, p. xiii-xiv). Notably, both SP and Hamlet exhibit the melancholic’s ‘keener eye for the truth’. For Hamlet:

this most excellent canopy, the air—look you, this brave o'erhanging firmament, this majestical roof fretted with golden fire—why, it appears no other thing to me than a foul and pestilent congregation of vapors (Bate: 2008, p. 46).

The narrator similarly asks, in entry 155:

How long, how long since I noticed the stars; no longer, now, mere inane pinpricks on a smothering sky of cheap cloth – but symbols, islands of light, soft, mysterious, hard, cold – all things, as much as I made them (p. 154).
Hamlet and the narrator of the journals alike claim special insight, seeming to suffer from the melancholic tendency of feeling responsible for the meaningfulness of the world, its lack of transcendence. However, references to the ‘canopy’ or ‘smothering sky of cheap cloth’ are at the same time an ironic allusion to the stage, and thereby their role as actors. Echoes of *Hamlet* thus function in the journals to satirise the melancholic’s self-indulgent solipsism.

This passage is exemplary of the way in which SP’s articulation of suffering is often mediated through intertextual references. Indeed, the self-consciously literary and theatrical language adds the staged dimension of a literary confession or dramatic soliloquy. Adopting the persona of prophet of the apocalypse or melancholic hero, the self-reflexivity of the narrator’s rhetoric shows that this is, in part, a canny meta-fiction about the creation of a voice, rather than an unadorned confession of her affective state. The entry thus provides an example of the way in which SP constructs herself as a literary figure. Since, as she suggests later in the same entry, ‘masks are the order of the day’, the passage itself cannot be taken at face value.

Next I want to examine two entries written in the summer of 1953, from Plath’s home in Wellesley, Massachusetts (pp. 185-187). Dated July 6 and July 14, they represent the last entries before, as the editor notes, ‘Sylvia Plath attempted to commit suicide by taking an overdose of sleeping pills on 24 August 1953’. The journals are not resumed until over two years later, on 22 November 1955. Stripped of literary allusions, the writing at this time has a less performative character. Indeed, the two passages enact a breaking down of meaning, as the language becomes increasingly repetitive and disjointed. Literary personae seem to fall away, leaving an absence in their place. As I would like to suggest, the textual elision produces the sense of unarticulated traumatic affect, in turn indicating one of the possible functions of appropriating a literary style or idiom.

In the first entry, SP tries to come to terms with her ‘fatal decision […] not to go to Harvard Summer school’ (p. 185) and instead to stay at home over the
summer. The advantages and disadvantages of these options have been thrashed out in a self-addressed letter of the same period, entitled ‘Letter to an Over-grown, Over-protected, Scared, Spoiled Baby’, which is contained in Appendix V of the Journals. This letter begins by firmly informing their recipient that ‘It is not the time to lose the appetite, feel empty, jealous of everyone in the world because they have fortunately been born inside themselves and not inside you’ (p. 543). Factoring in such practical limitations as time and money, and also her mental state, she finally decides to try ‘writing on my own’, despite – or possibly because of, since there is something masochistic about this letter – being ‘afraid of the huge possibilities of failure’ (p. 545). This splitting of voice, between writer and recipient, is also a key characteristic of the concurrent passages in the journals (much like the ‘you’ character in the narrative about ‘Bill’, discussed earlier). However, this division starts to collapse towards the end of these entries, indicating something about the function of journal-writing itself.

Having made her decision, the writer seems immediately to regret it, as she is plunged into a state of panic:

[Y]ou are an inconsistent and very frightened hypocrite: you wanted time to think, to find out about yourself, your ability to write, and now that you have it: practically 3 months of godawful time, you are paralysed, shocked, thrown into a nausea, a stasis (p. 185).

Time is underlined in this passage and it is indeed the prospect of three months of unstructured time that seems to be of particular concern, with a feeling of paralysis or ‘stasis’ articulated repeatedly throughout the passage. Self-accusations of inconsistency and hypocrisy intersect with the splitting of first and second person, addressee and addressee. The force of the self-reproach is suggestive of an equally strong counterforce of unwieldy resistance. In other words, the writer’s diatribe against herself strengthens an impression of her paralysis, as the self-commandments expose the precise ways in which she feels she is failing. For example:
You should not be bored, but should be able to think, accept, affirm – and not retreat into a masochistic mental hell where jealousy and fear make you want to stop eating – don’t ignore all the people you could know, shutting yourself up in a numb defensive vacuum: but please yank yourself up & don’t spend years gaping in horror at the one time in your life you’ll have a chance to prove your own discipline (pp. 185-186).

‘Affirm’, ‘don’t ignore’, ‘please’, and ‘prove’: the harshness of these underlined imperatives implies the almost overwhelming desire to give up. The cumulative effect of terms such as ‘numb’, ‘vacuum’ and ‘gaping’ imply a dread of falling into the abyss, simultaneously attesting to the enormous suffering the writer seems willing to undergo for her writing.

A range of circular imagery is used to convey SP’s mental state. She writes of a ‘merrygoround whirlwind of activity’, the absence of dashes (‘merry-go-round’) emphasising a sense of speed. The next image of a ‘private little whirlpool of negativism’ recalls the ‘turning and turning’ in Yeats’s ‘widening gyre’ (‘The Second Coming’: 1919). In an earlier entry the narrator had written, with an elated tone:

[Honesty, life for me is certainly a gyre, spiraling up, comprehending and including the past, profiting by it, yet transcending it! I am going to make it my job to see that I never get caught revolving in one final repetitive circle of stagnation (p. 177).

Behind these lines, the implication is that the ability to transcend the past is always at risk of failing, so that the narrator instead becomes ‘caught’ in its loop. Notably, these lines also indicate an approach to the past that is inextricable from her writing, since writing seems to be precisely that which forces a confrontation with traumatic affect. This approach has the quality of a vicious cycle insofar as writing offers a means of escape from the very trap in which writing simultaneously ensnares her. Writing is thus both what puts her in a ‘numb defensive vacuum’ (p. 186), and that to which she appeals as a
way out. Temporally, this bind might be expressed in terms of an effort to move forward that winds up looping the writer back into the past. There is thus a sense of inexorability, conveyed by entry 154: ‘today you made a fatal decision’; and, ‘immediately you wanted to reverse a decision which is speeding into finality’. The circle-image is also figured in spatial terms: writing seems to require a self-confrontation with her own mind, such that in order to go outwards, she must first go inwards. As she writes, ‘NOW is the time to analyse, to recreate in your own mind – not merely to shove the hole full of other people & their words’. Fear that her mind is empty produces extreme, paralysing panic:

You are frozen mentally – scared to get going, eager to crawl back into the womb. First think: here is your room – here is your life, your mind: don’t panic. Begin writing, even if it is only rough & ununified (p. 186).

Again, she urges herself, ‘Then think. If you can’t think outside yourself, you can’t write… Get a plot’.

The self-directed imperative indicates SP’s investment in finding a narrative, as that which would enable her to escape the affective present. Indeed, she must get ‘outside’ herself, turn herself into a character, in order to write. However, this turning to face her own mind – ‘You fool – you are afraid to be alone with your own mind’ – results in a sense of impasse, blocking off the future.

In the second entry, numbered 155, the narrator expresses again her fear of failure and desire to ‘shut yourself off from responsibility altogether’ (p. 186). However, the language becomes more abbreviated, particularly as it turns to the past:

New York: pain, parties, work. And Gary and ptomaine – and José the cruel Peruvian and Carol vomiting outside the door all over the floor – and interviews for TV shows, & competition, and beautiful
models and Miss Abels: (capable, and heaven knows what else.)
And now this: shock. Utter nihilistic shock (p. 187).

This passage constitutes one of the rare mentions of Plath’s summer in New York, where, the editor notes, she worked as guest managing editor of *Mademoiselle*, an experience that is subsequently fictionalised in Plath’s novel, *The Bell Jar*. However, unlike their depiction in the novel, the allusions here are not explained, instead presented only as a series of references piled on top of each other. Thus, the past is not constructed as a narrative, but rather in list form, with repetition of the conjunction, ‘and’, commas, dashes, ampersands and colons indicating a hasty jotting down of details for future use. The passage thus simulates a stage in the writer’s process, assembling rudimentary elements that have yet to be arranged into a coherent form.

Expressing a state of mental disorder, in the final paragraph of this entry SP begs herself:

please, think – snap out of this. *Believe* in some beneficent force beyond your own limited self. God, god, god: where are you? I want you, need you: the belief in you and love and mankind. You must not seek escape like this. You must think (p. 187).

Up until now SP has used the second-person voice, addressing herself as ‘my pretty maiden’, ‘kid’ or ‘baby’. At one moment she says, ‘you won’t have it this good again baby’, addressing herself with pet names that might be given by a lover or perhaps a father. In this last passage, however, ‘you’ and ‘I’ start to oscillate, implying that the two voices are competing with one another. Indeed, the weaker voice, ‘I’, seems to be gaining power, rupturing the text with a plea, ‘God, god, god […] I want you, need you’.

Equally, the repeated steely imperative to ‘think’ in this entry implies that a major function of writing is splitting from affect in an attempt to master it, to exit a sense of endless spiralling. Notably, this is connected to a literary end, by which the self is situated within a narrative: as she insists, ‘get a *plot*’. It is
significant that there is a gap in the journals in place of the suicide attempt and stay in psychiatric hospital, events that therefore only take place off-stage. The fact that they appear in narrative form in *The Bell Jar* illustrates how fiction supplants unmediated confession. This process of substitution arguably characterises Plath’s journals, whereby life is transformed into art (keeping in mind that in this context life is an outcome, rather than foundation, of the text). In turn, this process can be seen to play a defensive role, with self-fictionalisation comprising the only way to render traumatic affect in language.

In the passages analysed in this section, SP’s inability to transform her life into fiction, to situate herself as a character within a story, results in a sense of paralysis. Unable to sustain the split between ‘I’ and ‘she’, it is as if the writer closes in on herself, lacking form for her own subjectivity. As mentioned, in entry 28 the narrator had written, ‘perhaps some day I’ll crawl back home, beaten, defeated. But not as long as I can make stories out of my heartbreak, beauty out of sorrow’ (p. 23). It is precisely this inability to make stories that now seems to prompt a desire to retreat ‘back into the womb’. Thus, it could be argued that gaining distance from painful affect is dependent on a capacity for assuming an external identity, for experimenting with voice. Conversely, the failure to adopt a literary style or persona, to maintain a distinction between ‘I’ and ‘she’ or even ‘you’, or to treat her own suffering as object, results in a disintegration of language. Portraying the urgency of her investment in writing, which is needed to organise affect, this passage enacts the disintegration of the self as the journal itself fades out.

So far I have proposed that the journals dramatise SP’s attempt to convert her life into text, as a means of gaining distance from painful affect. As my analysis has indicated, the failure of this attempt results in a breakdown of language altogether. In the next section, I explore how SP’s pragmatic approach to her own psychic life, whereby she parodies the melancholic subject position, is necessitated by the social and economic restrictions placed on the woman writer in a patriarchal culture.
3. The ‘Work’ of Psychoanalysis

The final section I want to address in this chapter is entitled, ‘NOTES ON INTERVIEWS WITH RB: Friday, December 12th’ (pp. 429-501), written between 12 December 1958 and 15 November 1959 in Boston, Massachusetts. The initials ‘RB’ stand for ‘Ruth Beuscher’, the name of Plath’s psychiatrist. These notes on the treatment are published in Kuki’s edition for the first time, having been omitted from the 1982 version edited by McCullough, presumably because they were found too ‘intimate’ or too ‘nasty’. Inhabiting the idiom of psychoanalysis, this section of the journals enacts the attempt to piece together the past and its impact on the present. While the passages analysed here are imbricated with various and multiple preoccupations, I want to draw out a thread that weaves through these entries: namely, the inseparability of economic and psychic life. Emphasis on practical concerns, especially the material conditions necessary for writing, subverts the romantic notion of a melancholic artist entirely enveloped by suffering, and furthermore shows the inaccessibility of that subject position for women. Demonstrating a pragmatic approach to both the therapy and the material that is uncovered there, SP seems unambiguously intent on using the treatment for her art. Indeed, the way that these notes are interspersed with ideas for her writing indicates how the material is always already in the process of being shaped for publication.

Reference to the sessions with RB as ‘interviews’ in the heading introduces the dialogic character of this section, which re-enacts the exchange between therapist and patient. The term also evokes a job or journalistic interview, exemplifying the professional register invoked by SP’s approach to the therapeutic encounter. Her practical objective is immediately established in the opening lines:

If I am going to pay money for her time & brain, as if I were going to a supervision in life & emotions & what to do with both, I am
going to work like hell, question, probe sludge & crap & allow myself to get the most out of it (p. 429).

The comparison between a therapy session and an academic supervision implies that the discernible output expected is a form of written work, in this case poems and short stories. This instrumentalising approach to the therapy notably allows the narrator to elude vulnerability by envisaging herself as an equal (or indeed more powerful) partner in a transaction, seeking to maximise profit. As I would like to suggest, the therapy notes demonstrate how the narrator’s effort to convert her psychic material into art also functions as a way of fast-forwarding past painful affect.

Significantly, SP’s therapy notes suggest that her aspiration to become a writer is inextricable from social and economic context. Notably, she writes about feeling particularly pressurised by her mother to conform to expectations on women. Thus, she expresses a sense of relief when RB encourages independence: ‘better than shock treatment: “I give you permission to hate your mother”’. RB therefore becomes a “permissive mother figure” (p. 429). Indeed, SP’s creative and sexual freedom seems to rely on extricating herself from the maternal line. She repeatedly remarks on the symbiotic nature of her relationship with her mother, encapsulated by images of her mother becoming her child (p. 433, p. 456), as well as returning to her mother’s womb (p. 457)).

In turn, it is as if the mother is blocking access to the father. For example, the events surrounding his death are filtered through the mother’s perspective: ‘She’s had a hard life: married a man, with the pre-thirty jitters on her, who was older than her own mother, with a wife out West […] She figured he was such a brute she couldn’t, didn’t love him’ (p. 429). Toward the end of the narrative, the narrator even gets into character, impersonating her mother’s voice:

“I am bloody bloody bloody […] My husband whom I hate is in the hospital with gangrene and diabetes and a beard and they cut his
leg off and he disgusts me and he may live a cripple and wouldn't I hate that. Let him die.” (He died.) (p. 430).

Once again, the language anticipates Plath’s poem, ‘Daddy’, in which the speaker addresses her father, ‘the brute/Brute heart of a brute like you.’ The distribution of this adjective ‘brute’ among different voices in Plath’s writings unsettles or confuses the origin of language and subjectivity. In this passage, the short aside in brackets functions like a morbid punch line, insinuating causality between the mother’s fantasy (‘let him die’) and the father’s death. And yet, like identity, guilt does not settle in one place — for the daughter feels that her mother blames her, implying the former’s own sense of responsibility.

Later in the same entry, the narrator recounts a dream that again highlights the daughter’s sense of inextricability from her mother:

It was her daughter’s fault partly. She had a dream: her daughter was all gaudy-dressed about to go out and be a chorus girl, a prostitute too probably […] and her pants were wet with the sticky white filth of desire. Put her in a cell, that’s all you could do. She’s not my daughter […] The Husband, brought alive in the dream to relive the curse of his old anger, slammed out of the house in rage that the daughter was going to be a chorus girl. The poor Mother runs along the sand beach, her feet sinking in the sand of life, her moneybag open and the money and coins falling into the sand, turning into sand. The father had driven, in a fury, to spite her, off the road bridge and was floating dead, face down and bloated, in the slosh of ocean water by the pillars of the country club. Everybody was looking down from the pier at them. Everybody knew everything (p. 432)

Due to the third person pronoun (‘she had a dream’), it is ambiguous at first whether the dream belonged to mother or daughter, emphasising the porous nature of fantasy – the daughter is inside her mother’s dream, which is in turn
inside the daughter’s text. The permutations of Oedipal desire clearly implicate the daughter’s sexuality (the ‘sticky white filth of desire’ that somehow her mother knows about) in the father’s death, at least from the (imagined) mother’s perspective. Again, this passage contains ideas that re-emerge in ‘Daddy’, in which the speaker describes her father as a ‘Ghastly statue […] with a head in the freakish Atlantic’, and the ‘villagers’ who ‘always knew it was you’. However, I want to pick up on an idea that is not elaborated by the poems; that is, the image of the mother’s open moneybag dropping coins that turn into sand.

Indeed, the theme of wasted maternal sacrifice reverberates through the notes, hinging on the daughter’s sense of her failure to comply with matriarchal codes of behaviour. As SP describes ironically in the same passage, ‘[Her mother] gave her daughter books by noble women called “The Case for Chastity” […] What did her Daughter do? She slept with people, hugged them and kissed them’ (p. 432). Recalling how her mother ‘pinched’ and ‘scrapped’ to provide for her children (p. 430), SP senses her dismay after she and her husband give up their teaching jobs in order to focus on writing: ‘What would we do: next year, twenty years from now: when the babies came’ (p. 433). Subsequently she notes that her mother offered her $300 for a course in stenotyping for her birthday (p. 434). Expressing an unbearable sense of indebtedness, she asks: ‘what to do with your hate for your mother and all mother figures? What to do when you feel guilty for not doing what they say, because, after all, they have gone out their way to help you?’ (p. 435). The urgency of these questions relates to her sense that the tie to her mother, and indeed the pressure to submit to the same restrictions as her foremothers, is holding her back from writing. Time and again, chastity and practicality are associated with femaleness, while sexuality and creativity are associated with maleness. For example, this entry ends with the lines:

   Fear of losing male totem: what roots?
RB: you have always been afraid of premature choices cutting off other choices. Mother’s choices cut her life down to a dry chittering stalk of fear (p. 438)

In poems such as ‘Little Fugue’ and ‘Daddy’, ‘roots’ becomes a metaphor for a connection (or lack of connection) with both the dead father and the patriarchal canon, thus acting as an image for the speakers’ personal and poetic lineage. Here, the image is contrasted with the ‘chittering stalk’ of the mother’s life, implying feebleness and timidity. Aligning herself with ideas of maleness thereby seems to be necessary for pursuing a career as a writer, both sexually and economically. It is worth noting that the imagery in this passage is highly literary and hardly likely to be RB’s words, a reminder that in a sense the text of the journals generates the therapy, rather than the other way round.

The notion that repudiating the mother is a prerequisite for forging SP’s identity as a woman writer comes to the fore in another passage written in December 27, 1958, in which the narrator records that she read Freud’s ‘Mourning and Melancholia’ (1917):

Almost an exact description of my feelings and reasons for suicide: a transferred murderous impulse from my mother onto myself: the ‘vampire’ metaphor Freud uses, ‘draining the ego’: that is exactly the feeling I have getting in the way of my writing: mother’s clutch (p. 447).

Notably, the melancholic object is identified with the mother rather than the father (as in Plath’s poems). As this passage suggests, becoming a writer hinges on separation from the mother, or indeed *vice versa*. Moreover, economic overtones can be discerned in the concept of ‘draining the ego’, as though the mother is using up her resources; similarly, ‘clutch’ is also a term for a small handbag, recalling the open moneybag of her mother’s dream from which coins fall and turn into sand. Again attesting to a sense of blurred
identity, the relation of dependency is bi-directional: the mother is draining the daughter just as the daughter drained the mother.

Observing that narcissistic identification characterises melancholia, Freud proposes that the melancholic subject’s apparent self-reproaches are in fact ‘reproaches against a loved object which have been shifted away from it on to the patient’s own ego’. This redirection of reproach from the other to the self is ultimately a way of attempting to mitigate loss, since, if this is done the subject hopes that, as Freud writes, ‘the love-relation need not be given up’ (2001: p. 249). Such a conception of melancholic attachment can be applied to both the personal and poetic, which frequently overlap in Plath’s writings. As discussed earlier in this chapter, Bloom refers to the ‘melancholy of the creative mind’s desperate insistence upon priority’ (p. x). This passage from the journals indicates how the writer’s predicament is both similar and different: she needs to separate from her mother not only in order to create something original, but in order to create at all. For the narrator, the mother and father represent entirely distinct trajectories, whereby her maternal inheritance seems wholly incompatible with her ambition to be a writer.

It is noteworthy that economic themes of debt and indebtedness enter into SP’s therapeutic relationship, especially given the acknowledged maternal transference to RB. Indeed, the fact that she is not paying for the therapy repeats a pattern of indebtedness towards her mother:

Angry at RB for changing appointment tomorrow. Shall I tell her? Makes me feel: she does it because I am not paying money. She does it and is symbolically withholding herself, breaking a ‘promise’, like mother not loving me, breaking her ‘promise’ of being a loving mother each time I speak to her or talk to her (p. 444)

Observing that Plath did not pay for her therapy (or paid very little) in an interview conducted with Ruth Beuscher in 1988, the psychoanalyst Karen Maroda suggests that Beuscher ‘seemed oblivious to the therapeutic standard
of consistency as a way of providing a safe environment for the patient’
(2004). Maroda is particularly critical of Beuscher (who, as she points out, was
not a trained psychoanalyst, as critical literature on Plath often suggests) for
failing to encourage Plath to discuss her feelings towards her, and thereby to
analyse the transference. As she observes, ‘Ruth gave Sylvia permission to
hate her mother but not permission to express either love or hate toward her’.

Significantly, then, Maroda’s text also seems preoccupied by the question of
what Plath was deprived of in her therapy, in particular a chance to express
feelings of vulnerability and dependency. However, the therapeutic
relationship between Plath and Beuscher can also be placed in the wider
context of what was permitted to women by society. This context is
interestingly invoked in two letters from Beuscher to Plath, dated September
17 and September 26, 1962, which were written following Plath’s separation
from Hughes after he cheated on her. Acknowledging crossing over the
therapist-patient boundary (addressing the letter, ‘Dearest Sylvia’, and closing
off, ‘I love you’), her advice regarding Plath’s break-up with Hughes reflects
feminist discourses of the time: for example, ‘Don’t be anyone’s doormat. Do
your crying alone’. The second letter is more emphatic:

Keep him out of your bed. In the U.S. if a woman sleeps with her
husband after he has committed adultery, she can no longer sue
him for divorce on those grounds as her act of sleeping with him
constitutes condoning his misdoing. That is the practical reason.
The other reasons you already know.

Thus, encouraging Plath to ensure emotional and financial independence, this
letter indicates how the sexual inequality of the time meant women could not
afford to admit weakness. Such a sense of financial pressure thus accounts
for the daughter’s guilt regarding her mother’s sacrifice as single mother,
epitomised by the dream of image of coins turning into sand.

Finally, I want to consider how SP feels cheated by language itself, revealed
to be insufficient for localising lost object, or even determining whether such
an object exists. For example, regarding her mother, she writes ‘I feel no love, only the Idea of Love’ (p. 432); and again, ‘I felt cheated: I wasn’t loved but all the signs said I was loved’ (p. 433). In a refrain repeated throughout the notes, she asks, ‘WHY DON’T I FEEL SHE LOVES ME? WHAT DO I EXPECT BY “LOVE” FROM HER?’ (p. 448). The quotation marks around ‘love’ notably draw attention to the act of signification itself, as though she has been swindled by a false promise. There is thus a sense of disconnection between language and feeling, specifically in relation to an object that is felt to be lost, absent or simply missing.

The narrator again describes feeling ‘cheated’ in an entry written on Monday, March 9, which recounts a visit to her father’s grave:

A clear blue day in Winthrop. Went to my father’s grave, a very depressing sight [...] In the third yard, in a flat grassy area looking across a sallow barren stretch to rows of wooden tenements I found the flat stone, “Otto E. Plath: 1885-1940”, right beside the path where it could be walked over. Felt cheated. My temptation to dig him up. To prove he existed and really was dead. How far gone would he be? No trees, no peace, his headstone jammed up again the body on the other side. Left shortly. It is good have this place in mind (p. 473).

Notably, the feeling of being cheated relates especially to the words on her father’s grave, a signifier of his death rather than the reality. Again, there is a dissociation of representation and affect, whereby language touches only the periphery of experience. The farcical idea of digging up the father’s body may recall the gravedigger scene towards end of Hamlet, in which Hamlet’s encounter with Yorick’s skull constitutes the first time in the play he seems able to remember the past freely. With the fondness of a son, he recalls ‘a fellow of infinite jest, of most excellent fancy; he hath borne me on his back a thousand times’, as though this encounter finally allows an acceptance of life’s transience. In Plath’s journals, however, seeing the father’s grave has more of
the character of a missed encounter; indeed, the narrator is not even sure her father existed.

In a sense, the father’s grave functions as an image of the inaccessibility of affect. Significantly, this lack of encounter is immediately recuperated by the act of writing. Already at the end of the account, it is as though she is aware of the literary possibilities of her visit to her father’s grave (‘it is good to have this place in mind’). She writes in a subsequent entry, in context of an acceptance of one of her poems by the New Yorker, ‘must do justice to my father’s grave. Have rejected Electra poem from my book. Too forced and rhetorical’ (p. 477). The scene eventually ends up in The Bell Jar:

I had a great yearning, lately, to pay my father back for all the years of neglect, and start tending his grave [...]. The graveyard disappointed me. It lay at the outskirts of the town, on low ground, like a rubbish dump (p. 159).

SP’s desire to ‘pay my father back’ ambiguously suggests both repaying a loan and taking revenge. Interestingly, the economic language is in keeping with the idea of ‘cheating’, and suggests that writing — as the means of paying back the father — might provide a form of compensation. After this echo of the journals, the prose in The Bell Jar starts to take on a more literary tone: ‘low, shaggy clouds scudded over that part of the horizon where the sea lay [...] and raindrops darkened the black mackintosh I had bought this morning’. However, at this precise moment, the narrator adds a comic dimension that lightens the mood:

I had asked the salesgirl, ‘Is it water-repellent?’
And she had said, ‘No raincoat is ever water-repellent. It’s showerproofed.’
And when I asked her what showerproofed was, she told me I had better buy an umbrella (p. 160)
This excerpt is an example of how life material is moulded into fiction, a process that the journals continuously enact. It also typifies a procedure of relativising traumatic loss, in contradistinction to melancholic preoccupation with the past. As I have proposed, by exhibiting an exploitative approach to her own suffering, the narrator undermines the notion that poetry flows directly from the source of trauma. Furthermore, signalling material and cultural constraints, she de-romanticises the image of the melancholic poet who spends all their time suffering. Drawing on the language of ‘cheating’, it might be said that the narrator is cheated out of the melancholic subject position, denied of a relation to loss just as she is excluded from the anxiety of influence. While I have suggested that fictionalising her life may offer a way of establishing herself as a writer, the next section considers the extent to which self-parody, by skipping over affect, might ultimately foreclose processes of mourning. As in the anecdote of the raincoat in *The Bell Jar* (in which the raincoat does not, as its name suggests, keep out the rain), comedy masks a sense of disillusionment that cuts to the heart of language itself.

**Parodic Excess: the Time of Writing**

In this final section, I want to consider the function of the journals in relation to time, a preoccupation that is in fact prevalent throughout. Already in a childhood journal of 1946, the fourteen-year old writer had written out and underlined these lines from a poem: ‘like the joys of childhood – /too quickly passes by’ (Lilly Archive, box 1946). This concern with the vanishing of time, coupled with an attempt to capture it, continues to be prominent in the adult journals. Indeed, the choice of opening epigraph to her first published journal is a line from Joyce: “‘Hold to the now, the here, through which all future plunges to the past...’” James Joyce’ (p. 7). A few examples echoing this sentiment in the body of the text include:

> Everywhere, imperceptibly or otherwise, things are passing, ending, going’ (August 17, 1952: p. 130)
Time, experience: the colossal wave, sweeping tidal over me, drowning, drowning. How can I ever find that permanence, that continuity with past and future, that communication with other human beings that I crave? (November 3, 1952: p. 150)

Saturday morning, and I am at the old game of catching time between my fingers as it is running, forever running, away [...] Yes, obsessed, as always, with the vanishing of time! (January 24, 1953: p. 164)

I want to work at putting together the complex mosaic of my childhood: to practice capturing feelings and experiences from the nebulous seething of memory and yank them out into black-and-white on the typewriter (January 26-28, 1953: p. 168)

Finishing the next year here, enjoying the pressure of reading, thinking, while at my back always the mocking tick: A Life is Passing. My Life (February 19, 1956: p. 201)

I want to get back to my more normal intermediate path where the substance of the world is permeated by my being: eating food, reading, writing, talking, shopping: so all is good in itself, and not just a hectic activity to cover up the fear that must face itself and duel itself to death, saying: A Life is Passing! (February 20, 1956: p. 204)

I catch up: each night, now, I must capture one taste, one touch, one vision for the ruck of the day's garbage. How all this life would vanish, evaporate, if I didn't clutch it, cling to it, while I still remember some twinge of glory (February 9, 1958: p. 328)

Writing is a religious act [...] A shaping which does not pass away like a day of typing or teaching. The writing lasts: it goes about on its own in the world (December 12, 1958: p. 436)
Though taken from a range of contexts, what is consistent in these fragments is an expression of the desire to hold onto the past, and to achieve permanence in writing. The persistence of this expression implies a need to offset a loss, and as such might be characterised by the temporality of Donald Winnicott’s concept of ‘fear of breakdown’ (1989). Winnicott describes how ‘the patient must go on looking for the past detail which is not yet experienced. This search takes the form of a looking for this detail in the future’ (p 105). In light of this temporal model, the narrator can be seen to fear something that has already taken place, but which has not yet been consciously experienced. As a result, the unassimilated loss refuses to be placed in the past, instead always a possibility on the future horizon.

Rushing forward, the journals might then constitute a pre-emptive strategy for precluding a loss. As I have noted, the origin of the writer’s sense of loss is overdetermined. Nevertheless, it perhaps accounts for her often-stated search for a plot: for example, ‘I am still blocked about prose…It would be a certain therapy’ (p. 477); and ‘If IF [SIC] I could break onto [SIC] a meaningful prose, that expressed my feelings, I would be free. Free to have a wonderful life. I am desperate when I am verbally repressed’ (p. 510). Narrative structure would thus seem to hold the possibility of temporalizing affect, of ordering it within linear time.

The theme that seems to emerge most forcefully in the journals is the narrator’s desire to write, or more specifically to have her writing published. Again, her ambition to become a famous writer, to objectify herself and her life in print, may signal an attempt to recuperate loss. Notably, the text is punctuated by references to sending off poems to literary magazines and waiting for the return post for news on their acceptance or rejection. She frequently refers to her ‘New Yorker fever’, and its power to affect her moods: ‘a day of misery: The New Yorker rejection of all the poems’ (p. 372). Thus, she exists within a temporal framework that positions her subjectivity in relation to some great future fulfilment. In Freudian terms, this might be characterised in terms of a hope for (re)obtaining narcissistic perfection. As Freud writes: ‘to be their own ideal once more […] as they were in childhood
...this is what people strive to attain as their happiness'. The false premise of this striving, that such fulfilment was ever in fact possessed, is integral to the melancholic's attachment to the 'lost' object.

Equally, however, the narrator makes fun of her own desire for narcissistic perfection, of re-obtaining the so-called lost object, particularly in terms of re-uniting with the mother. For example, she often writes ironically of her desire to 'crawl back into the womb' (see, for example, pp. 23, 186 and 545). Similarly caricaturing herself as a baby, she writes how 'my umbilical cord has never been cut cleanly' (p. 56). Thus the journals play out what she describes as 'a stoic face. A position of irony, of double vision' (p. 620). She simultaneously occupies and stands outside of a narcissistic, melancholic subject position; to an extent, drawing awareness to its excess imposes a limit on endless mourning. This 'double vision' thus offers a means of escaping a temporal framework whereby the future forever circles back into the past. Through a mechanism of self-parody, the very act of writing a journal suggests the possibility of establishing an interval between the time of emoting and the time of writing.

**Conclusion: Parody and Working Through**

As this chapter has argued, the narrator of Plath's journals both embodies and transcends a melancholic response to the loss of her father; she is the traumatised self and the writing self who aesthetically transforms her experience in the present. Deconstructing the myth of melancholic poet, the journals thereby portray writing as a response to, rather than direct outpouring from, traumatic loss. Additionally, as I have suggested, parodying melancholia from a feminine perspective de-idealises the myth of originality, highlighting the gendered nature of this subject position. The journals thus show that parody or self-parody may constitute one of the only voices available to a woman writer seeking to establish herself in the patriarchal canon.

Nevertheless, the journals also indicate the limitations of self-parody. Indeed, the defensiveness of the parodic mode might counteract processes of
mourning and working through, in which language evades, omits or glosses over the unassimilated painful experience. Parody may thus ward off what Winnicott calls the unthinkable ‘underlying agony’ at the cost of processing affect, deferring a confrontation with traumatic loss such that it continues to be feared in the future. As I have suggested, the sense of urgency accompanying SP’s desire to turn her life into art may relate to a need for ensuring invulnerability against the threat of painful affect. The dream of becoming a published writer may thereby double up as a trap, whereby re-entering the traumatic past is the eternal condition of escaping its grasp. The next chapter on Plath’s poems further explores the ambivalence of self-parody as a mode of working through, considering the extent to which it closes off a space for mourning.

Chapter 4
Parodying Victimhood in Sylvia Plath’s ‘Holocaust Poems’

This chapter considers the role of Holocaust imagery in Sylvia Plath’s poetic construction of traumatised subjectivity, particularly in ‘Little Fugue’ and ‘Daddy’, both written in 1962. I make use of both the final versions of these poems as they were published posthumously in Ariel (1965), as well as drafts that are kept in the Smith College Archives, Massachusetts. Read as a typical instance of confessional poetry that attempts to ‘find images for personal suffering in the extremity of the concentration camp experience’ (Rosenfeld, p. 175), Plath’s so-called Holocaust poems have provoked extreme reactions since the moment they were published. On one end of the spectrum, critics have expressed downright outrage regarding Plath’s apparent appropriation of Jewish suffering, which is considered to be ‘utterly disproportionate’, ‘monstrous’ (Howe: 1973, p. 232) and ‘humanly offensive’ (Bloom: 2007, p. 4). On the other, a number of scholars have attempted to defend Plath from such criticism, often by pointing out the inseparability of the personal and political, and the way Plath’s poetry grapples with the fantasies at the heart of fascism (Rose: 2013, pp. 205-238). The divided — and, as I will observe, sometimes
self-divided — nature of critical response to Plath’s allusions to the Holocaust attests to the extent to which the poems place the reader in a highly volatile position. Moving away from a confessional model that assumes a synonymous relation between poet and speaker, this chapter does not seek to justify Plath’s use of the Holocaust image; but rather to examine how it functions poetically.

As part of my overall project of reframing confession as an intertextual genre, I propose viewing Plath’s depiction of traumatisation against the backdrop of Paul Celan’s poem ‘Death Fugue’ (from the German, ‘Todesfuge’) (1948), widely considered to be the benchmark of postwar poetry about the Holocaust. A comparison with ‘Death Fugue’ brings to light how narratives of trauma are self-reflexively staged in Plath’s poems. As I will argue, they parody cultural assimilation of the Holocaust, and particularly identification with Jewish victimhood. Significantly, ideas about parody can be brought to bear on debates about the ethics of writing poetry after Auschwitz. Indeed, by flaunting their complicity in parodically corrupting the Holocaust reference, Plath’s poems effectively substantiate Theodor Adorno’s reflection on the barbarism of writing poetry after Auschwitz. Thus, in an indirect way, their parodic dimension reiterates the ethical position that the atrocity can in no way be redeemed through art. Equally, as I will show, Plath’s poems do not pretend to portray the events to the Holocaust, and in fact ultimately reject their speakers’ affinity with Jewish suffering. Nevertheless, this does not let the poems off the hook, ethically speaking, since they make use of the very exploitation they critique. Thus, they remain morally ambiguous by participating in what they critique, especially gaining purchase from the morbid allure of fantasies of victimisation.

As this chapter will argue, the central trauma of Plath’s poems is located elsewhere. Appearing as a simulation or cut-out, blatantly lacking in depth, the Holocaust image functions only as a substitute for an absence in memory. The way in which the speakers are compulsively drawn to this absence
conveys the conflicted impulses to remember and forget characteristic of a traumatised psyche, as I discussed in Chapter 2. Emphasising the temporal dimension of traumatic memory, Plath’s poems illustrate the way in which poetic form can create a disturbance in the order of sequential time, enacting a compulsion to repeat that implies the return of an unassimilated past.

This chapter will explore the extent to which parody permits Plath’s poetic ‘I’ to gain provisional distance from the perpetual present of traumatic experience, whereby Holocaust imagery enables her to localise loss in language and time. As I will suggest, inability to recall the traumatic past might account for the sense of release accompanying the speaker’s claim to victimisation, which seems to set language in motion again and give temporary shape to suffering. At the same time, an emphasis on the performative dimension of Plath’s speakers’ identification with a Holocaust Jew prompts reflection on the reader’s voyeuristic interest in fantasies of trauma and victimisation. Significantly, Plath’s poetic ‘I’ also directs parody towards herself, thereby refusing the identity of victim and, as I will argue, ultimately denying herself the right to suffer. Portraying a curtailed process of mourning, the poems highlight how the Holocaust-substitute does not finally enable Plath’s speakers to articulate traumatic loss.

The first part of this chapter provides a review of the scholarship on Plath’s poetic identification with Jewish victimhood, observing how the two critical poles of condemnation and exoneration play into the drama of victimhood that the poems themselves stage. In particular, I will propose that divided reactions may in part be attributable to the self-parodying gesture of Plath’s poetic voice, illustrated by ‘Lady Lazarus’, which both solicits and rejects our sympathy. I will then preface my central analyses of ‘Little Fugue’ and ‘Daddy’ with a discussion of what Adorno termed the ‘dialectic of culture and barbarism’ (1983, p. 34), which implies the continuity between assimilation of atrocity and complicity in a culture in which such atrocity can arise. Exploring this dialectic, Thomas Mann’s novel *Doctor Faustus* (1947) offers a helpful
departure point, because it both plays out Adorno’s concern that art can falsely imply the possibility of reconciliation with Germany’s past, and indicates how the device of parody expresses a critical distance from such an optimistic outlook, as it was criticised by Adorno. I will investigate this parodic device in Plath’s poems by situating them in relation to Celan’s ‘Death Fugue’, a poem testifying to the horror of the camps that was gradually absorbed by the very culture it sought to denounce. As I will suggest, Plath’s poems parody the fate of ‘Death Fugue’ in Germany, both enacting and critiquing cultural assimilation of the Holocaust in a way that reflects the inescapability of the dialectic between culture and barbarism.

Turning to ‘Little Fugue’ and ‘Daddy’, the main body of this chapter examines how the parodic mode functions for Plath’s poetic speakers. As I will propose, ‘Little Fugue’ exhibits a method of what I will refer to as ‘melancholic substitution’, whereby images of the Holocaust are called upon to give form to the speaker’s sense of an elusive lost object. By drawing attention to the process of construction, the poem self-reflexively undermines its own search for analogies in place of a hole in memory. In ‘Daddy’, the speaker’s struggle to retrieve the traumatic past is precisely what fuels her fantasy of victimisation. Through the double voice of parody, she both assumes the voice of a little girl and draws attention to the way in which she is self-infantilising in order to play the victim. As I will propose, ‘Daddy’ gives insight into the possible allure of narratives of trauma, indicating how an extreme, de-subjectifying experience of suffering might represent the possibility of melancholic merging with the perceived lost object. Crucially, Plath’s poems show the therapeutic as well as ethical failure of invoking the Holocaust reference, for the speakers’ gesture of self-parody ultimately closes off a space for mourning traumatic loss. Furthermore, this failure is played out meta-poetically, insofar as trauma does not provide the speaker with a source of creative inspiration, as focused by the final poem analysed in this chapter, ‘The Munich Mannequins’ (1963).
Part One: ‘the boot in the face’

Scholarship on Plath’s poetic references to the Holocaust has tended to revolve around the question of her right to identify with Jewish victimhood. It was the critic George Steiner’s early response that set this agenda in motion. Despite the hostility of criticism that followed, Steiner’s doubts are in fact articulated within the context of great acclaim for the way in which Plath’s poetry engages with the Holocaust. Thus, Steiner’s reflections hold on to a tension that has more recently given way to increasingly polarised positions vis-à-vis the presence of the Holocaust in Plath’s poetry. In ‘Dying as an Art’ (1965), Steiner writes that Plath’s ‘last, greatest poems culminate in an act of identification, of total communion with those tortured and massacred’. He admires the way that, though Plath had ‘no personal, immediate contact with the world of the concentration camps’, she nevertheless ‘became a woman being transported to Auschwitz on the death trains’ (p. 301; italics Steiner’s). For Steiner, Plath’s imaginative focus on the camps counters a general inclination to forget; indeed, he commends Plath for developing a poetic idiom that is capable of responding to the atrocities of twentieth-century history. As he suggests, ‘in “Daddy” she wrote one of the very few poems I know of in any language to come near the last horror’ (p. 301).

Nevertheless, Steiner also formulates a doubt that reverberates throughout the critical literature: ‘in what sense does anyone, himself uninvolved and long after the event, commit a larceny when he invokes the echoes and trappings of Auschwitz and appropriates an enormity of ready emotion to his own private design?’ Notably, Steiner goes on to ask: ‘was there latent in Sylvia Plath’s sensibility, as in that of many of us who remember only by fiat of imagination, a fearful envy, a dim resentment at not having been there, of having missed the rendezvous with hell?’ (p. 301). He thus touches on the potential allure of identifying with Jewish victimhood, and the pleasure of breaking a moral taboo that might be experienced by the reader in turn.
Indeed, the illicit eroticism of Plath’s poems may contribute to the difficulty of holding onto the ambiguity of her poetic position.

Steiner returned to these questions in his article ‘In Extremis’ (1969), which registers a sense of conflict more emphatically. Again, he applauds Plath for finding a way of communicating an apprehension of the horror of the death camps. But at the same time, he asks: ‘does any writer, does any human being other than an actual survivor, have the right to put on this death-rig?’ (p. 305). For Steiner, the issue remains unresolved. As he writes towards the end of this article, ‘I can’t get this question of the poet’s “overdraft” clear in my own mind’ (p. 306). The sense of internal conflict in Steiner’s discussion helpfully reflects a tension that, as I will suggest, is produced by the poems themselves. However, preoccupation with the legitimacy of Plath’s Holocaust references has dominated critical literature, arguably at the expense of a focus on poetic technique.

Firmly occupying one side of the critical spectrum anticipated by Steiner’s influential discussion, Irving Howe exemplifies vehement objection to Plath’s alleged identification with Jewish victimhood, condemning Plath for trying ‘to enlarge upon the personal plight, give meaning to the personal outcry, by fancying the girl as a victim of a Nazi father’. As he asserts in an often-quoted line, ‘there is something monstrous, something utterly disproportionate, when tangled emotions about one’s father are deliberately compared with the historical fate of the European Jews’. Howe’s critique is notably linked to a disdain for confessional poetry, conceived as ‘strident and undisciplined’ (1973, p. 232). Echoing Howe’s perspective some years later, Harold Bloom writes of Plath’s ‘gratuitous and humanly offensive appropriation of the imagery of Jewish martyrs in Nazi death camps’ (2007, p. 4). Like Howe, Bloom indicates a lack of craft: ‘hysterical insanity, whatever its momentary erotic appeal, is not an affect that endures in verse. Poetry relies upon trope and not upon sincerity’ (p. 2). Bloom’s assessment thus attests to the frequently gendered nature of criticism on confessional poetry, as I discussed
in Chapter One. Instead, this chapter examines how Plath’s poems self-reflexively explore the ‘erotic appeal’ of the victimised subject position.

It is worth noting, however, that by no means all of the early criticism on Plath’s deployment of the Holocaust image was straightforwardly condemnatory, as subsequent critical surveys sometimes seem to imply. In fact, a substantial proportion of scholarship continued in the vein of Steiner’s more equivocal, and indeed thoughtful, response. Seamus Heaney’s *Times Literary Supplement* article, ‘The Indefatigable Hoof-taps’ (1988), exemplifies a tendency of toing and froing on the issue of, in Steiner’s words, Plath’s ‘right to put on this death-rig’. On the one hand, Heaney asserts that:

A poem like ‘Daddy’, however brilliant a *tour de force* it can be acknowledged to be, and however its violence and vindictiveness can be understood or excused in light of the poet’s parental and marital relations, remains, nevertheless, so entangled in the biographical circumstance, and rampages so permissively in the history of other people’s sorrows that it overdraws its rights to our sympathy.

Yet on the other, this criticism is situated within a predominately favourable retrospective of Plath’s poetry, in which Heaney traces the journey of ‘a gifted writer becoming a definitive one’ (p. 134). Interestingly, Heaney’s use of the term implies that Plath’s poem has already elicited the sympathy that he feels must be retracted. The formulation thus attests to the sense of ambivalence produced by Plath’s poetry, which I will argue is attributable to the way in

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7 For example, Susan Gubar’s discussion of prosopopoeia in Plath’s so-called ‘Holocaust poetry’ opens with the assertion ‘exploitation, larceny, masochism, sensationalism: the terms of opprobrium hurled against Sylvia Plath’s use of Holocaust material generally accord with George Steiner’s distress at any writer boasting “the right to put on this death-rig”.’ One might thereby detect a slight disingenuousness in the way critics disguise their departures from earlier scholarship.

which her speakers both replicate and critique their appropriation of Jewish suffering.

In *A Double Dying: Reflections on Holocaust Literature* (1980), Alvin Rosenfeld provides a formulation that encapsulates the first wave of criticism on Plath’s use of Holocaust imagery: ‘in the first instance the appeal of art to the vocabulary of the Holocaust minimises the terror of the camps by falsely generalising and universalising it; in the second instance, the effect is one of hyperbole or excessive strain, an invasion of history by hysteria’ (p. 181). I would now like to turn to two important attempts to shift critical emphasis away from Plath’s right to reference the Holocaust by demonstrating the inextricability of the personal and the universal, ‘history’ and ‘hysteria’ as Rosenthal puts it. The first is James E. Young’s “I May Be a Bit of a Jew”: The Holocaust Confessions of Sylvia Plath’ (1987). Young firstly observes that, unlike ‘Holocaust poets’ such as Paul Celan, ‘Plath has not tried to re-imagine, to capture, or to represent these events in any way’ (p. 128). Instead of an experience to be re-told or described, the Holocaust is available to her only ‘as a figure, an idea, in whose image she expressed another brutal reality: that of her own internal pain.’

Noting that Plath’s final poems were produced during a time in which the Holocaust dominated the media, Young suggests that images of the atrocity were ‘internalised and made private by the poet, used to order her private world, and then re-externalised in public verse’ (p. 132). He goes on to ask whether the ‘private’ and ‘historical’ can ever be separated, ‘insofar as we may neither express our private lives without recourse to public (i.e., historical) language, nor know history except by ordering it privately.’ Furthermore, Young speculates that Plath’s absorption of others’ experiences was so complete that the internalised images actually began to ‘incite the pain they are then used to express’ (p. 136). On this basis, he argues, ‘the massive suffering of the Jews becomes appropriate as a trope for the poet’s pain precisely because it was also an agent of it’.
Young’s analysis helpfully draws attention to the way in which the Holocaust features as a public trope in Plath’s poetry. However, his emphasis on the inevitability of this point of reference tends to overlook how the poems actively engage with this trope. This can be seen when, seeking to counter the objection that Plath misuses the Holocaust image, Young proposes that ‘the question might be changed from “should the Holocaust be used as a public image of reference?” to “how has the Holocaust been used as a public image of reference”’. Invoking Steiner, he argues that ‘we do not put on these “death rigs” because they fit, but because they are the remembered archetypes in our language by which we grasp our current lives’ (p. 142). Thus, rather than blaming Plath, Young suggests that the moral ‘crime’ against victims may be committed by the memory in public language itself. Indeed, for Young, ‘the Holocaust necessarily began to inform all writers’ literary imagination as a prospective trope’ (p. 145; my italics). However, the interchange between public and private does not mean that judgment about the way in which the Holocaust image is used should be suspended, nor absolve Plath’s poetic speakers of responsibility. Moreover, as this chapter will suggest, the poems themselves enact the problematic nature of cultural assimilation of the Holocaust, self-reflexively interrogating the ethics of representation.

The second and by far the most influential text that redirects the terms of the debate is Jacqueline Rose’s chapter ‘Daddy’ in *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath* (1991). Rose identifies the two poles of critical reaction (notably echoing Rosenfeld’s formulation cited above): ‘either Plath trivialises the Holocaust through the essentially personal (it is argued) reference, or she aggrandises her experience by stealing the historical event’ (p. 206). However, Rose responds by pointing out that ‘the critique of Plath underlines the fact that the Holocaust is the historical event which puts under greatest pressure the concept of linguistic figuration’ (p. 207). She thus aims to redirect the focus of scholarship by addressing the relationship between metaphor, fantasy and identification. As she suggests, ‘the issue then becomes not whether Plath
has the right to represent the Holocaust, but what the presence of the Holocaust in her poetry unleashes, or obliges us to focus, about representation as such’ (p. 207).

Rose’s chapter then proceeds by way of ‘a detour through psychoanalysis’, specifically the 1985 Hamburg Congress of the International Association of Psychoanalysis on the theme of ‘Identification and its Vicissitudes’. Referring to the case-histories of survivors, children of survivors and children of Nazis that were discussed at the conference, Rose observes how patients repeatedly ‘found themselves in fantasy occupying either side of the victim/aggressor divide’. As she argues, ‘it is the psychic exclusion or repudiation of those positions which, for psychoanalysis, is most likely to precipitate their projection or acting out’ (p. 211). By implication, recognition of the way victim/aggressor identities are occupied in fantasy may be essential for working through traumatic experience (p. 212). Rose thus suggests that the criticism of Plath can be turned around by asking: ‘not whether the Holocaust is “abused” by metaphor, but rather under what conditions of representation can the fantasies underpinning metaphor itself be spoken?’ According to her analysis, “Daddy” appears as a poem that represents a set of fantasies which, at a precise historical moment and with devastating consequences, found themselves at the heart of our collective political life’ (p. 236). Indeed, Rose suggests that articulating fantasy positions may prevent acting them out in reality, pointing to ‘something of the reversibility that might hold between pacifism and the commitment to (inner) war’ (p. 237).

Rose’s chapter on ‘Daddy’ offers the key insight that Plath’s Holocaust references foreground the dynamics of identification. However, its detour through psychoanalysis can also be seen subtly to sidestep criticism of the incommensurability between the experience of Plath’s speakers and that of Jewish victims. In fact, focus on the shared difficulties of metaphor, identification and fantasy implies a degree of parallelism between Plath’s poetic scenarios and the Holocaust context. As Rose observes, in ‘Daddy’
Plath’s speaker generalises Jewishness as a struggle about language and identity: ‘for the speaker, Jewishness is the position of the one without history or roots’. Notably, however, Rose’s analysis sometimes seems to repeat this generalising gesture. For example, she explains that her focus is ‘the point at which the abyss at the centre of Jewish identity, for the one who is Jewish and not Jewish, appears in the form of a drama about psychic aggression and guilt’ (p. 217). Arguably, Rose’s analysis thereby misses the irony of Plath’s poetic voice, which, as I will suggest, itself casts doubt on the stereotypical notion of Jewish subjectivity with which the speaker identifies.

It is perhaps telling that critics influenced by Rose’s focus on fantasy often imply that the sadomasochism enacted by Plath’s poetry can be mapped onto the historical atrocity, with the effect of generalising the experience of Jewish victims. For example, Susan Gubar argues that Plath ‘offers brilliant insights into a debilitating sexual politics at work in fascist anti-Semitism’. From this perspective, she suggests:

“Daddy” reads less like a confessional elegy about Plath’s grief and anger at the loss of her father, and more like a depiction of Jewish melancholia […] and thus a meditation on an attachment to Germany in particular, and to Western civilization in general, that many European Jews found not only inevitable but galling as well (2001: p. 203).

The idea that the relational structure presented by ‘Daddy’ can be applied to the entire German Jewish population is reductive of a complex historical situation, and moreover overlooks the fact that Plath’s poem indicates that the speaker is only partly of Jewish descent. Gubar goes on to suggest: ‘according to Plath, the Jews chuffed off "to Dachau, Auschwitz, Belsen" suffered the horror of impending extermination along with a crippling consciousness of complicity, if only the collusion of those doomed by a long history of intimacy to love and respect a force dead set against them’ (p. 204). Again, there is a danger of oversimplifying historical phenomena, while a final
The implausible implication of Gubar’s analysis is that Jewish victims derived sexual pleasure from their persecution.

The new angles on Plath’s poetry opened up by Young and Rose promote an earnest approach to Plath’s identification with Jewish victimhood, when in fact the poems’ speakers themselves delineate the discrepancy between their experiences with that of the death camps. An important theoretical contribution that brings this sense of irony into focus is Al Strangeways’s article, “The Boot in the Face”: The Problem of the Holocaust in the Poetry of Sylvia Plath’ (1996). Rather than suggesting Plath gives insight into fantasies involved in the Holocaust, Strangeways proposes a focus on what the poems reveal about the place of the Holocaust in culture. As she points out, the period in which Plath was writing her final poems saw not only the ‘real life’ drama of the Eichmann trial, but also a number of star-studded Hollywood films that brought the Holocaust to the forefront of the popular imagination (p. 377). These included The Diary of Anne Frank (1959), Exodus (1960) and Judgment at Nuremberg (1961). As Strangeways observes, ‘the act of trying to bring such horrific events to a popular audience involves a rationalizing and conventionalizing of the material, which ultimately runs the risk of trivializing the very events it is trying to commemorate’ (p. 384). Significantly, Strangeways argues that this problem not only informs Plath’s late poems but is also enacted by them. As she writes, ‘instead of trying directly to present the cruelty of the Holocaust itself, the feeling Plath’s poems generate is one of complicity in the easy assimilation of such past cruelties’ (p. 385). Readers are thereby meant to feel uncomfortable with the mythical depiction of Jewish suffering, since they are implicated in the voyeurism such an assimilation of the Holocaust implies. Therefore, Strangeways proposes, ‘such poems are culturally valuable because the appearance of the Holocaust in them is like a "boot in the face" – certainly, few readers leave them feeling "complacent instead of concerned or disturbed"’ (p. 385).
Strangeways observes that Plath’s ‘Daddy’ not only attests to the inseparability of the personal and the historical, but also compounds the problematic distinctions and connections between ‘our lives and their suffering’ (p. 386). Essentially, she argues that ‘the poem is effective because it leaves readers in no clear or easy position in relation to the voyeuristic gazes operating within it […] and able to take no unproblematic stance regarding the uses of metaphor involved’ (p. 387). In light of this insight, the internally conflicted nature of early scholarship on Plath’s use of Holocaust imagery can be seen as a marker of the poetry’s success. Building on Strangeways’s insights, this chapter will suggest that a dual response might be regarded as an effect of the parodic mode in Plath’s poetry, whereby her speakers both perform and mock an appropriation of Jewish victimhood. As I want to stress, since the poems are complicit in what they critique, they cannot be ethically vindicated. Significantly, they place not only the reader but also the speakers themselves in a difficult, even unsustainable position.

*My Approach: ‘Lady Lazarus’ (1961)*
In 1960, Plath made a pop-art style collage in which President Eisenhower sits at a desk with a set of playing cards in his hand, an American flag billowing behind him as he looks out at the viewer with a tranquillizing smile (the word ‘sleep’ has been stuck onto his lapel). Raised to his right, a small figure of a woman posing in a swimsuit is placed next to the slogan, ‘every man wants his woman on a pedestal’, while a red, white and blue jet bomber dives directly into her waist. Featuring a variety of cuttings from magazines and newspapers (selling products such as beer, electric model cars and golf), the collage juxtaposes images of consumer culture with the threat of nuclear destruction, notably aligning military warfare with patriarchal power. It thus demonstrates a satirical stance toward the glossy banality of contemporary American media, in which images are uprooted from context and divested of

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meaning. Collage or photomontage would come to inform the methodology of Plath’s poetry, which, as I will suggest, draws attention to its own process of construction. Framing Plath’s technique in this way offers an approach to the function of Holocaust images in her poetry. Featuring as superficial cut-outs, clichéd references to the Holocaust can be seen as an ironic response to the media’s commercialisation of the atrocity, which were often selected for their qualities of spectacle and horror. Techniques of advertising in Plath’s poems seduce the reader into viewing difficult content; their jarring incongruity then provokes reflection on the reader’s voyeuristic enjoyment of scenes of suffering. Like a collage, a poem entitled ‘Lady Lazarus’ exemplifies the way in which Plath’s poems both replicate and subvert public consumption of images.

A self-reflexively intertextual poem, ‘Lady Lazarus’ parodies the Christian resurrection narrative to figure the speaker’s return to life after a series of suicide attempts. The trope of resurrection also applies to the speaker’s relation to her aesthetic inheritance, in that she channels the dead masters of the poetic canon. Thus, as well as alluding to the biblical account of Jesus’s resurrection of Lazarus, the title echoes T S Eliot’s ‘The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock’ (1911), in which the hero imagines himself as ‘Lazarus, come from the dead, / Come back to tell you all’. Eliot’s poem is framed as a dramatic monologue, a form that is in turn often associated with Robert Browning. Browning notably used dramatic monologue to resurrect voices from the past while simultaneously implying an ironic distance from them. Situating ‘Lady Lazarus’ in this tradition can help to steer away from biographical readings by directing attention towards poetic technique. Thus, the speaker of Plath’s dramatic monologue, instead of representing Plath herself, is an intertextual figure made up of wide-ranging historical, cultural and mythical references, revealed one by one in ‘the big strip tease’. Central among these references is that of the Holocaust Jew. Provocatively identifying with a Jewish victim who has been raised from the dead, ‘Lady Lazarus’ exemplifies the way in which Plath’s poetic ‘I’ parodies cultural assimilation of the Holocaust. By
highlighting the way in which it has been assembled, I suggest that the poem enacts a drama of appropriation in which Jewish victimhood is scandalously worn as a theatrical accessory.

Throughout ‘Lady Lazarus’, the speaker flaunts her appropriation of Jewish victimhood. She describes her face as a ‘featureless, fine / Jew linen’, proceeding to direct her enemy to ‘peel off the napkin’ (lines 9-10). Alluding to the linen that was used to wrap the body of Lazarus before laying him in the tomb, these lines enforce the theme of theft by implying the speaker has stolen it from Lazarus’s dead body. She then asks, speaking from the perspective of a Jewish corpse, ‘Do I terrify? / The nose, the eye pits, the full set of teeth?’ (lines 12-13). As Mark Ford observes, ‘what makes her references to such atrocities so disturbing is their incorporation into a poetic performance that also deploys the language of advertising, mass spectacle and pornographic self-display’ (2016). Indeed, the speaker’s miraculous rebirths are governed by the logic of commodity:

There is a charge

For the eyeing of my scars, there is a charge
For the hearing of my heart— —
It really goes.

And there is a charge, a very large charge
For a word or a touch
Or a bit of blood

Or a piece of my hair or my clothes (lines 57-64).

The four-time repetition of ‘charge’ emphasises the ‘peanut-crunching crowd’s’ fascinated witness of her display of commoditised martyrdom, perhaps also indicating a popular appetite for images of Jewish suffering. The repeated
vowel sound (‘scars’, ‘charge’, heart’, ‘large’), which is especially drawn out in Plath’s recording of the poem, creates a sustained expression of pain that adds to the sense of a theatrical performance.

‘Charge’ also has sexual overtones. Indeed, performing a ‘big strip tease’, the speaker positions herself as archetypal object of the gaze qua victim. In turn, the gaze is turned back on the crowd that ‘shoves in to see’, eying the terrible wounds and scars the speaker tauntingly chooses to parade. The poem thereby indicates the erotic pull of (self-)victimisation, for speaker and reader alike. Notably, in the drafts of ‘Lady Lazarus’ in the Plath Collection at Smith College, the male antagonist is presented not only as ‘Herr Enemy’, ‘Herr Lucifer’ and ‘Herr Doktor’, but also as ‘My Great Love’. ‘Lady Lazarus’s’ masochistic subtext might recall the controversial line in ‘Daddy’, ‘every woman adores a Fascist’ (cited by Ford: 2016). Due to the poem’s self-reflexively staged identification with Jewish victimhood, readers are in turn invited to reflect on their own voyeuristic enjoyment of the victim subject position. Notably, a sense of pleasure seems to drive the language itself, as the hard syllables and blatant internal rhymes (‘grave cave’, ‘turn and burn’) propel a poetic tour de force. Aware of her own performative brilliance, the speaker brags:

Dying
Is an art, like everything else.
I do it exceptionally well.

I do it so it feels like hell.
I do it so it feels real.
I guess you could say I’ve a call (lines 43-48).

As the speaker acknowledges, if dying is an art, it is not real; similarly ‘a call’ can be read meta-fictionally as a poetic vocation. Thus foregrounding their own poetic artifice, these lines register the ambivalent ethics of the poem. On
the one hand, Plath’s poetic ‘I’ stages the spurious act of identification, mounting a self-critique of her own claim to victimhood. But on the other hand, the poem makes use of the very techniques it mocks, eliciting precisely the fascination it condemns. Thus, ‘Lady Lazarus’ both performs and critiques exploitation of Jewish suffering and the gleaning of aesthetic profit from atrocity.

The final lines of the poem declare a vengeful return from the dead:

   Out of the ash
   I rise with my red hair
   And I eat men like air.

As well as invoking the mythical phoenix, this final image of rebirth might also recall the fire of Holocaust ovens. However, the extreme vindictiveness undercuts itself in the simile of eating men ‘like air’, implying that constructing an enemy in the figure of a Nazi cannot ultimately sustain the speaker. Notably, the language also echoes Hamlet’s response to Claudius’s question, ‘How fares our cousin Hamlet?:’

   Excellent, i’ faith, of the chameleon’s dish. I
   eat the air, promise-crammed. You cannot
   feed capons so. (3.2.93-95)

Hamlet thus puns on ‘air’ and ‘heir’, expressing his dissatisfaction about the fact that he has not inherited the throne after his father’s death. Reading this allusion to Shakespeare in ‘Lady Lazarus’ indicates the speaker’s difficulty in relation both to her patrilineal and poetic inheritance. Additionally, the chameleon’s association with masquerading, with trying on different outward appearances, resonates with the poem’s overall method of collage or substitution. Like the ‘promised-crammed’ diet of the chameleon, the Holocaust image ultimately evaporates into the ether at the end of the poem,
a mere substitute for a less distinct sense of suffering. ‘Lady Lazarus’ thus performs the unsustainable and un-sustaining nature of appropriating Jewish suffering for figuring the speaker’s traumatic loss, both ethically and poetically.

This chapter proposes that the same mechanism of parodic substitution can be discerned, in a subtler, more intimate form, in two other poems by Plath, ‘Little Fugue’ and ‘Daddy’. As I will argue, these poems also address their speakers’ motivation for incorporating and appropriating the narrative of Jewish victimisation. The parodic mode can be thrown into relief by situating Plath’s treatment of Holocaust material against the backdrop of the poetry of Paul Celan, particularly his poem ‘Death Fugue’. It is noteworthy that probably the best-known poems of Celan and Plath, ‘Death Fugue’ and ‘Daddy’ respectively, have both been characterised as the ‘Guernica’ of postwar poetry. In ‘Dying is an Art’ (1965), Steiner describes Plath’s ‘Daddy’ as the ‘Guernica’ of modern poetry”; several years later, John Felstiner writes that Celan’s ‘Todesfuge’ is ‘in its way the Guernica of Europe’s leading postwar poet’ (1986, p. 251). Though this echo is almost certainly inadvertent, the implication is that each poem, like Pablo Picasso’s painting, depicts the agony of war and particularly the suffering of innocent victims. However, while both poems invoke the events of the Shoah, they are spoken from markedly different perspectives. As I will propose, the parodic mode in Plath’s poetry means that the speaker never finally settles in the victim subject position.

A link between Celan and Plath has been observed by Michael Boswell in his article, ‘Black Phones: Postmodern Poetics in the Holocaust Poetry of Sylvia Plath’, where he notes Plath’s use of ‘oxymoronic, Celan-like imagery’ (2008, p. 62), particularly in ‘The Munich Mannequins’, a poem I will turn to at the end of this chapter. Elaborating on this connection, my analysis will point to some quite startling echoes of Celan’s language in ‘Little Fugue’ and ‘Daddy’. However, while Boswell envisages Plath’s project in continuity with that of Celan – arguing, for example, that she shares the similar concern of ‘lending structure to the unsaid’ of the Holocaust (p. 15) – I want to attend to the
transformation such images undergo in Plath’s poetry. In fact, as I will argue, the trope of the ‘unsaid’ or unrepresentable is relocated from the trauma of the Holocaust in Plath’s poems. In different ways, ‘Little Fugue’ and ‘Daddy’ revolve around a traumatic void, a pervasive sense of absence. As my analysis will suggest, it is precisely the inaccessibility of traumatic memory that motivates appropriation of the Holocaust idiom, as the speakers struggle to recover loss and orientate themselves towards the future. Before turning to the poems themselves, the next section will situate them in the context of a confrontation between art and history.

Part Two: Culture and Barbarism

In 1949, Theodor W. Adorno famously stated that ‘cultural criticism finds itself faced with the final stage of the dialectic of culture and barbarism. To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric’ (1983, p. 34). The implication is that making art after the Holocaust perpetuates a culture in which such an atrocity could arise. In an early passage of Thomas Mann’s Doctor Faustus (1947), the young protagonist Adrian Leverkuhn is in conversation with the novel’s narrator, Serenus Zeitblom, after they have both attended a lecture on ‘Beethoven and the Fugue’. (The ‘Grosse Fuge’, described in the lecture as ‘a savage brawl between hellishly dissonant instrumental voices’ (1999, p. 55), will be a central reference in Plath’s poem, ‘Little Fugue’.) ‘Beg your pardon’, Leverkuhn interrupts his friend, ‘but barbarism is the antithesis of culture only within a structure of thought that provides us [SIC] the concept […] we would have to become much more barbaric to be capable of culture once again’ (p. 66). Anticipating Adorno’s statement (Adorno and Mann were in correspondence 1943-1955), these lines indicate the dialectical relationship of culture and barbarism, art and brutality, which is figured in the novel by the motif of the fugue. Doctor Faustus then proceeds to play out this sequence via a reworking of the Faust legend in which Germany sells its soul to the Devil.
Leverkühn is the jewel of German culture, a gifted, solitary and overreaching composer, who trades his soul for twenty-four years of exceptional musical achievement. Leverkühn’s life story is presented as an allegory of the rise of the Third Reich, of Germany’s descent ‘into hell amid the dance of thundering flames’ (p. 474). As Zeitblom describes toward the end of the novel, the truth revealed by papers in the spring of 1945 is that ‘Germany had become a thick-walled underground torture chamber’. He then asks:

Was not this regime, both in word and deed, merely the distorted, vulgarised, debased realisation of a mindset and worldview to which one must attribute a characteristic authenticity and which, not without alarm, a Christianly humane person finds revealed in the traits of our great men, in the figures of the most imposing embodiments of Germanness? (pp. 505-506).

The great man he has in mind is, of course, Leverkühn, whose story is entwined with that of Germany, each poisoned at the root that is their culture.

However, if Leverkühn symbolises the downfall of Germany, he also seems to represent the possibility of its redemption. Approaching his death, he is described by the narrator as ‘Christlike’, undergoing ‘a kind of spiritualised suffering’ (p. 507). Notably, unlike Goethe’s Faust, who is ultimately redeemed as a reward for striving, Leverkühn’s chance of salvation paradoxically lies in an embrace of despair. His fictional biographer writes of ‘the reversal of the notion of temptation, in that Faust refuses the idea of salvation as itself a temptation’ (p. 514) – a refusal apparently expressed by Leverkühn’s final composition, The Lamentation of Doctor Faustus. And yet this ‘expressive cry from the soul’ is exactly what prepares the way for salvation — the possibility of hope that comes from giving voice to pain:

But what if the artistic paradox, which says that expression, the expression of lament, is born out of the construct as a whole,
corresponds to the religious paradox, which says that out of the profoundest irredeemable despair, if only as the softest of questions, hope may germinate? This would be hope beyond hopelessness, the transcendence of despair – not its betrayal, but the miracle that goes beyond faith.

The passage ends with ‘the dying note of sorrow’ standing, finally, as ‘a light in the night’ (p. 515). The logic of reversals is thus still very much at play: despair and hope; darkness and light; and, one could add, barbarism and culture. In an author’s note following the text, Mann refers to Leverkühn as ‘the tragic hero of my novel’ (p. 525), indicating both the necessity of his downfall and the sense of catharsis offered by his composition.

For Adorno, who was asked by Mann to comment on the novel, Zeitblom’s ‘hope beyond hopelessness’ over-optimistically contradicts the trajectory of the narrative:

I found the heavily laden pages too positive, too unbrokenly theological in relation to the structure not only of the _Lamentation of Dr. Faustus_ but of the novel as a whole. They seemed to lack what the crucial passage required, the power of determinate negation as the only permissible figure of the Other’ (cited by Cobley: 2005, p. 183).

However, the novel’s ending can also be viewed through the lens of parody. Indeed, parody is a thread running throughout the novel. It is the prospect of composing music that transcends the parodic, in order to ‘break through the age itself’, that entices Leverkühn to exchange his soul (p. 257). According to Zeitblom, this is exactly what Leverkühn’s final composition achieves (‘its style is purer, darker in tone on the whole and without any parody’ (p. 513)). At the same time, one might question whether the novel itself sets out to achieve the same objective, for it is notably the narrator, not necessarily the author, who wants to save both friend and country from eternal damnation. Approached
parodically, the ‘light of the night’ may appear as a coward’s wishful thinking. Mann would later describe the structure of *Doctor Faustus* as ‘comic’ because a frightened and bumbling narrator is struggling to cope with historical and psychological terror (cited by Wood: 2003). Complicating matters, however, the novel nevertheless participates in what it critiques (Mann himself writes a German masterpiece). Indeed, *Doctor Faustus* remains an earnest, optimistic novel grappling with the possibility of art after Auschwitz, allegorizing and aestheticizing atrocity. Plath’s poems similarly enact the very techniques they mock. However, by directing parody towards themselves, they highlight their own complicity in the cultural assimilation of the Holocaust. The way in which this mechanism of self-parody comes surprisingly close to Adorno’s position can be brought out by a comparison with Celan’s ‘Death Fugue’.

‘Death Fugue’

Celan’s ‘Death Fugue’ (c. 1945), probably the pre-eminent lyric to have emerged from the European Jewish catastrophe, also invokes the form of a fugue to denote the dialectic of culture and barbarism, now particularly focusing on the horrific consequences for Jewish victims. The poem is set in the continuous present of a concentration camp, and told from the perspective of Jewish prisoners tyrannised by a Nazi commandant. The Jews are ordered to ‘jab your spades deeper you lot there you others play on for the dancing’ (line 18) – a dance that entails digging their own graves.¹⁰ The title creates a rhythmic symmetry that emphasises the juxtaposition of music and death. Suggesting a resonance with the ‘Art of the Fugue’, the summa of Johann Sebastian Bach, the title thus throws into doubt the height of musical culture, with the atrocity of the camps making music and the idea of music grotesque. The fugue also provides a form for the poem’s layering of historical and cultural allusions, which build on the coexistence of Bach and Auschwitz suggested by the title. As Felstiner observes in his brilliant analysis of the

¹⁰ Citations come from John Felstiner’s translation of the poem, which can be found here: https://www.celan-projekt.de/todesfuge-englisch.html [Accessed 26 Nov. 2019].
poem, practically every line embeds verbal material from the disrupted world to which the poem bears witness, such as Faust’s heroine Margareta alongside the maiden Shulamith from the Song of Songs, distilling German and Jewish identities (1995, p. 27).

‘Death Fugue’ holds a unique place in the debate about the possibility of poetry after Auschwitz, and particularly concerns that metaphor facilitates integration of the atrocity within language as though the trauma could be healed. If the Holocaust is an event in which ‘annihilation overleapt the bounds of metaphor and was enacted on earth’ (Rosenfeld: 1980, p. 27), Celan’s poem reflects precisely the way that, as Felstiner writes, ‘reality can swell to metaphorical excess and defy belief’. Indeed, in the Janowska camp an S.S. lieutenant ordered Jewish fiddlers to play a 'Death Tango' during marches, tortures, grave digging and executions, who were shot before the camp was liquidated. As Felstiner speculates, Celan may have seen a 1944 pamphlet on ‘The Lublin Extermination Camp’ by Konstantin Simonov, which describes how ‘scores of loudspeakers began to emit the deafening strains of the foxtrot and the tango. And they blared all the morning, all day, all the evening, and all night.’ As Celan writes in the first lines of ‘Death Fugue’:

Black milk of daybreak we drink it at evening
we drink it at midday and morning we drink it at night
we drink and we drink

This opening becomes the refrain of ‘Death Fugue’, which appears, with a minor variation, at the start of all four stanzas (except the intrusion of the commandant’s voice in stanza three). As Felstiner notes, the oxymoron that nullifies the nourishment vital to humankind may not be a metaphor; perhaps the camp inmates were given a liquid they called ‘black milk’ simply by way of description. The image thus attests to the way in which ‘the real overtook the surreal, brute fact outstripped imagination’ (Felstiner, p. x).
That the black milk is drunk ‘day…night…evening…morning’ can be read as a parody of the creation sequence from Genesis, with the variation and re-sequencing of the times of day in the poem suggesting that time is on an inescapable loop. Following the form of a fugue, lines of the poem are split and reordered, so that images seem to return with increased determinacy as though refusing to subside from memory. The rising and falling rhythm of ‘we drink and we drink’ is prolonged relentlessly to the very end, unstopped by punctuation so that the words tumble into one another and the volume increases with momentum as the commandant ‘shouts scrape your strings darker you’ll rise then as smoke to the sky’ (line 25). Mobilising a temporality that disrupts the linear progression of time, ‘Death Fugue’ emotively evokes, in Felstiner’s words, ‘a timing of degradation, a senseless inescapable cycle’ (p. 35). Denoting the perpetual present, the poem shows that the atrocity can never be redeemed.

The sharp counterpoint exemplified by the image of black milk is central to the logic of the poem, underscoring Nazi brutality. The inexorable rhythm of ‘we drink it and drink it’ propels a rollicking beat that calls up German songs – from the Munich beer-hall, for example, where Nazism in part arose (Felstiner, p. 35). But, since it can also be likened to the rhythm of Jewish prayers, said three times a day, the poem emphasises the discordance of Nazi and Jewish voices. Because the victims’ words pervade the poem, it is striking when they report another voice, ‘he commands us play up for the dance’. Indeed so much depends on the differing voices that it jolts to hear the victims quote their persecutor: ‘He shouts jab this earth deeper you lot there you others sing up and play’. By the time this ‘master from Deutschland’ is named four times, ‘Death Fugue’ has evolved its own span of real time: morning and midday and evening and night, the poem’s reiterations bear out the fatality of the concentrationary universe. The twin motifs that have shadowed each other throughout the poem join at the end:

Your golden hair Margareta
Your ashen hair Shulamith

The figures of Margareta and Shulamith undercut each other, implying that the German and Jewish ideals will not coexist.

Startlingly, however, during the course of its literary life, Celan saw ‘Death Fugue’ assimilated by the very culture it denounced, even serving as a proof text in a post-Nazi Germany preoccupied with 'national guilt', 'collective mourning', 'coming to terms with the past' and 'reparation' (Felstiner: 1986, p. 251). As the poem received widespread fame, readers focused upon its artistry whilst often ignoring the subject matter. Thus Death Fugue’s musical construction, its play among verbal themes, diverted attention from the poem's real theme: that German fascism consummately orchestrated human annihilation. With an ease that seemed indecent to Celan, during the 1950s ‘Death Fugue’ was ensconced in anthologies and, notably, in school textbooks, helping German youth to ‘grasp, master, and surmount’ the ‘shadowy force of our history’, as was reported in one article (cited by Felstiner: 1995, p. 118). But for Celan, what happened in Nazi Europe was not to be mastered and surmounted. In a letter to Erich Einhorn in 1962, he wrote that the literature prizes he was given for ‘Death Fugue’ shouldn’t fool anyone: ‘they are, finally, only the alibi of those who, in the shadow of such alibis, continue with other, more contemporary means, what they started, and continued, under Hitler’ (2005, p. 281).

It was therefore particularly painful to Celan that critics began to apply Adorno’s remarks on the barbarism of writing poetry after Auschwitz to ‘Death Fugue’ itself. Adorno said on a 1962 radio talk (published in 1965) that 'through the aesthetic principle of stylization... an unimaginable fate still seems as if it had some meaning; it becomes transfigured, with something of the horror removed' (cited by Felstiner: 1986, p. 255). In an article for the periodical Merkur that followed, Reinhard Baumgart questioned poetry not merely after but also about Auschwitz: Celan's ‘Death Fugue’ and its motifs,
'all of them thoroughly composed in an elegant score – didn't that show far too much pleasure in art, in despair turned "beautiful" through art?' (cited by Felstiner: 1986, p. 255). Of course, the point is that no piece of art can escape the dialectic of culture and barbarism. Adorno's injunction is qualified in his 1962 piece 'Commitment', where he writes, 'I have no wish to soften the saying that to write lyric poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric'; however, he goes on to explain that 'it is now virtually in art alone that suffering can still find its own voice, consolation, without immediately being betrayed by it’ (1982, p. 312).

1962 was also the year Plath wrote her two poems ‘Little Fugue’ and ‘Daddy’, which, as I will propose, raise this very question of betraying Jewish suffering. Just as Doctor Faustus participates in the notion that art can redeem atrocity, Plath’s poetry enacts cultural assimilation and the metaphorizing of the Holocaust. However, the use of self-parody in Plath’s poems highlights their own collusion in aestheticising suffering, showing — as I will argue in the following section on ‘Little Fugue’ — the innate corruption of poetic language.

Part Three: ‘I envy the big noises’

Plath’s ‘Little Fugue’ (1962) was written almost two decades after Celan’s ‘Death Fugue’. Mimicking the fate of Celan’s poem in Germany, ‘Little Fugue’ participates in the cultural assimilation of the Holocaust, particularly by implying an analogous relation between the speaker’s father and a Nazi. However, as I will propose, a comparison with ‘Death Fugue’ highlights the self-reflexivity with which the Holocaust trope is transposed into this new context, enhancing the contrast between the two different depictions of victimhood. Several continuities between the poems can be observed, most obviously the reference to German culture and specifically its music, with the fugue being associated with great German composers such as Bach and Beethoven. Mimicking the contrapuntal form in music, poetic themes are placed in conjunction with one another. Instead of presenting a linear
sequence or narrative trajectory, each poem progresses by way of the fugal principle of repetition, with images re-emerging in different arrangements and generating the sense of an inescapable, traumatic present.

Like ‘Death Fugue’, ‘Little Fugue’ uses black and white imagery to present a dichotomy between Nazi persecutor and Jewish victim. For example, the opening of Plath’s poem, ‘the yew’s black fingers wag:/cold clouds go over’, is reminiscent of Celan’s image of ‘black milk’ as well as the contrast between German and Jewish ideals, ‘your golden hair Margarete/your ashen hair Shulamith’. ‘Little Fugue’s’ landscape is also strikingly resonant with the imagery of the earlier poem. The yew tree’s association with a graveyard (on which Plath’s poetry frequently draws) recalls Celan’s line, ‘we shovel a grave in the air’. Similarly, the ‘cold clouds’ that cover the sky in Plath’s poem evoke the commandant’s words in ‘Death Fugue’: ‘you’ll rise then as smoke to the sky/you’ll have a grave then in the clouds.’ In ‘Little Fugue’, the father’s ‘yew hedge of orders,/Gothic and barbarous’, which culminate in the cry of dead men, echo the orders of the Nazi commandant in ‘Death Fugue’: ‘he shouts play death more sweetly this Death is a master from Deutschland’. The depiction of Nazi barbarity in Celan’s poem is thus discernible in the construction of the father in ‘Little Fugue’.

In light of an intertextual reading of the two poems, it is possible to see how ‘Little Fugue’s depiction of mourning situates itself in the shadow of the Holocaust context. However, as my analysis will show, the later poem is not ultimately about the Holocaust, but rather an absence in memory of the dead father for which the atrocity is called in as a substitute. Instead of the irregular, unpunctuated lines of ‘Death Fugue’ that tumble into each other with the force of their subject matter, the short sentences of Plath’s thirteen stanzas, neatly ordered into four lines, create a feeling of blockage. Similarly, while Celan’s speakers seem to speak straight from the camps, use of the past tense in ‘Little Fugue’ immediately conveys distance from the traumatic past. Plath’s poem segues through a series of images with a logic that is difficult to fathom;
their surreal, tangential connections underline the speaker’s sense of dissociation. Drifting, digressive and lacking in orientation, the speaker’s search for her dead father is analogous with the poem’s meta-fictional search for a poetic muse. The number of versions of this stanza in drafts kept at the Smith College Archives enforces this sense of an initial struggle to settle on a theme.

Both ‘Death Fugue’ and ‘Little Fugue’ use the fugue as a structural principle, whereby a limited number of subjects pass between voices and overlap in different ways. However, whereas in Celan’s poem the fugue enacts the relationship of German culture and Nazi barbarity, ‘Little Fugue’ stages a series of attempted dialogues with an addressee who is missing. The polyphonic arrangement is based on the failed interaction between two basic themes, which are introduced in the first stanza:

   The yew’s black fingers wag;
   Cold clouds go over.
   So the deaf and dumb
   Signal the blind, and are ignored.

Since the correlating impairments prevent the participants from communicating, the poem opens with a message that is continually bound to be lost. A sense of foreboding is amplified by the fact that ‘dumb’ can imply not only an inability to speak (informally it means ‘stupid’) but also an unwillingness to do so, while ‘ignored’ sounds like a willed act, close to ‘ignorance’, indicating that neither of the parties is blameless. The carefully chosen images of the first stanza are developed contrapuntally throughout the poem, given a series of variations and resonances that emphasise the sense of an unbridgeable chasm between the ones sending and receiving the message.
As well as a contrapuntal musical form, the term ‘fugue’ can refer to a ‘flight from one’s own identity’, denoting psychological amnesia or ‘dissociative reaction to shock or emotional stress’ (OED Online: ‘fugue, n’). With this second definition in mind, the ‘cold clouds’ of the first stanza are suggestive of psychic numbness, while ‘go over’ implies an obfuscation of memory, as well as the poem’s procedure of superimposing images. This sense of the fugue as flight or amnesia points to a failure of memory or of access to traumatic knowledge. Indeed, taken together, the two meanings of fugue (musical and psychological) present a combination of intense affect and dissociation that might constitute a possible response to traumatic experience. In my reading of the poem that follows, I will draw out the speaker’s attempt to locate the traumatic event, to penetrate this hole in memory associated with the father’s death.

The central image of the yew tree introduced in the opening line of ‘Little Fugue’ is a frequent trope in Plath’s poems, featuring, for example, in ‘The Moon and the Yew Tree’ (1961), where it is similarly associated with a silent communication in the poem’s final line: ‘the message of the yew tree is blackness – blackness and silence.’ The ‘Gothic shape’ of the yew in this earlier poem reappears in ‘Little Fugue’, which draws on the tree’s associations with death and resurrection (in a draft Plath had written, ‘O I am of a graveyard mind’, conveying the sense of being haunted by the dead). The yew’s fingers wag as though possessed, combining with the corpse-like coldness of the clouds to create a sinister, chilling effect. As ‘yew’ is also a homonym of ‘you’, later in the poem identified with the father (‘such a dark tunnel, my father!’ (line 26), the first stanza anticipates the speaker’s attempt to hear his voice. However, the fact that this message is ‘ignored’ implies a wry mockery of this Gothic Romantic tradition, making the wagging fingers seem exaggerated, even comic. In parallel with this effort to speak with the departed, the first stanza, with its methodical rhythm and precise punctuation, can also be seen to mimic an invocation of a muse. What is interesting – and offers a way of approaching the poem as a whole – is that the speaker seeks
to draw creativity precisely from the source of a trauma, through consultation with her dead father. As the blind ignore the dumb, the stanza may be read as a denial of a sublime encounter, its systematic, detached tone a far cry from free-flowing imagination.

Enhancing a feeling of distance and dissociation from the past, the speaker is positioned as a spectator, watching events unfold from a distance. (In an earlier draft, Plath had written, ‘the landscape silvers; a queer light’, conjuring the image of a black and white film.) Pointing to the voyeurism of her gaze, in a subsequent scenario the speaker ‘couldn’t stop looking’ at ‘the blind pianist’ whose ‘fingers had the noses of weasels’ (lines 8-12). In keeping with the poem’s pattern of synesthetic crossing, the image of seeing morphs into one of hearing as the speaker describes in the next stanza how:

He could hear Beethoven:
Black yew, white cloud,
The horrific complications.
Finger-traps — a tumult of keys (lines 13-16).

Reference to the ‘horrific complications’ might recall the initial reception of Beethoven’s ‘Grosse Fuge’, a composition for string quartet that was accused by critics of the time as ‘inaccessible’, ‘incomprehensible, a confusion of Babel’ (cited by Solomon: 2003, p. 35). Indeed, the final line, ‘Finger-traps – a tumult of keys’, implies a loud, confused noise, a state of confusion or disorder, which puns on the intensity of feeling generated by the music. The line also alludes to a Chinese finger trap, a gag toy in which the unsuspecting victim must push their finger further inside for the trap to loosen. The implication might be that the only way of breaking free of the dead father is by becoming even more ensnared. The image notably recalls other instances in Plath’s poetry, such as the ‘barb wire snare’ in ‘Daddy’, where the tongue stuck in the speaker’s jaw so that she could ‘hardly speak’ (lines 25 and 28). There is thus the sense of being entrapped, in ‘Little Fugue’, by the
horrific complications of affect, whilst the ‘keys’, which might provide a way out of the trap, are in tumultuous disarray – giving the impression of imprisonment within the confusion of a traumatic past.

Significantly, however, the third person formulation ‘he could hear Beethoven’ implies that the chaotic music nevertheless remains inaudible to the speaker. Amplifying the resonance, Beethoven’s notoriously discordant work was written while the composer was going deaf. The reference thus suggests a densely textured cacophony that paradoxically cannot be heard. In turn, this acts as an image for the speaker’s inability to access traumatic memory, leading to her claim: ‘I envy the big noises,/The yew hedge of the Grosse Fuge’ (lines 19-20). Highlighting the contrast, the next stanza continues:

Deafness is something else.
Such a dark funnel, my father!
I see your voice
Black and leafy, as in my childhood (lines 21-24)

In the absence of the ‘big noises’ that she envies, the speaker can only ‘see’ the father’s voice as though he were perhaps an actor in a silent film, or a figure too far away to be audible. The ‘funnel’, a medium of communication, is dark, ambiguously suggesting an obscuration of communication or communication with obscurity. As such it relates to other images in Plath’s poetic vocabulary, such as the ‘black telephone’ that is ‘off at the root’ in ‘Daddy’, and the yew tree itself as a mediator between the living and the dead.

It is significantly at this precise moment that the pleasantly ‘leafy’ voice of the father turns into ‘a yew hedge of orders,/Gothic and barbarous, pure German’. Thus, the silence the speaker hears instead of the ‘big noises’ is substituted by an overtly clichéd image of Nazism, with the adjective ‘pure’ indicating an ironic attitude towards Nazi ideology. Self-consciously conflating Nazi orders with the father’s silence, the speaker acknowledges how she is driven by envy
— not only of Beethoven’s ‘great’ fugue in contrast with her little one, but also of the collective trauma of the Holocaust that would give her own traumatic loss a tangible, recognisable form.

Furthermore, the vilification of the father immediately begins to break down, as the voices of the poem become indistinguishable. The declaration, ‘I am guilty of nothing’ (line 28) can be heard in different ways, either ‘I am not guilty of anything’ or ‘I am guilty of, precisely, nothing’. It thereby seems to parrot the protestations from those who failed to speak up during the Second World War. And yet, placed at the end of the stanza, it is not clear from which subject position the line emanates: it can be read as the voice of the speaker herself, but also retroactively back into the cries of the dead men heard in the voice of the father, and into – as a consequence – the father’s own voice (I take this insight from Rose: 2013, p. 220). Such ambiguity is produced by the poem’s method of substitution, whereby the same subject is passed around different voices in the manner of a fugue. According to the superimposition that results, the yew is both the orders of a persecutor and the cries of a victim.

Contrasting with the sharp demarcation of Nazi and Jew in Celan’s ‘Death Fugue’, the oscillation of roles in ‘Little Fugue’ demonstrates how subject positions are tried on for size, experimented with, but eventually removed. But perhaps ultimately, the ‘nothing’ of which the ‘I’ is or is not guilty signals to a yawning absence in memory. Significantly, then, it is the speaker’s difficulty in reaching her father, in localising the loss, which motivates an invocation of collective trauma for articulating personal suffering. The substitution of the historical situation is provisionally what makes communication with the father possible.

Jumping to the present, stanza eleven opens with ‘similar clouds […] spreading their vacuous sheets’, again relating the great ‘nothing’ of the poem (repeated in lines 28, 38 and 43) to the speaker’s inability to remember: ‘do
you say nothing?/I am lame in the memory’ (lines 43-44). The absence in place of the father (earlier figured by the line, ‘you had one leg’ (line 40) is made accountable for the speaker’s lameness of memory. Allusions to those who refused to speak up during and after the Holocaust (those who ‘say nothing’) have thus been called upon to lend weight to the speaker’s accusation against the dead father – which, thereby, is shown to be unreasonable. The penultimate stanza of the poem demonstrates how the father comes in and out of focus via references to the Holocaust, ultimately puncturing the fiction of his culpability. The speaker recalls a fragmentary memory:

I remember a blue eye,
A briefcase of tangerines (lines 45-46)

The colours of blue and orange in these lines are contrastingly vivid against the black and white background of the poem, emulating a flicker of sudden recollection.

At the same time, the single blue eye is reminiscent of Celan’s ‘Death Fugue’, where it constitutes the only rhyme:

this Death is ein Meister aus Deutschland his eye it is blue
he shoots you with shot made of lead shoots you level and true (line 30)

The clumsiness of this rhyme stands out in ‘Death Fugue’, as a mockery of Aryan purity and high cultural tradition. Calling on this Nazi cliché to picture the father, ‘Little Fugue’ then adds the incongruous image of a ‘briefcase of tangerines’, evoking a Christmas treat that, as in Katherine Mansfield's short story 'Bliss' (1918), distils a bittersweet sense of occasion. The association with Nazism is thus swiftly supplanted by the image a father who brings gifts home to his family. The setting transfers to an ordinary domestic scene, as
the realisation comes that ‘this was a man then, then!’ (line 47), rather than a Nazi villain. And yet, this statement also appears like a non sequitur, since the tropes of a blue eye and a briefcase of tangerines do not, after all, add up to a man.

The line, ‘this was a man’ is in exemplary instance of intertextuality in Plath’s poem, in this case gathering together ideas about memory and its lack. It can be heard as an allusion to Primo Levi’s If This Is A Man (1947), and particularly the title poem that prefaces the book, which addresses: ‘you who live safe / In your warm houses / You who find, returning in the evening, / Hot food and friendly faces’ (2004, p. 17). The father carrying briefcases of tangerines can be seen to belong to this category. Levi urges his addressee to ‘carve [these words] into your hearts…Repeat them to your children’. The implicit accusation of this allusion is thus, once more, the father’s silence, his failure to register the atrocity, and to share it with his children.

‘If this was a man’ also recalls Hamlet’s remark to Horatio about his recently deceased father, ‘He was a man. Take him for all in all./I shall not look upon his like again’ (1.2.186-7), which is striking for its apparent understatement and emptiness of particular content. Like Hamlet, the speaker of ‘Little Fugue’ is trying to find words for her father, but she can only say something abstract, ‘this was a man, then!’ The stanza concludes by accounting for this inability to speak with an emphasis on her lack of memory, ‘death opened, like a black tree, blackly’ (line 48) — a line that analogously rehearses an utter failure of poetic language. Here the poem uses an image of life (a tree opening) to depict death, adding to the pathos but also the logic of inversions in the poem. The yew tree is not, then, the father himself, but rather his death, a hollow blackness that swallows up colour and language. As with the earlier image of the funnel, it is the silence that is the problem, leading only to a gap in memory where the father should be. This fits in with the poem’s method of substitution: ‘yew’ in place of ‘you’ and, as I have been arguing, a Nazi or a
passive bystander in place of un-localised traumatic loss. Indeed, either the
speaker caricatures the father (‘Gothic and barbarous’) or he is silent.

Recapitulating the two main themes of the fugue, the final stanza moves into
the present tense:

I survive the while,
Arranging my morning.
These are my fingers, this is my baby.
The clouds are a marriage dress, of that pallor (lines 49-52).

These lines are torn between moving forward and moving backward in time,
between acting out and working through traumatic loss. While ‘morning’ looks
to the future, the homonym ‘mourning’ looks to the past. Similarly, ‘survive’
can be read negatively (as in, she only survives) but also as a testament to
the speaker’s courage. An earlier draft had the subsequent line, ‘in such
colours as the new month may offer’, which seems to imply a sense of hope,
openness to what may come. And indeed, the speaker’s arranging of her
mourning can be understood as the very act of writing this poem, breaking the
silence despite being ‘lame in the memory’. The possessive pronoun, ‘my
fingers’ and ‘my baby’, could be read as a claim to aesthetic agency: now she
is creating her own fugue, situating herself in a canon that includes both
Beethoven and Celan.

And yet, there is something automatic in the way she numbly gesticulates, as
though she must remind herself of what is hers. The final line of the poem,
‘the clouds are a marriage dress, of that pallor’, again suggest a tension
between the old and the new, the past and the future. A wedding dress points
to the promise of a new life, but its pallor has connotations of death, as though
something were still obstructing the speaker’s view, smothering her
speech. The poem thereby ends with a lack of union, like the irreconcilable
figures of Margareta and Shulamith at the end of ‘Death Fugue’. Alternatively,
the ending perhaps indicates a union precisely with the void, which, remaining featureless, the poem has failed to fill in. Building on the double meaning of ‘vacuous sheets’ (line 42), the conjugal allusion may attest to speaker’s melancholic desire for merging with the lost/absent object.

Indeed, the methodical tone of these final lines is in keeping with the opening of the poem, detached as though the speaker were viewing her own life from far away. After all, the logic of the fugue can only progress by what has gone before, signalling a future already determined by the past. This temporality of repetition is representative of the non-linear sequence presented by the poem as a whole, and explains why it is difficult for the reader to establish a singular narrative. The continuous re-patterning may indicate the speaker’s struggle to make sense of her past, to situate herself against her personal and aesthetic inheritance. The experience of reading the poem, too, can feel like trying to solve a puzzle, groping for connection when the pieces do not quite cohere. This lack of coherence can be seen as a symptom of the fact that, in the absence of memory, an array of surface-images is grafted together. Interestingly, in a draft, the poem begins, ‘the yew’s black fingers agitate…/like cut outs of a dozen Christmas trees’. This image constitutes another reference to German culture, once again only a flattened replica. Indeed, ‘cut outs’ offers an image of the poem as a collage, assembled from materials from different contexts. It also denotes a person perceived as characterless or lacking in individuality, and thereby applies to the featurelessness in place of the father. Moreover, a cut out is the breaking of an electric circuit, enforcing, therefore, the sense of a fissure in memory.

‘Little Fugue’ thus circulates around a mnemonic void, figured throughout by images of blindness, deafness and lameness, enacting a series of substitutions for a sense of indeterminate traumatic loss. Freud writes that in melancholia, ‘one cannot see clearly what it is that has been lost’, signalling to an essential misrecognition on the part of the subject (p. 245). In ‘Little Fugue’, the speaker’s search for the lost object proceeds by way of what
might be termed ‘melancholic substitution’. A ‘substitute’ may refer to ‘a person taking the place or filling the role of another; a replacement’, or ‘a person who or thing which becomes the object of love (or some other emotion) which is deprived of its natural outlet’ (*OED Online*: ‘substitute, n.’, 4.a and f). The term can thus be used to denote the way in which Holocaust imagery stands in for the speaker’s absent memory, projected on to the blank screen of an otherwise inaccessible past. However, while this imagery may allow momentary access to traumatic affect, the process of melancholic substitution is performed from a self-reflexive distance. Notably, references to Nazism are always precipitated by an admission of a lack of memory; furthermore, they appear generic, glib and obviously insincere. ‘Little Fugue’ thus draws a parallel between an absence of traumatic memory and of poetic inspiration. Struggling to situate herself within her personal and aesthetic inheritance, the speaker highlights how invocation of the Holocaust image fails, both as a way of articulating loss and as a source of creativity.

As I have proposed, the Holocaust references in ‘Little Fugue’ can read in light of the self-conscious intertextuality of the poem. The speaker inhabits this narrative of trauma whilst at the same time showing awareness that it does not belong to her. Throughout, she is positioned as spectator, attributing to herself a voyeuristic interest in others’ suffering. As such, the association of her father with a Nazi, and his silence with that of those who failed to speak up, are shown to be staged. She therefore acknowledges that there is no-one at whom to direct her anger, for the father perpetrates only insofar as he is absent.

What ‘Little Fugue’ demonstrates, then, is how the stereotype of a Nazi acts as a stopgap for the aporia in language created by an inaccessible traumatic past. Thus the clichés of Nazism in ‘Little Fugue’ are insignias of forgetting; underlying the speaker’s rhetoric of victimhood is an inability to localise her childhood trauma. In place of silence, the ‘big noises’ of the speaker’s fantasy of the Holocaust can be heard – though, as I have argued, this invocation is
both provisional and self-reflexive. The speaker tries on but ultimately discards the roles of perpetrator and victim, and after all is left with nothing. Appropriating the Holocaust fails to enable the process of memory-work and, in parallel, that of writing a poem. In the next section, I will further explore the idea that amnesia leads to a fantasy of victimhood in Plath’s poem ‘Daddy’, which, as I will suggest, gives insight into the allure of victimhood as that which might recuperate loss.

Part Four: ‘Every woman adores a Fascist’

A dramatic monologue spoken in the first person, ‘Daddy’ is a much more theatrical poem than ‘Little Fugue’. It is also much more combative, as the speaker directly confronts her father and, as the second-person addressee, in a sense the reader too. It is interesting to compare Plath’s recording of the poem with that of Celan reading ‘Death Fugue’, because in both cases the force of affect is audible. Celan read with ‘a cold heat’, one friend said, and even made a slight mistake when he came excitedly to ‘jab the earth deeper…sing up and play’ (cited by Felstiner: 1995, p. 32). Plath’s articulation is comparably caustic, her clipped pronunciation conveying something like a mixture of vitriol and vulnerability. However, whereas the emotion in Celan’s voice seems heartbreakingly fitting for the poem’s subject, the affective intensity of Plath’s reading is somehow at odds with what the poem represents. While the formal features of ‘Daddy’ combine to create pathos, the content feels insincere – resulting, I will suggest, from a sense that it has been cut and pasted from recycled images. In fact, the speaker seems to inhabit these images parodically, establishing a self-reflexive distance that makes them questionable. ‘Daddy’ thus draws attention to a motivation behind the method of melancholic substitution I observed in ‘Little Fugue’, showing how the speaker’s attempt to recover traumatic memory fuels fantasies of victimisation. As I will argue, the poem thereby challenges identification with the subject position of victim, as well as conveying the discrepancy of affect
and representation that indicates the difficulty of bringing traumatic experience into language.

‘Daddy’ ostensibly presents the victim narrative of a daughter’s liberation from an oppressive father, though, already, this narrative is complicated by the fact that he is dead. The poem begins with ‘You do not do, you do not do / Any more, black shoe’, announcing the moment of casting off his unbearable hold on her psyche. The last line of the poem establishes an apparently definitive break: ‘daddy, you bastard, I’m through’. In this narrative, the father is identified with a Nazi, the speaker with a Jew: he is the ‘black shoe’ in which she has lived, ‘poor and white’, for thirty years, ‘barely daring to breathe or Achoo’ (lines 2-5). ‘I have always been scared of you’ (line 41), she points the finger, addressing him as a ‘panzer-man’ (45) with a ‘Luftwaffe’ (42) and ‘Aryan eye’ (44), a brutish ‘Fascist’ (48) and ‘swastika’ (46) who is ‘chuffing’ her off ‘like a Jew’ (32), a ‘devil’ and ‘black man’ who ‘bit my pretty red heart in two’ (54-56). If the poem is read as a straightforward victim narrative that uses the Nazi and Jew as a metaphor for personal suffering, then the Holocaust reference certainly seems outrageously disproportionate. However, this sense of a flagrant lack of proportion can be understood as an effect of the poem. Instead of reading ‘Daddy’ as ‘one of the most nakedly confessional poems ever written’ (Phillips: 2017), I would like to draw attention to its processes of construction.

As discussed in Chapter One, my project is to reframe confession as a genre that is inherently intertextual. This characteristic is exemplified by ‘Daddy’ as a tissue of quotations drawn from innumerable centres of culture. The poem assembles wide-ranging literary and historical references, from nursery rhymes and Gothic folklore to fascism and concentration camps, and thus creates a multidimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend or clash. This collage-like formation has a discomforting effect, as the poem brings different worlds together without necessarily upholding their different values.
Especially troubling, for example, is the speaker’s characterisation of herself in terms of nursery rhymes, recalling the tale of the old woman who lived in a shoe, in juxtaposition with her identification with Jews being taken off to ‘Dachau, Auschwitz, Belsen’ (line 33). ‘Daddy’ foregrounds the perverse incongruity of such juxtapositions, drawing attention to its own trivialisation of Jewish suffering. Indeed, the dramatic structure of the poem, its use of caricature and hyperbole, prohibits any wallowing in unchecked pathos, offering a parodic treatment of subject matter that could have been destroyed by self-pity or sensationalism. Thus, in my reading of the poem, I will suggest how the narrative of victimhood is parodied. The speaker assumes the stereotypically weak subject positions of a child and specifically, a little girl, all the while drawing attention to the fact that she is self-infantilising in order to play the victim. The identification with victimhood is especially controversial when her tone becomes flirtatious and, I will argue, gives insight into the libidinal pull of traumatisation.

‘Daddy’ has a flippant, choppy and conversational swing that immediately compels the reader’s attention. (Interestingly, Plath herself reportedly described the poem as ‘light verse’ (Dickie: 1979, p. 160).) The jaunty rhythm gets going in the first stanza:

You do not do, you do not do
Any more, black shoe
In which I have lived like a foot
For thirty years, poor and white,
 Barely daring to breathe or Achoo (lines 1-5).

While the familiar ‘Daddy’ of the title has already suggested a childish voice, the Mother Goose rhymes (the repetition of babyish ‘oo’ syllables in ‘you’, ‘do’, ‘shoe’ and ‘Achoo’) evoke the sounds of a nursery. There is a particular echo of the rhyme, ‘there was an old lady who lived in a shoe’, which, about a
mother who whips her children, implies a sinister undercurrent. Rich in symbolism, often with dark undertones, childhood writing was evidently of interest to Plath: she wrote as a child, herself, and created many stories about and for children, including the ‘The Bed Book’ (published posthumously in 1976).

The accusatory repetition of ‘you do not do’ also recalls a rhyme in the Grimm brothers’ version of ‘Cinderella’ (1812), which is sung by a pair of pigeons:

Rucke di guck, rucke di guck,
Blut ist im Schuck. (= Schuh):
Der Schuck ist zu klein,
Die rechte Braut sitzt noch daheim.\(^{11}\)

(Looky, look, look at the shoe she took.
There’s blood all over, and the shoe’s too small.
She’s not the right bride you met at the ball.’ (Zipes: 2010, p. 310)

The story of Cinderella, premised on the death of a parent and rewarding a daughter’s faithful mourning, offers an interesting backdrop to Plath’s poem. When Cinderella’s widowed father remarries, she is banished to the kitchen by her stepsisters, where she is forced to work morning until evening and sleep ‘next to the hearth in the ashes’. ‘This is why’, the Grimm brothers explain, ‘she always looked so dusty and dirty and why they all called her Cinderella’, her very name thereby associating with funeral ashes, and indeed she visits her mother’s grave three times every day (Zipes, p. 301).

Later in the story, one of the stepsisters cuts off her toe and the other her heel, in order to fit inside the slipper and thus marry the prince. However, the stepsisters’ deceit is uncovered by the song of the two pigeons, which are perched on the branch of a hazel tree above the mother’s grave. The slipper

\(^{11}\) Text available at: https://germanstories.vcu.edu/grimm/aschen_dual.html [Accessed 26 Nov. 2019].
eventually finds its rightful owner, and the story ends with a wedding between Cinderella and the prince, while the stepsisters are punished with blindness.

With its array of overdetermined images, ‘Daddy’ may be seen to inhabit this fairy-tale world, which is also a world of unconscious infantile fantasy, according to a tradition of psychoanalytic interpretation. In his reading of ‘Cinderella’, Ernest Jones suggests there was a custom of throwing an old slipper or shoe after a newlywed couple:

> One would regard the object thrown as a symbol for the (fruitful) female organ itself, an interpretation that may be supported by quoting the decidedly broad saying that used to accompany it "May you fit her as well as my foot fits this old shoe" (1964, p. 10).

While reference to this custom is un-sourced, Jones’s approach exemplifies a history of psychoanalytic interest in the possible fantasies underlying fairy-tale tropes. Plath’s poem similarly underscores the presence of sexuality in childhood. The image of the black shoe, for example, can be seen to anticipate an incestuous implication of the line ‘the tongue stuck in my jaw’ (line 25), which can be read as the father’s German tongue now ‘stuck’ inside her. This union is a situation from which she tries to escape, for, as in the fairy-tale ‘the shoe is too tight,/This bride is not right!’, similarly the black shoe of ‘Daddy’ has become claustrophobic. Indeed, the speaker may have to dismember herself in order to get out.

Continuing along a psychoanalytic vein with an allusion to Oedipus, the second stanza opens with a reference to the murder of the father:

> Daddy, I have had to kill you.
> You died before I had time—(lines 6-7)
This couplet implies the speaker was denied the opportunity to kill her father, with the result that she has been stuck at a particular moment of her past, and thus necessitating his murder in the present. As the poem later indicates, this missed moment is the father’s death when she was a child: ‘I was ten when they buried you’ (line 57). This was the story given by Plath herself in a radio interview, in which she said the poem was about a girl whose father died ‘while she thought he was God’ (note how the third person differentiates the speaker from the poet) (Plath: 2004, p. 194).

The next line of the stanza describes the father as ‘marble-heavy, a bag full of God’ (line 8). As well as the grandeur implied by the reference to marble, the image also creates the sense of an oppressive burden, a dead weight like a grave the speaker must lug around with her. At the same time, however, ‘God’ is a metaphysical, and thus weightless, entity. The oscillation between weight and weightlessness emphasised by the odd grammar of this line is in keeping with shift in perspective brought about by another association of ‘marble’ and ‘bag’, that is, with a child’s toy. Colloquially, ‘bag’ can also be testicles in German (‘Beutel’), again enforcing a sexual undercurrent in the poem’s allusions to childhood.

The final lines of the stanza offer another strangely assembled image, in which the father again looms larger than life:

   Ghastly statue with one gray toe
   Big as a Frisco seal (lines 9-10)

The image of a statue suggests how the father is a memorialised figure, frozen in time, thereby indicating both the stagnation of his image in the speaker’s memory, and its continuing influence on her. ‘Ghastly’ suggests horror, perhaps relating to the disproportionate size of the toe; and, since there is only one of them, the body is broken up, fragmented (though a second meaning of ‘seal’ is joining things together, exemplifying the opposing
forces of attraction of repelling enclosed in the poem. Notably, whereas the speaker was ‘like a foot’ in the first stanza, now the reference is to the father’s ‘one gray toe’—a sequence already suggesting an exchange of places or subject positions. The toe could almost be seen as a shard of Plath’s earlier poem, ‘The Colossus’, in which the speaker scales a vast, sphinx-like patriarchal statue, trying to piece it together. In this poem, the speaker crawls ‘like an ant in mourning’ (line 12), a contradictory image suggesting that, like the speaker of ‘Daddy’, she inhabits a provisional metaphorical world in which the scattered parts do not add to make a whole. Significantly, echoes of ‘The Colossus’ in ‘Daddy’ enforce Plath’s idiosyncratic mythology of the father, whilst at the same time exhibiting the process by which she canonises her own poetry. The image of a statue may also recall the legend of Don Juan, which forms the basis of Mozart’s opera, Don Giovanni (premiered in 1787). Like ‘Little Fugue’, then, ‘Daddy’ alludes to classical music from the German-speaking world. The key image of this opera is the horrific statue of the dead father who comes back to life to take revenge on his murderer. This subtext in ‘Daddy’ thus enhances the ominous spectacle of the father figure that will not be laid to rest.

The enjambment between second and third stanzas graphically conveys the father’s stretched out body:

   And a head in the freakish Atlantic  
   Where it pours bean green over blue  
   In the waters off beautiful Nauset (lines 11-13)

The image of the father’s body, drowned in the Atlantic Ocean, is oversized and oddly disproportionate, the adjective ‘freakish’ implying something very strange and unexpected and thus perhaps an allusion to the impact of his death. Unnaturally frozen in time, he looms excessively large, as though the speaker is still seeing him through a child’s eyes. And yet the series of mixed metaphors suggest that his image does not cohere in the speaker’s memory;
they take the reader into the realm of fantasy where he appears overblown, distorted and grotesque.

Rather than presenting an orderly picture, therefore, everything is muddled up in a way that is comparable to the confusion of senses in the earlier poem, ‘Little Fugue’, which ultimately signify a lack of memory. Similarly seeking to locate the lost father, the speaker of ‘Daddy’ explains how ‘I used to pray to recover you./Ach du’ (lines 14-15), while her use of the past tense implies that she has long given up hope of retrieving him. The stanza ends with a switch into German, ‘Ach, du’, signalling how recovery of the father is next attempted via his German language.

The start of the fourth stanza explains how the speaker wanted to recover her father ‘in the German tongue, in the Polish town’ (line 16). This may be an allusion to the Polish Corridor, which was invaded by Nazi Germany at the start of the Second World War, or more generally the complex history of Germany and Poland. The reference is thus suggestive of a history of displacement, of the loss of homeland and identity, and indeed, in the next line this Polish town is ‘scraped flat by the roller/Of wars, wars, wars’ (lines 17-18). This is another image that does not seem to hold together, for to scrape is to drag or pull rather than to flatten; the effect is an emphasis on violence. Repetition of ‘wars’ mimics the cyclical motion of a roller, indicative of a repetitive and comprehensive obliteration. At the same time, the broad generalisation suggests only a limited, abstract impression of the past.

In the aftermath of these wars, the problem of locating the father has to do again with language and its deficiency:

    But the name of the town is common.
    My Polack friend

    Says there are a dozen or two.
So I could never tell where you
Put your foot, your root,
I could never talk to you (lines 19-24).

The derogatory term ‘Polack’ again underlines the speaker’s ignorance, enhanced by the confusion between Germany and Poland in these lines. Furthermore, ‘a dozen or two’ seems excessively, ludicrously vague. Thus, the speaker’s language not only fails to pinpoint a locale; it also obscures historical and geographical detail. Meanwhile, ‘root’ recalls the yew tree of ‘Little Fugue’, similarly relating to the speaker’s failure to find and communicate with her father. Here, again, rootlessness is shown as an incentive for (mis)appropriating the historical reference.

The next lines of the poem perform how the speaker’s inability to recover her father impacts on her own ability to define herself:

The tongue stuck in my jaw.

It stuck in a barb wire snare.


I could hardly speak (lines 25-28).

Stuttering at the threshold of self-identification, the first person pronoun sticks in the throat. Perhaps the speaker’s inability to place her father means that she is also unable to place herself, attesting to the Lacanian idea that the father’s law is what provides entrance into language. Equally, the repetition of ‘ich’ indicates an excess of self and no sense of what to do with it, all articulated and nowhere to go.

Such overt narcissism may indicate the speaker’s self-acknowledgment of the illegitimacy of invoking Holocaust imagery, for the ‘barb wire snare’ can be read as a concentrationary image, pre-empting the speaker’s identification
with a Jewish victim. These lines perform a universalizing gesture: because she cannot place the father he is everywhere. Furthermore, the speaker makes a shift from not being able to locate the father, to seeing him as an enemy, specifically a German Nazi, while in turn positioning herself as a Jew. Thus, as in ‘Little Fugue’, it is precisely the failure to recover the father – geographically, historically and linguistically – that can be seen to motivate the invocation of Holocaust imagery. It is worth noting that this gesture is situated in the past, ‘I thought every German was you’ (line 28), and, later in the poem, ‘I began to talk like a Jew’ (line 34; italics mine) – a retrospective perspective rather than something that is happening now, emphasising how the speaker is, and indeed always was, at a distance.

It is the speaker’s failure to recover the father, to localise him and therefore also herself, that especially seems to prompt identification with Nazi and Jew. As in ‘Little Fugue’, the Holocaust metaphor provides a language, if only provisionally. The self-reflexivity of this identification can be detected in the following lines:

And the language obscene.

An engine, an engine
Chuffing me off like a Jew.
A Jew to Dachau, Auschwitz, Belsen.
I began to talk like a Jew.
I think I may be a Jew (lines 30-35).

The engine that chuffs the speaker off is made up of obscene language: the German language of the father or, significantly, the very language that is producing this metaphor. Not only does the adjective ‘obscene’ suggest the moral offensiveness of this language; it also introduces a sexual dimension (a previous draft had ‘pornographic’) that seems to accompany the speaker’s sudden sense of a gain in power (Smith College Archives). Like the previous
‘wars, wars, wars’, the repetition of an engine speaks both to the relentless, mechanical violence of the Nazi genocide, but also to the rhythmic thrusting of sexual penetration. Similarly, ‘chuffing me off’ conveys the regular sharp puffing sound of the trains that carried Jews to the camps, and at the same time the idea of being led to orgasm. The combination thus implies the subtext of an ‘obscene’ and ‘pornographic’ libidinal interest in identifying with the subject position of victim. The ‘obscene’ moreover relates to a horrific thing that cannot, by definition, be shown; and thus sustains the sense of an unrepresentable core that the poem necessarily fails to articulate.

The speaker’s enjoyment can be associated with the fact that the father only begins to speak when he is framed as the enemy; she enjoys his power over her, preferring a fascist father to none at all. In turn, identifying with a Jewish victim gives her a language – from ‘I could hardly speak’ to: ‘I began to talk like a Jew. / I think I may well be a Jew’ (lines 28, 34-5). Here, the speaker plays into stereotypes of the defective, inferior, even deceptive Jewish language. The ‘obscene’ language thus constructs her as a speaker of something inferior, or at least leads her to fantasise about this construction. In the next stanza, she elaborates on this proximity she is arguing between herself and a Jew, with points of reference that are exaggeratedly clichéd:

The snows of the Tyrol, the clear beer of Vienna
Are not very pure or true (lines 36-7).

That these lines almost read like a tourism advert is indicative of the speaker’s awareness that she is merely visiting the Jewish identity, and that it does not belong to her. Furthermore, the ideas that she is citing are not ‘pure’ or ‘true’, as the fascist regime liked to see itself. In the next lines, references to her ‘gipsy ancestress’, ‘weird luck’ and ‘Taroc pack’ (38-9) paint a stereotypical portrait of Jewishness, prejudicially equating the Jewish people with another group that is discriminated against. Notably, the feminine ‘ancestress’ situates the speaker in the maternal line, in accordance with matrilineal descent in
Judaism. As the only reference to the mother in the poem, it is an identification that would place the daughter in a sexual relation with the father.

The identification with a Jewish victim and, simultaneously, her father’s lover, gives the speaker a sense of empowerment. For example ‘I have always been scared of you’ (line 41) implies that she is no longer scared, the italics suggesting the pointing of a vindictive finger. More clichés are used to characterise the father in the next lines: ‘your neat mustache/And your Aryan eye, bright blue’, ‘your Luftwaffe, your gobbledygoo’ (lines 42-44). But notably it is his language that is now seen as deficient and babyish (‘gobbledygoo’), while she is in charge, indicating a reversal of roles. In the following line, ‘O you’ is translated into English, as though the speaker is finding her own language, and envisioning him as a Nazi is giving her the strength to fight back. She is able to belittle and condemn him, ‘Not God but a swastika/So black no sky could squeak through’ (lines 46-47), the Nazi symbol a device for caricaturing the father’s oppressiveness, while empowering herself. Blocking out the sky, the father is positioned on top of the speaker, another potentially sexual image. ‘Squeak’ suggests the material of leather, which not only refers back to the image of the shoe at the start of the poem, but also the leather subculture. There is thus the sense of a role-play, in which positions of Nazi and Jew are theatrically, provocatively performed, as the following lines corroborate:

Every woman adores a Fascist,
The boot in the face, the brute
Brute heart of a brute like you (lines 48-50).

‘Every woman adores a Fascist’, the most controversial line in the poem insofar as it makes explicit the eroticization of Jewish victimhood, also evokes a lyric from the popular song ‘Ship Ahoy!’ (1909), ‘All the nice girls love a sailor’. Alluding to a light-hearted fling, the cadence of this line seems utterly dissonant with its content. The form also mimics a childhood phrase, such as
'every good boy deserves favour', consistent with the nursery-rhyme character of the poem. The repeated ‘boo’ sounds might then be heard as a mock sob, as though the speaker is playing the crybaby, and thereby indicating a disturbing sexual fantasy at the heart of the poem.

The allusion to childhood continues in the next stanza, turning the desire to be dominated into the desire to be fathered:

You stand at the blackboard, daddy,  
In the picture I have of you (lines 51-52).

The ‘daddy’ address is a reminder that this is a child’s voice, while the blackboard evokes the context of a schoolroom. That a blackboard is used to teach children language again points to the fact that the father, psychoanalytically speaking, is the figure of the law allowing accession to the symbolic. The picture, like the earlier image of the statue, freezes a moment of reality, in which the father appears as an authority figure, larger than life, to the child. Then, employing a girlish lexicon, the speaker (an adult) parodies the role of victim as she describes her father’s picture:

A cleft in your chin instead of your foot  
But no less a devil for that, no not  
Any less the black man who

Bit my pretty red heart in two (lines 53-56).

The ‘cleft’ has thereby transferred from father to daughter, as her heart is split in two (further figured by the line break between stanzas), like the way the lameness of the father becomes the speaker’s inability to remember in ‘Little Fugue’. Thus again, the roles of daughter and father, victim and oppressor, are blurred. Indeed, the (unjustified) reason he is a devil becomes clear: ‘I was ten when they buried you’ – the speaker thereby acknowledges, as in
‘Little Fugue’, that the only crime the father has committed is that of dying on her. Use of the third person, ‘they’, suggests the daughter herself did not participate in the burial; that in fact she has not managed to bury him, to grieve him properly and thereby move on.

This failure to mourn, the narrative of the poem suggests, is what gives rise to the speaker’s construction of various models of the father, and, as a consequence, also her construction of herself. In the next stanzas, she explains how:

At twenty I tried to die
And get back, back, back to you.
I thought even the bones would do.

But they pulled me out of the sack,
And they stuck me together with glue (lines 58-62).

The attempt to get ‘back, back, back’ is perhaps one of the reasons why the speaker adopts a childish voice in this poem – to return to a time in which he was alive. Notably, the repetition is also poetically feeble, sounding like a desperate attempt to make rhyme and metre work. Attention is thus drawn to the way in which ‘Daddy’ sustains two levels, involving the attempt both to articulate traumatic loss and to write a successful poem. Suggesting an absence of agency, ‘they’ (again, in the third person), pulled her ‘out of the sack’, a phrase that additionally implies the end of sexual intercourse. Stuck together with glue, it is as if the speaker were a collage, assembled out of whatever images are to hand in the outside world. It was at this moment, the speaker tells us, that she ‘knew what to do/I made a model of you’ (lines 63-64). Thus, just as she is stuck together, his identity is also moulded.

Not only is he a ‘model’ in the sense of an example, he is also a construction – a representation or replica that, like the earlier image of the statue, cannot
move of its own accord. The active formulation, ‘I made a model’, emphasises the speaker’s self-consciousness in creating images for the father. Making collages and constructing models are both activities that might be done in childhood, again suggesting that these are especially childish imagos of her father and herself. The father is thus transformed symbolically through the poem’s series of substitutions, connected by the word ‘black’, used so far to describe the shoe, the swastika, the blackboard at which he stands – a word that denotes an absence of colour or, in Plath’s poetic index, memory.

The final ‘model’ of the father is the husband, ‘A man in black with a Meinkampf look’ (line 65), implying that the speaker is acting out her relationship with her father in the present. The allusion to Hitler’s autobiographical work again caricatures the father as a Nazi; his ‘look’, as well as emphasising this is just an image, can be read as the way he looks to the speaker, or indeed the way he looks at her – thus demonstrating how the metaphor is used to bring him to life. She is implicated in this fantasy, involving ‘the rack and the screw’, when she says, ‘I do, I do’ (lines 66-7), transforming the ‘you do not do’ of the start of the poem into a marriage vow. ‘So’, the speaker declares to her father, ‘I’m finally through./The black telephone’s off at the root/ The voices just can’t worm through’ (lines 68-70).

The black telephone, a regular trope in Plath’s writing, is now off at the root, which suggests the disconnection of possible communication (the word ‘root’ also recalls the yew tree in ‘Little Fugue’, where it is similarly a ‘go-between’ between the living and the dead), while the worm alludes to his decaying corpse. Thus it is as if the speaker has finally been able free herself:

If I’ve killed one man, I’ve killed two—
The vampire who said he was you
And drank my blood for a year,
Seven years, if you want to know.
Daddy, you can lie back now (lines 81-85).
Linking to the earlier line, ‘I have had to kill you’, implies that it is in the figure of the husband that the speaker has killed the father, acting out her revenge.

The metaphor of the vampire highlights the way in which the father has refused to stay dead in the speaker’s psyche, returning to torment her, to subsist on her life-source. The image of him drinking her blood has erotic overtones that are sexually ambiguous, an ambiguity or role-reversal that continues in the final lines of the poem:

Daddy, you can lie back now.

There’s a stake in your fat black heart
And the villagers never liked you.
They are dancing and stamping on you.
They always knew it was you.
Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I’m through (lines 75-80).

This stanza reads like phony medieval folklore involving elaborate rituals for identifying a vampire, and thus indicates the speaker’s desire for a public punishment of the blood-sucking father. At the same time, the phrasing of ‘the villagers never liked you’ sounds childish, evoking the politics of a playground.

Despite the apparent decisiveness of this final verdict on the father, the syntax is decidedly ambiguous. As Rose has observed, the ‘stake’ in the father’s ‘fat black heart’ (compared with the speaker’s ‘pretty red’ one) can be read, for example, as a sign of continuing investment (2013, p.233). Meanwhile, ‘through’, taken either as a preposition or as an adverb, has multiple implications. If read in the context of the earlier reference to the black telephone off at the root, ‘through’ represents a channel of communication that the last line succeeds in reopening and implies, therefore, the speaker is ‘through’ with her own life. Thus ‘I’m through’ captures a sense of being
suspended between different options: through with the father, through to him and/or herself through.

This state of a suspension is a logic that runs through the entire poem, for the very movement forward the speaker seeks to make (casting off the black shoe) at the same time loops backwards – since ‘through’ is also to return to the father, as an earlier line put it, ‘back, back, back to you’. The repetition of the word ‘you’ eighteen times in the poem, often featuring as the last word in the line, counterproductively invokes the presence she is trying to dispel. This paradoxical temporality is additionally suggested by the poem’s structure. The rhyme scheme propels a circular motion as if the poem is on a perverse merry-go-round: the rhyme, ‘I’m through’ sends the reader back to the start of the poem, ‘you do not do’ – back, then, to the ‘you’, from which it seems the speaker cannot escape fully. As the poem indicates, the reason for this repetition is traumatic, relating to the temporality of an event that was missed, encapsulated by the lines: ‘I have had to kill you/You died before I had time’ (6-7). Due to a loss that took place prematurely, before the speaker was ready, the ‘you’ is ultimately unidentifiable. As Rosenfeld and subsequent critics have pointed out, the homonym between ‘you’ and the German ‘du’ turns ‘you do not do’ into ‘you you not you’, emphasising the insistent presence of an addressee who is absent.

The temporality of ‘Daddy’ may attest to a retrospective attempt to master a traumatic loss. As such, it can be interestingly approached through an example of the ‘compulsion to repeat’ given by Freud in Beyond the Pleasure Principle (1920), namely, a repetitive game that Freud observed in the behaviour of his one-and-a-half-year-old grandson. In this game, which Freud called ‘Fort-da’, the child plays with a bobbin attached to a string, throwing it over the side of its cot while making the sound ‘ooo’ and then retrieving it with an accompanying ‘aaa’. The child thereby compensates for the uncontrolled comings and goings of the mother, ‘by himself staging the disappearance and return of the objects within his reach’. Thus the game relates, in Freud’s view,
to ‘the child’s great cultural achievement – the instinctual renunciation (that is, the renunciation of instinctual satisfaction) which he had made in allowing his mother to go away without protesting’. However, as Freud notes, a puzzling aspect of the game is that ‘the first act, that of departure, was staged as a game in itself and far more frequently than the episode in its entirety, with its pleasurable ending’ (1975, p. 15). This version of the game thus seems to suggest the acting out of a compulsive repetition of a traumatic experience, ‘beyond the pleasure principle’. The same temporality can be seen in Plath’s ‘Daddy’, in which the speaker seeks to overcome the premature loss of her father. Reeling the father in so that so she can cast him away again, the speaker is suspended between working through and acting out the trauma of her father’s death; between, that is, finite mourning and interminable melancholia.

Notably, in Jacques Lacan’s gloss of the ‘Fort-da’ game, what is repeated is the moment of the child’s birth into language, which, as in the Freudian scenario, is predicated on a renunciation. For Lacan, it is not simply a case of the child mastering deprivation by assuming it, ‘for his action destroys the object that it causes to appear and disappear by bringing about its absence and presence in advance’ (2006, p. 260). As Lacan notes, the object is embodied in the symbolic pair of the dichotomy of phonemes – ‘fort’ and ‘da’ – so that the child becomes part of the system of concrete discourse of those around itself. In this way, ‘subjectivity simultaneously masters its dereliction and gives birth to the symbol’, a gesture that can be characterised as separation from the (m)other or, equivalently, entrance into language. Crucially, for Lacan, what is perceived to be lost in this moment of symbolic castration – the mother’s desire – was never truly possessed; that is to say, the preoedipal symbiosis is a fictive projection from a postoedipal position. As Lacan writes, ‘it is, of course, clear that what is supposed to be found cannot be found again. It is in the nature that the object as such is lost. It will never be found again’ (Lacan: 1997, p. 52). In ‘Daddy’, the speaker appears to be stuck at entrance of language, ‘Ich, ich, ich, ich,/I could hardly speak’; ‘the
tongue stuck in my jaw’ perhaps implying that the incestuous wish has not been renounced.

Tracing the vicissitudes of the ‘Fort-da’ game in Lacan’s thought allows observation of two overlapping scenarios in Plath’s ‘Daddy’, the loss of the real father, but also the absence of perfect union with the (m)other. As noted, the difficulty in localising the father is staged by the elusive temporality of the poem, attesting to the confusion of traumatic experience. In fact, the poem illustrates the way in which loss and absence may be merged into one from the perspective of the traumatised psyche. As a result, the historical trauma of the father’s death is elided with the structural trauma on which subjectivity is predicated; the hole in memory is generalised into the absence at the heart of language.

Significantly, this elision may account for the libidinal draw of victimisation in the poem. As noted, there is a distinct erotic current running through Plath’s language: from the ‘obscene’ (formerly ‘pornographic’) language that chuffs the speaker off, to the scandalous sexual role-playing of Nazi and Jew. The conflation of absence and loss can give rise to the misconception that absence may somehow be recuperated or made good, that symbiosis with the (m)other is after all possible. In her radio introduction to ‘Daddy’, Plath suggested that ‘the poem is spoken by a girl with an Electra complex’, which in psychoanalysis denotes the girl’s psychosexual competition with her mother for possession of her father (cited in Plath: p. 293, n. 183). However, the poem also suggests a more standard Oedipal situation, explicitly in its reference to the murder of the father: ‘Daddy, I have had to kill you./You died before I had time’. For Freud, the murder of the father, or rather guilt for having committed this crime is what institutes the law against incest with the mother (as Freud writes in Moses and Monotheism, ‘men have always known that once upon a time they had a primeval father and killed him’ (1995, p. 102)).
Thus, one way of reading these lines in ‘Daddy’ is that the father died before the daughter had time to wish him dead; before, that is, she had submitted to the law forbidding incest. What she has missed then, is both entrance into language and (the same thing) separation from the (m)other. The absence of a third leaves no protection against perfect union with the (m)other, which is perhaps why the speaker models her father as a series of authoritarian figures, capable of imposing a barrier between herself and her mother.

But this authoritarian picture of the father also paradoxically implies that such illicit pleasure is possible. The fantasies of torture in the poem may thus be experienced as a punishment for forbidden union with the mother. Such a tyrannical manifestation of the paternal law gives the (false) impression that what has been forbidden, indeed, what one is being punished for, is actually obtainable. The ‘fundamental fantasy’, according to Lacan, is that the ‘lost’ object may be regained. In ‘Daddy’, as I have suggested, the lost father may serve as a placeholder or fantasy screen for that object that is perceived to have been lost – what Lacan calls the objet a. Bruce Fink notes that ‘by cleaving to rem(a)inder, the split subject, though expelled from the Other, can sustain the illusion of wholeness; by clinging to the object a, the subject is able to ignore his or her division’ (1995, p. 59). The elision of absence and loss may help to explain the erotic pull of fantasies of victimisation – as a desubjectifying experience, trauma may come to represent for the subject the possibility and the allure of a preoedipal, presymbolic merging with the (m)other. In ‘Daddy’, the lost father becomes the agent of a liaison with death, by which the absence at the heart of language is misperceived as a lack that may, one day, be filled.

Thus, I suggest, the troubling sexuality of Plath’s ‘Daddy’ gives insight into the appeal of victimhood as a de-subjectifying limit experience that seems to offer the possibility of merging with the ‘lost’ (absent) object. It therefore indicates a reason behind the taboo pleasure that might be derived from narratives of trauma and victimhood, which represent, perhaps, a last vestige of absolute
meaning and the hope of a paradise regained through extreme suffering. As the poem itself shows, this is an extraordinarily problematic view, not least because it obscures the distinction between historical and structural trauma, idealising victimhood in a way that detracts from political engagement. Equally, as the poem makes clear, appropriating a narrative that is self-consciously not one’s own precludes the work of mourning that may be necessary for a traumatised subject to heal. As in ‘Little Fugue’, the speaker of ‘Daddy’ fails to unpick the ties of melancholic attachment and thus reorient herself towards the future.

Conclusion

Reading Plath’s poetry against the backdrop of Celan’s ‘Death Fugue’, this chapter has argued that her use of the Holocaust idiom is parodic, and that the speakers of ‘Little Fugue’ and ‘Daddy’ inhabit trauma narratives self-reflexively. Made up of a mosaic of images, their stylised imitations of victim-identification function like a costume or prop, exposing the way traumatised subjectivity is constructed or ‘modelled’. However, the poems cannot thereby be straightforwardly exonerated for their use of Holocaust imagery. Instead, their ethical status remains precarious, for they both participate in and critique assimilation of Shoah imagery and collusion in a culture that makes the Shoah possible. Furthermore, they rely on the allure of the very fantasies of victimisation they make problematic. Significantly, by sustaining a sense of moral ambiguity, use of the parodic mode poems bears witness to Adorno’s insight into the dialectical relation of culture and barbarism.

At the same time, as I have shown, the focal point of ‘Little Fugue’ and ‘Daddy’ is not the trauma of the Holocaust, but instead a mnemonic void around which their speakers ceaselessly circulate. It is the fundamental inaccessibility of the trauma at their centre, and the need to formulate free-floating affect, that drives a process of melancholic substitution. To an extent, the parodic mode opens up a temporal interval, allowing Plath’s poetic subject
to gain distance from her traumatic past. The co-presence of traumatic affect and representation in the poems suggests how the double voice of parody can impose a limit on — or rather operate simultaneously with — the compulsion to repeat. Notably, the speakers’ appropriation of the Holocaust narrative seems to set language in motion, instigating a series of words and images that give a fleeting form to an indeterminate sense of loss. Indeed, the act of writing itself, to which the poems draw attention, is a way of mediating traumatic affect. Analogously, as well as mourning the loss of the personal father, parody emerges as a way of situating the woman artist, responding to a German-speaking male canon that includes both Beethoven and Celan. As a form of imitation characterised by ironic inversion (Hutcheon: 2000, p. 6), parody opens up an alternative to repetition in a writing that contends with the past. However, as I have shown, this future perspective is often dragged back towards the past, as the impenetrability of traumatic loss is mirrored by the sense of drawing a poetic blank.

Furthermore, while the parodic mode allows Plath’s poetic subject, partially and provisionally, to escape the temporal loop of traumatic experience, ‘Little Fugue’ and ‘Daddy’ indicate the limitations of parody as a means of working through. Indeed, mourning has a tendency of tipping into melancholia, as the speakers are preoccupied by a past that eludes conscious recollection. The temporality of repetition that is in different ways enacted by the poems poses a challenge to the adequacy of others’ narratives for containing and making sense of traumatic affect. As I have proposed, the dimension of self-parody in the poems prevents the reader from resting in pathos, holding up a mirror to the pleasure derived from depictions of trauma. Crucially, self-parody also enables Plath’s speakers to displace suffering. That is to say, emphasising how the traumatic experience is stolen is also a way of disowning it, whereby the poetic subject disqualifies herself from the victim subject position. Thus, it is not simply that the potential offense caused by parodying identification with Jewish victimhood might push the reader away; the speakers also refuse themselves the right to experience painful affect. In this way, self-parody
seems to function as a defense mechanism that closes off the possibility of mourning. The defensiveness of parody was observed in my previous chapter on Plath’s journals, in which the subject chastises herself for a tendency toward self-pity: ‘what do I know of sorrow? No one I love has ever died or been tortured’. The irony of this statement is, of course, that someone she loved, namely her father, has in fact died (2014, p. 33).

‘The Munich Mannequins’

Written on 28th January 1963, ‘The Munich Mannequins’ is one of Plath’s last poems. It is also one of her most obscure, made up of a series of unrhymed couplets that give the impression of separate but related units. Because of what Ted Hughes describes as its ‘denser pattern’, as Tim Kendall observes, ‘it is difficult even to determine the subject’ (2000, p. 32). Several images from earlier poems, including ‘Little Fugue’ and ‘Daddy’, feature again, but they seem further abstracted, more difficult to interpret. For example, the yew tree, emblematic of death and specifically the dead father in Plath’s lexicon, is transformed mysteriously into ‘the tree of life’. As a result, the poem seems more confident of its metaphors, and less eager to explain or recapitulate them; its tone is resigned, as though relinquishing the effort to communicate. As I will suggest, to account for the ‘voicelessness’ with which the poem ends, the speaker seems to trial different forces of oppression: patriarchal culture, Nazi Germany and, more obliquely, the weight of something that cannot be said.

The poem opens with an allusion to the demand of perfection placed upon women:

Perfection is terrible, it cannot have children.
Cold as snow breath, it tamps the womb (lines 1-2).
Later in the poem, the mannequins, ‘in their sulphur loveliness, in their smiles [...] Naked and bald in their furs’ (lines 10 and 13), perhaps refer to fashion models, or to real women transformed into puppets by a male-dominated society. The poem also seems to accuse Germany of failing to acknowledge its past, describing Munich as a ‘morgue between Paris and Rome’ (line 12). The snow, as it ‘drops its pieces of darkness’, provides an image of being submerged. As Boswell has pointed out, the imagery of ‘The Munich Mannequins’ recalls Celan’s wintry landscapes (2008, pp. 56-58), and the allusion to postwar silence may be read in continuity with a critique of cultural assimilation and complicity. References to the ‘domesticity of these windows’, the ‘baby lace’ and ‘green-leaved confectionery’ (lines 21-22) suggest the artifice of a society that keeps its atrocities well hidden under its superficial appeal. The poem ends with a description of:

The thick Germans slumbering in their bottomless Stolz.
And the black phones on hooks

Glittering
Glittering and digesting

Voicelessness. The snow has no voice (lines 23-27).

‘Stolz’ or pride implies the lack of remorse with which Germany buries its past; the ‘black phones’ – an image of communication with the dead in Plath’s poems – firmly on their hooks, ensuring the dead will not speak. Given the contemporaneity of the Holocaust trope in the early nineteen-sixties, the phones may furthermore represent an allusion to the technological administration of mass murder.

However, ‘The Munich Mannequins’ can also be interpreted as a dual allegory about the attempt to communicate with the dead and, more self-reflexively, to speak through poetry. The opening image of a tamped womb may therefore
be reread as a figure of stifled self-expression. It may be compared with a line from Celan, ‘clenched around your word is the snow’, which comes from an untitled poem beginning, ‘with a changing key/you unlock the house where/the snow of what’s silenced drifts’ (Celan: 2001, p. 65). These lines suggest the silencing of a traumatic past, and an attempt through language to release the snow-clenched word. With a similar association of snow with silence, Plath’s poem also seems to write around a trauma, though she cannot seem to access it. The second couplet describes the womb as a place:

Where the yew trees blow like hydras,
The tree of life and the tree of life

Unloosing their moons, month after month, to no purpose (lines 3-5).

As in ‘Little Fugue’, in which ‘death opened, like a black tree, blackly’, these lines combine death and life in the same image, while at the same time suggesting a total failure of poetic language. The womb, symbolic of fertility, is where the yew trees blow like hydras: the mythical allusion suggesting an attempt to create that is constantly cut off. Moons are unloosed ‘to no purpose’, implying both a monthly failure of fertility and a creative block. An implication of this oxymoronic imagery – the combination of death and life – is that the speaker is searching for inspiration in the source of traumatic loss of her father. His presence is again alluded to in the image of ‘the black hones on hooks’ (line 24), which recall the ‘black telephone off at the root’ (line 69) in ‘Daddy’, thus resuming the theme of an attempted communication with the dead.

The poem suggests the speaker’s sense of exclusion and isolation as she wonders through the empty Munich streets, as if window-shopping for ideas to write about. Perhaps the mindless mannequins are then a projection of her dissociated state of mind, unable to make touch or contact with the past. Similarly, the scenes seen through the shop windows reflect her sense of
infertility, the freezing over of life. In this desolate landscape, the forces of oppression in the poem are almost resignedly invoked, as though they do not manage to give voice to the speaker’s trauma. She borrows a German word, ‘Stolz’, referring to German history to articulate and make sense of her suffering – as in ‘Little Fugue’ the Germans are blamed for her inability to speak. But the analogy between the Shoah and the speaker’s trauma is a misfit, showing how parodic inhabitation of this narrative is a project that ultimately fails. The poem seems to end with despair, with an amnesia that ensures the speaker cannot find a voice, inextricably linked with the silence of her dead father: just like the ‘black phones on hooks’, ‘the snow has no voice’. Traumatic loss thus presents an impasse, for which the Shoah does not provide, in Celan’s phrase, ‘a changing key’. The ‘voicelessness’ that is digested by the black phones at the end of the poem implies a substantive void with which the speaker must contend.

Chapter 5
Girlhood Trauma in Louise Bourgeois’s Writings

Having kept a diary from the age of twelve, Louise Bourgeois wrote extensively throughout her life in a multiplicity of forms, including letters, diaries, notebooks, loose sheets and annotations on the backs of drawings. These diverse writings are often used to support autobiographical and psychoanalytic interpretations of her art. For example, a selection of Bourgeois’s writings was published in the double volume edited by Philip Larratt-Smith entitled *Louise Bourgeois: The Return of the Repressed*:
Psychoanalytic Writings (2012), which includes a collection of psychoanalytically oriented essays on Bourgeois’s work. As I will discuss, this publication encourages the critical approach of placing the artist in the role of analysand, the critic in the role of analyst. Through analysis of the personal documents and diaries stored at the Louise Bourgeois Archive in Chelsea, New York, this chapter instead reads Bourgeois’s writings as a multivalent, figurative and playful art form in their own right. Moreover, engaging with the assertion that ‘Louise Bourgeois invented confessional art’ (Dorment: 2010), I will argue that Bourgeois’s writings interrogate critically the autobiographical idiom, reframing confession as an aesthetic genre. Repositioning Bourgeois as the author of these writings, rather than their unmediated ‘I’, opens them up to new and multiple readings. In addition, this interpretation makes clear how the writings function as an artist’s notebook, a laboratory for trying out ideas that are often incorporated into her artworks.

In particular, this chapter examines ways in which Bourgeois’s writings construct girlhood trauma. The first section explores the construction of childhood in a selection of the artist’s personal writings, published in the second volume of Louise Bourgeois: The Return of the Repressed: Psychoanalytic Writings (2012). Drawing attention to a variety of linguistic and visual features, I suggest that the writings may be read productively alongside the artist’s Insomnia Drawings (1994-1995), which seem to have functioned as a kind of diary on sleepless nights. Locating a nexus between writing and drawing brings attention to the processual, repetitive gesture of Bourgeois’s writings, as a way of formulating affect. At the same time, the writings emerge as an intertextual cloth, fabricated from a range of literary threads. Thus, the second part of this chapter highlights the device of parody in Bourgeois’s construction of girlhood trauma. As a self-reflexive, ironic and fundamentally intertextual mode, parody stands in relation to another work of art or, more generally, another form of coded discourse (Hutcheon: 2000, p. 16). In Bourgeois’s writings, the Freudian Oedipus complex – as it is applied to the

12 Excerpts are © The Easton Foundation.
‘little girl’ in Sigmund Freud’s paper on ‘Femininity’ (1933) – is parodically mediated via the literary and cultural canon. As a result, Bourgeois identifies with the position of daughter in the family, evoking the experience of the female child, whilst simultaneously exceeding this identification by drawing attention to its narrative framing. Her writings thereby signal a dissociation of affect and representation that is characteristic of traumatic experience: as Dominic LaCapra observes, ‘one disorientatingly feels what one cannot represent; one numbingly represents what one cannot feel’ LaCapra: 2001, p. 42). But the dimension of parody in Bourgeois’s writings also, I suggest, draws attention to the ways in which narratives of girlhood trauma are culturally and politically mediated.

Bourgeois’s use of parody is exemplified by her 1982 photo essay published in *Artforum*, ‘Child Abuse: A Project by Louise Bourgeois’, a piece that stages a critical engagement with psychoanalytic theory and the overvaluation of the phallus in patriarchal society. In what follows, I will explore this parodic dimension in a selection of Bourgeois’s unpublished archive writings, observing how the Oedipus-inflected narrative of girlhood trauma is channelled through her references to French fiction. In particular, I analyse passages that allude to Honoré de Balzac’s *Eugénie Grandet* (1833) and Françoise Sagan’s *Bonjour Tristesse* (1954), novels that both explore the subject position of daughter within the family. Performing the interplay of traumatic affect and representational artifice, the writings under study suggest how parodic narrativity might offer a means of translating the anxiety-provoking enigmas of the adult world, imposing form onto unprocessed traumatic experience. Comprising a repository for the artist’s ideas, they also carry implications for reassessing the function of narrativity across Bourgeois’s oeuvre.

*Narrative and Form*
Within Bourgeois scholarship, there are a number of well-established interpretative strategies founded on reading the artist’s oeuvre autobiographically. Bourgeois herself ostensibly suggested this approach in her photo essay, ‘Child Abuse’, which coincided with a major retrospective of the artist at New York’s Museum of Modern Art in 1982. Incorporating images from the artist’s own childhood with a textual commentary, ‘Child Abuse’ comprises four double-paged spreads that stage a familial drama involving the father’s affair with the children’s live-in English tutor, Sadie Gordon Richmond. Meanwhile, the apparently tolerant mother plays her own betraying role in the love triangle, while the daughter fumes at being used as a ‘pawn’ to ‘keep track of your husband’ (1982, p. 44). This photo essay was the moment when, as Vivien Raynor writes in her New York Times review at the time, Bourgeois elected to ‘publicise the trauma of her childhood’; though, as my analysis below will highlight, the aesthetic techniques of this ‘project’ function to undermine the very narrative it seems to espouse.

The story of ‘Child Abuse’ is often assumed to be the blueprint from which Bourgeois’s art must necessarily derive, with the task of the critic limited to pointing up the connections initiated by the artist. As Robert Storr writes in his recent monograph, the story of Bourgeois’s childhood is ‘paradigmatic of Oedipal drama’ (2016, pp. 26-29). Likewise, the way in which mutually reinforcing biographical and psychoanalytic narratives are used to interpret Bourgeois’s art is, for the purposes of the present study, very conveniently distilled by Richard Dorment’s article, ‘Louise Bourgeois invented confessional art’ (2010). Referring to the ‘Louise Bourgeois industry’, Dorment glosses the history of criticism of Bourgeois’s work as follows:

Equipped with intimate knowledge of her life’s story (soon to be augmented by the publication of her voluminous diaries) the symbolism of her materials was easy to interpret. Tapestries refer to the family

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13 Examples include the essays collected in the first volume of Louise Bourgeois: The Return of the Repressed: Psychoanalytic Writings (2012).
business, cages to imprisonment; marble houses to the security of her
early childhood, guillotines to its brutal end. This literal, one-to-one,
indexical symbolism turned each new work into a fragment of a
psychoanalytical case history seething with oedipal angst.

Demonstrating a common conflation between Bourgeois’s ‘life story’ and ‘a
psychoanalytical case history’, Dorment’s article concludes, ‘one thing you
have to hand to her: she invented confessional art’. Thus, Dorment
participates in the highly reductive gesture of applying a pre-conceived
theoretical model to Bourgeois’s works. At the same time, as Bourgeois’s
writings themselves make clear, he also betrays a misconception of
confessional art on which such criticism is based. Nevertheless, this is a
misconception that has steered reception of Bourgeois’s writings, particularly
in a psychoanalytic context.

A selection of approximately eighty of Bourgeois’s ‘voluminous diaries’ was
published for the first time in Louise Bourgeois: The Return of the Repressed:
Psychoanalytic Writings (2012), which accompanied an exhibition of the same
title at the Freud Museum in London. With its inclusion of six essays by art
historians and psychoanalysts, this publication of the so-called
‘psychoanalytic writings’ suggests a theoretical orientation that arguably risks
overlooking their aesthetic construction. Epitomising a tendency of reducing
Bourgeois’s works to, as Dorment puts it, a ‘case history seething with
Oedipal angst’, the editor writes that:

Behind the fear of disintegration, paralyzing anxiety, agoraphobia,
murderous threats, suicidal impulses, guilt, and self-loathing that are
recorded in her psychoanalytic writings and given symbolic equivalents
in her sculptures, lay repressed incestuous wishes for her father (p. 72).
The Oedipus complex is thus presented as the underlying explanation both of Bourgeois’s symptomology and of her art. For example, referring to one of Bourgeois’s sculptural installations, Larratt-Smith suggests that ‘the killing of the father in The Destruction of the Father is Bourgeois’s retaliation for the feeling of emptiness which indicates a castration anxiety (and which is so evident in her psychoanalytic writings)’ (p. 77).

Larratt-Smith subsequently proposes an analogy between Bourgeois and Freud’s patient pseudonymously named ‘Dora’:

Just as in Freud’s case history of Dora the ‘nature of her [Dora’s] disposition had always drawn her towards her father’, so in Bourgeois’s earliest extant diary from 1923 it is clear that as a young girl she was unusually fixated on her father (p. 74).

Thus, the critic places himself in the role of analyst and the artist in the role of analysand; moreover, Bourgeois’s writings are put on a par with the speech of a psychoanalytic session. Despite the fact that Dora’s analysis was, by Freud’s own admission, cut short by his failure to observe the phenomenon of transference, Larratt-Smith concludes his diagnosis: ‘to paraphrase Freud’s assessment of Dora, Bourgeois’s constitution combined with her “neurotic need for affection” mark her down for a neurosis’ (p. 75). Seemingly oblivious to the diverse history of feminist commentary on Freud’s treatment of Dora, Larratt-Smith’s version of the Sadie story reinforces an equally patriarchal narrative of female guilt:

[A]s Dora facilitated her father’s affair with Frau K. by spending time with Herr K., Bourgeois facilitated her father’s liaison with Sadie by taking the role of her mother’s nurse […] No less than her mother Joséphine, she too is complicit in her father’s liaison, adding another layer to her later guilt (p. 76).
Glossing over the culpability of the father, as well as suggesting the totally inappropriate idea that the child is partly to blame, such an account fails to observe how Bourgeois’s writings knowingly inhabit the idiom of Freudian psychoanalysis. The subject of ‘Child Abuse’, for example, refers to herself as a ‘pawn’ in a way that echoes Dora’s complaint of being used to facilitate her father’s infidelity.

In his two essays in *The Return of The Repressed* (‘Louise Bourgeois in Psychoanalysis with Henry Lowenfeld’ and ‘Symbolising Loss and Conflict: Psychoanalytic Process in Louise Bourgeois’s Art’), Donald Kuspit similarly reads Bourgeois’s work through a reductive Freudian lens. Describing Bourgeois as a ‘favourite, perhaps even spoiled child [who] remained narcissistically indulgent and disturbed throughout her life’ (p. 17), he develops an overtly sexist reading of the artist and her work with a particular emphasis on her alleged penis envy. Discussing the motif of hair in Bourgeois’s art, he cites the following from Freud’s paper on ‘Femininity’:

> It seems that women have made few contributions to the discoveries and inventions of civilization; there is, however, one technique that they have invented – that of plaiting and weaving […] Nature itself would seem to have given the model which this achievement initiates by causing the growth at maturity of the pubic hair that conceals the genitals (p. 136).

Apparently corroborating this association of femininity, weaving, shame and sin, Kuspit suggests that it is worth thinking of a remark by Bourgeois in the context of Freud’s idea of the origin of weaving: “‘when you have something to hide, hair comes to the rescue’” (quoted in Kellein: 1999, p. 9). Overlooking the discernible irony in Bourgeois’s remark, which mimics the language of style and beauty advertising, Kuspit recalls Freud’s theory that little girls ‘feel greatly at a disadvantage owing to their lack of a big, visible penis’ and, for
that reason, ‘develop a wish to be a man’. Thereafter, Kuspit interprets Bourgeois’s works as a repeated display of penis envy, asking:

Does the spiral staircase symbolise an erect penis, the spider web symbolise a collapsed – detumescent – penis? Are the abundance of penis-looking works in Bourgeois’s oeuvre – conspicuous among them five untitled bronzes of 1970-72, each about the length of an erect penis – evidence of her penis envy? (p. 136).

Kuspit’s answer to all the above questions is yes. Reading her ‘body-image problems’ as having to do with fact that ‘she had no penis’, he thus summarises that ‘Bourgeois’s art was vitalizing compensation for her depressing lack of a penis, a memorial to the loss of a penis she never had’ (p. 137). With highly gendered language, Kuspit turns art criticism into a kind of predatory pursuit: ‘the spiral staircases are seductively slick, like well-combed beautiful hair – virginally pure however, inviting one to mount them’ (p. 133). Bourgeois’s writings fit into Kuspit’s argument merely as evidence: for example, ‘Bourgeois’ journals again and again recount her feelings of emptiness, of being a void, which the hollow core or void at the centre of her spirals paradoxically conveys’ (p. 20). Such a literal and selective use of Bourgeois’s writings entirely misses the intricacy of their form and playful use of register.

In her contribution to *The Return of the Repressed*, ‘The Sublime Jealousy of Louise Bourgeois’, Juliet Mitchell offers a far more nuanced psychoanalytic approach to Bourgeois’s writings. While she is interested in exploring Bourgeois’s ‘sublime jealousy’, nevertheless she acknowledges that this is but one factor in ‘an imbrication of various and multiple preoccupations such as would arise within a clinical session’ (p. 47). Pointing to the complexity of the relationship between psychoanalysis and narrative, Mitchell suggests that the truth of Bourgeois’s stories is, as in those of the first hysterics, ‘not the sort to be believed or disbelieved’. Regarding the story of Sadie, then, she points out
that ‘even a complicated story simplifies; it makes coherent, here in a playful modality, what is multiple’ (p. 53). Building on this insight, my analysis will emphasise the narrative multiplicity of Bourgeois’s archival writings. However, the focus of this analysis is not so much the psyche of the artist, as the ways in which the confessional subject is linguistically constructed, through such devices as self-stylisation, parody and caricature.

A number of critics have pointed out that accounting for Bourgeois’s works through the neatly packaged narrative of Sadie does them a profound disservice, and have proposed instead that attention should shift onto the formal aspects of the work itself. Writing on Bourgeois’s sculptures in ‘Bourgeois Prehistory, or The Ransom of Fantasies’ (1999), for example, Anne Wagner proposes that narratives serve critics as a compensation for an ‘incompleteness lodged in the work itself’, which she attributes to the work’s assimilation of images from a Paleolithic past. While conceiving Bourgeois’s work as ‘a means of recovering some past bodily sensation’, she insists that such a ‘regression’ represents a theoretical development within the history of art.

In *Louise Bourgeois’s Spider: The Architecture of Art-Writing* (2001), Mieke Bal similarly emphasises form, proposing Bourgeois’s ‘Spider’ (1997) as a theoretical object that, too vast in scale to be viewed all at once, resists simple narration. Envisaging Bourgeois’s sculptural installations as ‘houses of the mind’, Bal proposes that ‘this is the level where narrativity – not specifically narrative content – serves as the cement that builds the house’ (p. 38). This formulation notably shifts attention to the level of ‘cement’, to the very material from which narrative is formed. In her monograph on Bourgeois, *Fantastic Reality: Louise Bourgeois and a Story of Modern Art* (2005), Mignon Nixon too rejects an Oedipal interpretation of Bourgeois’s works, instead drawing attention to the way in which the artist’s inchoate, amorphous sculptural objects evoke subjectivity on the threshold of emergence. For Nixon, as for Wagner and Bal, Bourgeois’s works simulate a pre-narrative, pre-Oedipal
moment, this time located in the world of infantile drives. As she suggests, her art turns ‘time and again to the beginning, to the dynamic of the maternal-infantile relation’ (p. 9).

In sum, a formal approach helpfully draws attention to the ways in which Bourgeois’s artworks might evoke the topography of affect. Rather than viewing form and narrative antithetically, however, I want to apply this approach to Bourgeois’s writings with a view to addressing their overlooked aesthetic dimension. As any visitor to the Louise Bourgeois Archive will know, it would be impossible to overstate the diversity of these writings: formally, they range from lines and marks covering a whole page, to notes jotted on the back of a drawing. The physical layout of the texts is also varied, often conjoining word and image. Weaving seamlessly between French and English, lines tend to flow into each other without punctuation, such that their meanings can be determined in different ways, or remain elusive. In many places the prose has a poetic quality, featuring devices such as rhythm, rhyme, alliteration, metaphor, word play and portmanteau. Old French songs and expressions recur, as does an array of references from the literary and psychoanalytic canon. Such experimentation with idioms, concepts and tropes adds a playful, ironic and humorous dimension. These are writings that flip between the tragic, the comic, and at times sarcastic, leaving the reader with a sense of their author dancing circles around them.

Two Aspects of Weaving

The practice and trope of weaving in Bourgeois’s drawings, fabric works, sculptures and installations have prompted several critics to draw a comparison between the artist and Homer’s Penelope in the Odyssey. In the Odyssey, Penelope works on the shroud of her father-in-law by day, but unpicks the web by night in a stratagem to resist unwanted suitors during her husband’s long absence after the Trojan War. Penelope’s weaving and

14 I will refer to Emily Wilson’s recent translation of The Odyssey (2018).
unweaving characterises the repetitive activity of ‘binding’ affect, a metaphor used by Freud to denote the psyche’s attempt to deal with overwhelming stimulus (Freud: 2001). Equally, however, it evokes the process of fabricating narratives, a clever means for Penelope to put off her admirers. These two aspects of weaving can in turn be mapped onto Bourgeois’s writings, themselves analogous with Penelope’s cloth, as they parodically both inhabit and exceed the idiom of traumatic loss. In this way, I suggest that Bourgeois’s writings demonstrate the role of parody in translating affect into form.

In a notebook written in c. 1995-1996, Bourgeois herself invokes this image of Penelope’s weaving and unweaving in a manner that offers a potential conceptual model for the writings:

\[
\text{une absence est un puits qu’il faut remplir […]}
\]
\[
\text{le manque est beaucoup plus important que le comblé}
\]
\[
\text{On peut même s’en occuper et jouer à la remplir puis à la vider. Les enfants dans le tas de sable, sur la plage – la marée remplit le trou d'eau puis se retour puis revient éternellement – Penelope le tisse et le untisse (LB-0827)}
\]

an absence is a well that must be filled […]
The lack is much more important than the filled One can even take care of it and play to fill it then empty it. Children digging a hole in the sand, at the beach – The tide fills the hole with water then goes out then comes in eternally – Penelope weaves it and unweaves it\textsuperscript{15}

\textsuperscript{15} The transcription and translation of this passage are provided by the Louise Bourgeois Archive.
The prioritisation of lack in this passage, as that which is ‘beaucoup plus important que le comblé’ (‘much more important than the filled’), seems to signal attachment to a sense of absence or loss: an empty hole, unwoven threads. In the *Odyssey*, Penelope, too, as Emily Wilson suggests, ‘has a deep loyalty both to her lost husband, for whom she weeps every night and who she misses “all the time”, and also to the “beautiful rich house” in which she lives, which she risks losing forever if she remarries’ (p. 3). Penelope’s weaving/unweaving provides a metaphor for the way in which Bourgeois’s writings work over scenes of loss, giving shape to and binding affect. Such an emphasis on process is suggestive of an analogy with Bourgeois’s *Insomnia Drawings* (1994-1995), which the artist made during sleepless nights. As I will propose below, the strong visual dimension of the writings evinces the repetitive lines of the drawings, suggesting a function of calming anxiety.

The process of filling and emptying a lack is also associated, in the passage cited above, with ‘children digging a hole in the sand’, which is then filled in by the tide. This image may suggest another scene of mourning: the game of ‘fort-da’ discussed by Freud in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), in which the child repetitively throws out and draws in a bobbin over his cot. For Freud, the game constitutes the child’s attempt to cope with the coming and going of the mother, with the thread – as could be said of the image of Penelope weaving – signifying attachment. With the utterances of ‘fort’ and ‘da’, the game also instigates the child’s use of language for symbolising loss, pointing to another aspect of Penelope’s weaving: the fabrication of narratives. Bourgeois’s writings evoke this moment of symbol-formation, simultaneously occupying the position of the child on the cusp of language; but also the adult seeking to re-formulate a narrative response to a sense of lack in the present.

In addition to technical expertise, Penelope shows a capacity for storytelling: she weaves a fiction, convincing her suitors that she cannot marry any of them until the task of weaving the shroud for Laertes is completed. In this
way, her fabric is also a fabrication, a delaying tactic for warding off unwanted admirers. Furthermore, as Wilson observes, the poem of the *Odyssey* itself ‘weaves and unweaves a multilayered narrative that is both simple and artful in its patterning and composition’ (p. 3). The same claim might be made for Bourgeois’s writings, I suggest, given their intertextual fabric of linguistic fiction. The reference to Penelope in the passage cited above is one example of the literary patterning of Bourgeois’s writings. There are a number of other fictional references running through Bourgeois’s texts, whereby narrative is the thread with which the artist’s writings are woven. Just as Penelope’s cloth is designed to keep her suitors at bay, the element of storytelling in Bourgeois’s writings functions as a ruse to ward off interpreters: in each case, the storyteller’s artistry safeguards the ambiguity of their sufferings.

**Part One: Figuring Childhood Affect**

This section explores how Bourgeois’s personal writings produce childhood affect, particularly feelings of disorientation, instability and internal danger. Drawing attention to the spatiality of the writings, in terms of both their imagery and layout, I suggest Bourgeois’s language may be seen in continuity with her *Insomnia Drawings*, which have been described by Frances Morris as a ‘visual diary’ (2013, p. 17). Notably, passages conveying heightened affect are often recorded during the night, constructing a nocturnal space in which the psyche unravels. The seclusion of nighttime provides an opportunity for the vocalisation of affect, as in the case of Homer’s Penelope, who is described as ‘weeping by night and sad by day’ (2017, p. 370). For psychoanalyst Jean Laplanche, unweaving is equated with the work of mourning, ‘disentangling to allow the formation of new knots’ (2005, p. 253-4).

This section proposes an analogy between the act of writing and Penelope’s

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16 This section of my chapter cites a selection of Bourgeois’s personal writings published in *Louise Bourgeois: The Return of the Repressed: Psychoanalytic Writings* (2012). As Larratt-Smith writes in his editor’s note to the second volume, italics indicate passages that have been translated from the French. Larratt-Smith has also opted to correct abbreviations and misspellings ‘to clarify [Bourgeois’s] intent’ (2012, p. 5), which accounts for a number of the inconsistencies between the original texts and their translations.
nightly unpicking of her shroud, each representing the repetitive process working through affect.

The dimension of process in Bourgeois’s writings is highlighted by a comparison with her *Insomnia Drawings*, each form evoking the urgency of their execution. These drawings, comprising around 220 sheets of loose paper, were made during a period of particularly acute insomnia, between November 1994 and June 1995. Like Bourgeois’s writings, they would lie scattered throughout the bedroom, sometimes at the foot of the stairs. A wide range of stationery was used, from manuscript and graph paper to discarded envelopes and headed studio notepaper. Significantly, as Marie Bernadac notes, ‘drawing and writing cannot be divorced in this series’ (2000, p. 12). Indeed, written words are often placed on the front or back of each drawing. The artist describes the literary quality of the images themselves: ‘instead of doing drawings’, she writes, ‘I want to compose sentences (which have meanings), which have messages’ (cited by Bernadac, p. 12).

Arguably, it is equally possible to envisage Bourgeois’s writing as a form of drawing. Thematically, the writings echo the drawings’ imagery of domestic architecture and the home (2013, p. 31); they also share a preoccupation with time (p. 95) and needlework (p. 57). Stylistically, the layout of the writings mimics the shapes of the drawings: for example, tall lists of words suggest sketches of tower blocks (pp. 74, p. 90, p. 115, p. 127). Indeed, throughout the writings, Bourgeois’s use of lists is suggestive of writing as process: or example, in c. 1964, she writes:

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enjoy: order
    the polish of a surface
    the polish of a sentence
The form of a piece
    of a statue
    of a garment
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of a hairstyle

the resolution of a problem
What do we mean by – transform chaos into order
Find sense out of nonsense.
order out disorder
please out of displease, the harmony out of suffering (p. 143).

This passage exemplifies listing as a method of ordering thoughts, where the night is a time of intense affect: ‘I awake in the revenge, the aggression, the rage and the / chaos’. Order is imposed onto affect not only through content, but also through the arrangement of text on the page. Indeed, Bourgeois’s writings are often comparable with concrete poetry, a form emerging in the nineteen-fifties in which meaning is conveyed through visual and sonic elements of language.

Emphasis on graphic space is a recurring feature in Bourgeois’s work. The artist studied mathematics and geometry at the Sorbonne and, as she suggests, ‘my love of geometry is expressed by the formal aspect of my work’ (cited in an article by Cooke: 2007). Reflecting on concrete poetry, Edward Lucie Smith (1966) writes: ‘Form is meaning […] Pictorial logic is different from verbal logic. A sequence of images may be recognized as a sequence without narrative connections’ (cited in Williams, 1967: p. 286). There are numerous examples of such sequences in Bourgeois’s writings. A text written in c. 1959 attests to the artist’s habit of listing words with similar sounds or visual features:

Eppigone Epigone Epiphany Iphigenia

Epiglote Ergot (p. 113)\textsuperscript{17}

\textsuperscript{17}For details on the interesting thematic content of this collection of words, see Larratt-Smith: 2012, p. 113, fn. 5.
Bourgeois’s writings particularly explore how the materiality of language can convey affect, developing, as she puts it, a ‘vocabulary of forms’ that ‘can be made to express elemental emotions’ (p. 171). As she underscores in 1991, ‘it is the form not the content’ (p. 182).

A four-paged passage written in October 29, 1958 (LB-0266) which was recorded at 4am (p. 84), illustrates the continuity of writing and drawing in relation to the spatial construction of affect:

[…] I need space I pace up and down the whole
house big distances covered
all the windows are thrown open
all the lights are turned on —
the writing on the page is large the
drawings (double page of journal)
no expense is too large, the drawing
starts with a jab and goes
round and round larger and
larger and
larger faster and faster
like the children who swirl
faster and faster (p. 83)

Implying pent-up affect, pacing up and down the house is linked with writing and drawing on the page. These lines thus suggest the figurative relation of writing, drawing and moving through space. Notably the gesture of writing or drawing quickly turns into the swirling of children, an image conveying a sense of disorientation. The selection of writings analysed below illustrate how the sensory impressions of the child are figured textually.

Disorientation
A loose sheet dated December 1963 is made up of sixteen lines, with indentations of lines 1, 4, 7, 9 and 14, suggesting five stanzas of a poem (LB-0302 (p. 137)). Emphasis is placed on the beginning of each stanza, due to the capitalisation and underlining of the first word, creating a pulsating rhythm that is matched by the layout of the text on the page. As the passage opens:

Chaos the night the dark as large
as the whole room as long as a whole night as
black as despair.

the Road in the sun unwinding itself
slow and free and visible and unhurried +
friendly.

The imagery takes metaphoric leaps across the dimensions of time and space. Night is thus figured spatially, creating a sense of spatio-temporal inescapability and the intensity of the present moment. A series of contrasts is posed: ‘chaos’ and ‘the road’; night and day; darkness and light – and their respective associations with confusion and clarity, disorder and order.

The next lines convey a passage between these contrasting states, taking place both in space and in language, as a result of the enjambment:

the shift from the 2nd to the first, what
happened – it is all up.

The metaphor of a passageway is developed in the fourth stanza:

let us find it again like a blind
tating touching along the wall for the
knob of a door for the banister from
total loss, you start orienting yourself
again + trying to remember
With the simile of blindness implying total darkness, use of the personal plural 'us' suggests the narrator’s attempt to guide herself; as she writes in lines 12-13, ‘you start orientating yourself / again’, implying that writing itself thereby a means of orienting through emotional intensities. Offering an example of the multilingualism of Bourgeois’s writings, the word ‘tating’ comes from the French verb ‘tâter’, meaning ‘to feel’ or ‘to sound out’, and suggests orientation via touch. The text’s navigation of an interior habitat, ‘along the wall for the / knob of a door for the banister’, conveys physical dependency like that of the child. Indeed, representing a liminal domestic space, the image of a passageway perhaps evokes a child’s sense of being excluded from the adult world. The final stanza enforces a feeling of being stuck in this childhood state:

it is too much and would never work, the
past was all wrong and misunderstanding, what
could the future possibly be, another past

These lines again suggest the inescapability of the affective present, in which the future is a repetition of the past.

Instability

The writings often take up the perspective of a child, particularly in relation to its external environment. Suggesting a sense of precariousness and the need for balance, they emulate the first encounters between self and world, and the experience of the body moving through space. A passage written in 1959 (LB-0227, p. 112) can be taken as an example. The text is twenty-five lines long in total, and made up of short lines spilling into each other as the eye follows the mainly unpunctuated text at a quick pace. Stacked up like a tower, the layout of the text suggests both height and falling, and therefore insecure balance. The passage opens with an expression of this need for stability:
With my gaze I
was leaning on him
if he hadn’t been
there as my anchor
point I would have
collapsed

The language is again metaphorical and synesthetic, here crossing sight and
touch, looking and feeling, as the subject leans on ‘him’ with her gaze. As in
the passage discussed above (LB-0302), the subject discusses a mental state
in terms of the need for physical support, this time an unidentified male figure.

Characterising a lack of reciprocity that links to the social world of relation,
Bourgeois writes that ‘he did not see me or look at me’, subsequently
describing ‘the big loneliness to look without being seen’ (lines 13-14). As she
describes this ‘one-way voice’:

it is not
yet communication
but it is the desire of it
like a child who
can hang on to the
side of the play-pen who
can raise itself to see and to feel itself.

Progressing associatively, these lines suggest an inquiry into affect by way of
the physical memory of a child raising itself by hanging on to the side of the
playpen. Acting as a barrier between child and adult worlds, the pen is
symbolic of separation and the desire to communicate. At the same time, it
enables the child to see and feel itself, functioning as a transitional object that
might also suggest a metaphor for the writings themselves — a sense
enforced by the double meaning of the term ‘pen’. The passage ends with an allusion to a fable that has been associated with Aesop, a figure frequently invoked in Bourgeois’s writings, about a collaborative effort to overcome respective disabilities:

\textit{as upon waking}

\textit{the blind and the Paralytic.}

In the context of this passage, the paralytic may stand for the child, before having learned to walk, while the blind could refer to ‘him’, as her unseeing ‘anchor point’, or the side of the play-pen on which the child hangs. The fact that the fable has also become a French idiom (‘l'union de l'aveugle et du paralytique’), ironically referring to an uncompromising relationship, is indicative of Bourgeois’s wry sense of humour. Thus, levity is brought to the passage, by which the narrative voice establishes distance from the perspective of child.

A text made in 1958 (LB-0272, p. 73), composed of nineteen lines, reconstructs another scene from childhood: that of learning how to walk. The passage begins with the assertion:

\begin{quote}
I do not have to live in a world
world of vacuum (Marie Bonaparte) I can create
my own, artist world of omnipotence + fantasy
I have to control space because I cannot
stand emptiness
\end{quote}

Associating artistic practice with orientation in space, these lines can be read self-reflexively, insofar as they are involved in the creation of the subject’s own ‘artist world’. Again, affect is portrayed with spatial imagery, evoking the sensation of the body:
emptiness is a space the edge of which you do
not know and you are not sure of – like falling
into space or like being dizzy

Pre-empting Meltzer’s description of the child’s sense of ‘falling forever’ (1978), of having no boundaries to contain fear, the narrator locates her sense of disorientation in childhood:

this question of space is perhaps sim
ply to have had fear of falling –
When Pierre was born Maman said – Louise got
Up and walked.\(^{18}\) Maybe I was just
afraid to fall at that moment – Vertigo and
great fear on balconies (roof at 18\(^{th}\) St)\(^{19}\)

Thus, the narrator suggests, she was displaced from the centre of the family her brother’s birth. She refers to herself in the third person, ‘Louise’, as if she is retelling an anecdote, reconstructing a scenario from childhood in order to determine the origin of her affect. The passage ends with an injunction:

Pull yourself together […]
Be modest and tight knitted
Always upon the loom your work shall put back –
Perfect and revisit again

Punning on the idioms of needlework, the passage ends with a quote from Nicolas Boileau-Despréaux’s *L’Art poétique* (1674): ‘*Vingt fois sur le métier remettez votre ouvrage*’, which became the French saying: ‘*faire et défaire,*

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\(^{18}\) The line ‘Louise got / Up and walked’ echoes the New Testament account of Jesus healing a paralysed man, ‘then Jesus said to him, “Get up! Pick up your mat and walk” (John 5:8, Holy Bible: New International Version). Thus, as in the entry written in 1959 (LB-0227, p. 112), the infant’s physical predicament is conveyed through the figure of a paralytic.

\(^{19}\) The reference is to Bourgeois’s studio at East 18th Street in New York, and provides an example of the way in which the writings slide between past and present.
c’est toujours travailler’ (Larratt-Smith: 2012, p. 73, fn. 1). These lines anticipate the title of Bourgeois’s 2000 installation at the Tate Modern, ‘I do, I undo, I redo’. Such a repetitive process of doing, undoing and redoing characterises the writings use of language, and also relates to the artist’s praxis more generally, according to which a certain set of key themes are reworked across different media. Notably written at ‘6.15 am’, this passage thus concludes with an invocation of Penelope at her loom, unweaving by night, methodically preparing to rearticulate affective states.

Internal Danger

Often in the writings, a place meant to assure safety and security carries internal dangers. This sense of an endangered intimate space is in turn associated with the child’s phantasies concerning the mother’s body. A text written in 1957 (LB-0141, pp. 53-54) exemplifies this relation of a sense of space and the maternal body. The passage begins:

when I had my mother in consciousness or stream of thoughts (which term is more exact) I made a round mound – and I made the following mound the mound is my [SIC] the passage self holding to the ground with the maximum gripping surface

Demonstrating how affect is translated into form, these lines suggest sculpting as an enactment of the infant’s relation to its mother. The round mounds are a frequent image in Bourgeois’s drawings and paintings, with the breast-like formations doubling up as a landscape. The image of the ‘self holding to the ground’ suggests a child attaching itself to the landscape of a female body, and its sense of dependency on the mother for stability.\textsuperscript{20} As the subject subsequently writes, ‘I feel like a mussel clinging to its rock’.

\textsuperscript{20}A text written in c. 1959 also explores the relation of sculpture, stability and the mother’s body as landscape, home or place of rest: ‘The mother is the / Earth, the mounds of Bourgogne and or provence or of Easton / where one falls asleep on the warm grass’ (LB-0464, pp. 108-9).
However, later in the passage, the subject conveys a sense that the mother is not always a safe place for the child:

of course the warm palm which is a mother can be a bad one. An inadequate or degenerate mother >

>obviously terror sets in – a Broken mother is like a cold house – or a soft walking stick or a rotten plank – it is an anomaly. Paulson story about the bombed out bomb shelter where the shelter becomes a trap – the “good mother” becomes a trap (p. 54)

This series of images implies the threat that lurks within the maternal space, with the story about a bombed out bomb shelter epitomising a sense of internal danger. Paulson, whom the editor notes was a friend of Bourgeois’s, appears in another passage that develops a similar theme in c. 1955 (LB-0126, pp. 48-49). Again recorded at night, at ‘3.15 a.m.’, spatial imagery is used to convey the fear of imminent threat:

instead of being an agent of death, sometimes I think of a box as an agent of refuge withdrawal + peace – but of course sometimes children die in the womb or are asphyxiated in a hiding place (Paulson during the / war)

The subject thus suggests a lack of safety in the very place one expects to be protected, something dangerous coming from within. This notion of a shelter doubling up as a trap notably informs many of Bourgeois’s artworks, from the Femme Maison paintings first shown in 1947 to the Cells of the 1990s.
The sense of internal danger often arises at night, and thus particularly seems to characterise nocturnal space. As the text embroidered into a series of Bourgeois’s fabric works reads, ‘has the day invaded the night or the night invaded the day?’ (2009-2013) – a line that is used for the title of the publication of Bourgeois’s *Insomnia Drawings*. Similar language is used in the writings when the subject writes in c. 1958, for example:

the silence invaded the room
and I was afraid to hear my heart
beat. this danger was coming from within
and that this only an incessant flow of words could keep at bay if not master it (p. 91)

This experience might recall the labours of Franz Kafka’s beast in ‘The Burrow’ (1931), a short story that is used by Maurice Blanchot in his discussion of the ‘other’ night of insomnia. As Blanchot writes in a section entitled ‘Night as Trap’ in *The Space of Literature* (1955): ‘the more the burrow seems solidly closed to the outside, the greater the danger that you be closed in with the outside, delivered to the peril without any means of escape’; ‘then it is intimacy that becomes menacing foreignness’ (2015, p. 167). As I will suggest in the next chapter, in Bourgeois’s *Cells* such a sense of internal danger is figured by the Gothic uncanny, as a way of simulating the return of unbidden affect.

*Transforming Chaos into Order*

In his discussion of the psyche’s way of dealing with traumatic rupture in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), Freud uses the metaphor of ‘binding’, suggesting that that ‘the binding of the energy that streams into the mental apparatus consists in its change from a freely flowing into a quiescent state’ (2001, p. 31). Representing a means of calming turbulence and finding rest,
the repetitive attempts of the psyche to bind stimulus also provides an image for writing as weaving/unweaving. Thus, Bourgeois’s writings demonstrate the intention of translating affect into form. As the subject repeats to herself, drawing from the proverb, “a place for everything, everything / in its place” that is the way you have peace’ (LB-0131, 1955, pp. 44-45). Similarly, the subject writes in 1957 (LB-0221):

I would like to embroider +
put everything in place and in a
proper + predictable manner –
to simplify, reduce organise
round up and retire after
being sure of the method drawn
in and concentric I would like
to be. (p. 52)

The imagery of embroidery as a method of ordering prefigures tropes of thread and yarn, stitching and knitting that recur throughout the Insomnia Drawings. The idea that the subject can rest ‘after being sure of the method drawn / in and concentric’ suggests drawing as a means of finding peace, and can similarly be linked to the motif of circles, spirals and coils in the Insomnia Drawings (Bourgeois: 2013, pp. 47, 83, 85 & 101) – with the motion of encircling articulating Bourgeois’s work both technically and metaphorically.

Part Two: ‘This is child abuse’

The last section examined the construction of childhood feelings of disorientation, instability and internal threat within the family home. Next, I want to suggest that form is given to such feelings by placing them inside a literary frame, which provides a temporary shelter for housing intense affective states. To illustrate, I would first like to turn to Bourgeois’s photo essay, ‘Child Abuse: A Project by Louise Bourgeois’. The scenario of ‘Child
Abuse’, a bourgeois family home in which the child is caught up in the adults’ affairs, has been intimately mapped by Freudian psychoanalysis. Nixon has observed how Bourgeois’s photo essay echoes Freud’s case study on Dora, a feminist *cause célèbre* when Bourgeois created this work (2005, p. 45). Dora claims that her father intends to offer her to Herr K., the mistress’s husband, in exchange for silence about the infidelity. Similarly, the narrator of ‘Child Abuse’ refers to herself as a ‘pawn’, declaring that ‘this is child abuse’ (1982, p. 44). Thus, as Nixon suggests, ‘the artist was, in some sense, copying Dora’ (p. 45). Furthermore, like Dora, she feels betrayed ‘not by the objects of her repressed desire (Freud’s theory of the case) but by bourgeois convention itself, which seems to offer no place for a daughter’ (p. 48). Nixon argues that ‘Child Abuse’ thereby resonated with contemporary feminist discourse in the 1980s, which retrieved and revalorised hysteria as a form of female protest (p. 50).

Despite the convincing parallel between the voices of ‘Child Abuse’ and Dora, there is nevertheless a crucial difference. Bourgeois’s narrator does not level the accusation of being used as a pawn at her father, but rather directs it towards her mother: ‘Sadie is supposed to be there as my teacher and actually you, mother, are using me to keep track of your husband’ (p. 44). Thus, she seems to affirm the patriarchal narrative of female guilt according to which women are to blame. The gendered nature of this narrative becomes explicit in Robert Storr’s recent gloss of ‘Child Abuse’, where he describes Sadie’s stay in the Bourgeois home as ‘a five-year marital siege’. Continuing the military metaphor, Storr adds that: ‘despite the pain and indignity of her position, from the beginning of the affair Joséphine [Louise’s mother] had apparently decided to beat a tactical retreat’ (2016, p. 23). Conceiving the two women at war over the husband, he thereby implies the mother’s tolerance of, and therefore complicity with, the sexual economy of the Bourgeois household.
I suggest that such a literal reading of Bourgeois’s photo essay, in which the narrator is cited synonymously with artist herself, risks missing the way in which irony is deployed within it as a theoretical strategy. Notably, its title has a significant but often omitted sub-heading, ‘A Project by Louise Bourgeois’, with the term ‘project’ implying that the piece has been carefully planned to achieve a particular aim. In a reading attentive to this element of the photo essay, the relationships between author, word and image shift. Rather than presenting autobiographical material, the photographs acquire the aura of found objects: personal yet highly ambiguous, they evoke intrigue rather than revealing a singular story. Similarly, the highly allusive text accompanying the photographs can then be seen to draw on multiple cultural references that combine to structure the narrative. Thus, taken together, word and image perform the interplay of affect and representation in relation to childhood memory. Bourgeois’s use of the parodic mode here sustains these two registers simultaneously: the narrator identifies with the confusing world of childhood in the face of adult sexuality, but she also cannily stages this identification. Through this means of drawing attention to its own representational act, the essay’s protest is subterranean rather than stated at surface level, and achieved through intertextual allusion.

The first spread of the photo essay features a pair of photographs selected from the Bourgeois family album, depicting Louise as a child hiking with her parents against a backdrop of alpine scenery. The photographs have been arranged to mirror one another, with each parent resting a hand on the daughter’s shoulder; however, while the child turns towards her mother with a happy smile, she turns sullenly away from her father. This symmetry might suggest a drama of divided Oedipal allegiances. At the same time, the mechanism of doubling anticipates the essay’s theme of betrayal, with the pairing of images giving them an artificial, choreographed quality.

A potential cultural association generated by the visual suggestiveness of the mountain setting is Robert Wise’s *The Sound of Music* (1965), a popular film of the time which tells the story of a trainee nun who is sent to look after seven children but ends up falling in love with their widowed father. ‘Child Abuse’ similarly centres on the trope of governess in the family home; however, an important difference of this plot is that the father figure, Louis Bourgeois, is still married. The words ‘Child Abuse’ in the right-hand corner indicate that this story, unlike that of the film, does not have a happy resolution; the bright pink font further highlights the monochromatic simplification, not to say hypocrisy, of the black-and-white image, forewarning something sinister on the horizon.

The next page of the essay presents a photograph of Bourgeois’s sculpture, *Eyes* (1972). A monolith topped by two round, hollowed stones, the sculpture recalls a pair of goggling eyes or binoculars from behind a veil, or, perhaps,
the wide-eyed shock of a child exposed to a traumatising sight – as if turned to stone by a Medusa-like image. The eyes also introduce notions of secrecy and surveillance: staring out from the page, they draw attention to the dynamic of looking and being looked at, prompting the viewer to reflect on her own voyeurism. Significantly, the eyes are slightly angled towards the photograph on the opposite page, in which Louise is with Sadie on a rowboat, as if saying, ‘watch out’. Above the photograph, the text’s voice enters:

\begin{quote}
Some of us are so obsessed with the past that we die of it. It is the attitude of the poet who never finds the lost heaven and it is really the situation of artists who work for a reason that nobody can quite grasp \textup{(1982, p. 43)}.
\end{quote}

The narrator adopts a Romantic idiom in depicting the bittersweet hold of her childhood, adding a degree of irony to her alignment with the melancholic poet. Indeed, the notion of a ‘lost heaven’ she seeks to recover can be read as a parodic reference to Marcel Proust’s \textit{À la recherche du temps perdu} (1908). Recurring allusions to Proust in Bourgeois’s writings (so far archivists have counted eight mentions) offer an example of how the artist enters into dialogue with the French literary canon.\textsuperscript{21} This engagement in her writings precedes a feature of her art: for example, two prints made in 1999, entitled ‘Madeleine’ and, more playfully, ‘The Smell of Feet’, enact an identification with Proust's protagonist in \textit{Du côté de chez Swann}, who famously bites into a madeleine and is suddenly transported back to his childhood. In ‘Madeleine’, the concentric circles depicting the woman’s nostrils visually echo Bourgeois’s \textit{Eyes} sculpture, widened in response to the mnemonic object. Furthermore, the cake is jammed into her mouth whole, like a gag, while the necklace or ‘choker’ wound tightly around her neck might imply the stranglehold both of a

\textsuperscript{21} Ascertained in personal conversation with the Louise Bourgeois Archive during my research visit on 5\textsuperscript{th}-9\textsuperscript{th} June, 2017.
traumatic past and of the patriarchal French canon. Displaying an interplay of personal and cultural memory, parroting the Proustian narrative voice in ‘Child Abuse’ implies ironic distance from a wistful, sentimental attitude towards recalling the past.


Indeed, in stark contrast with the nostalgic preface in ‘Child Abuse’, the continuation of the text after a line break seems designed to shock:

_On the left, the woman in white is The Mistress. She was introduced into the family as a teacher but she slept with my father and she stayed for ten years (p. 43)._  

The narrator’s anger is audible, with the repetition of ‘she’ enforcing an accusatory tone as the character Sadie is cast in the role of archetypal villain, ‘The Mistress’. The description of her innocuous-seeming white clothing, carrying an association of virginity, may be designed to enforce the
accusation of hypocrisy. At the same time, one might think of Wilkie Collin’s *Woman in White* (1860), a popular novel belonging to the nineteenth century ‘sensation’ genre of literature that was preoccupied with criminal biographies. Addressing social anxiety regarding identity in the Victorian era, this novel provides a literary background for the theme of being duped in ‘Child Abuse’. Notably, the hero of the story is a drawing master, hired to teach two young women in a country estate, while the father’s infidelity is the key to the novel’s mystery. Whether or not advertent, the allusion contributes, as I will argue, to a subterranean implication of the father’s culpability in this story of ‘child abuse’.

On the third spread, there is a picture of an imposing gateway to an ornate stately home, with two towering statues of carved female figures. The external perspective of the photograph implies exclusion from the adult world within. The accompanying text addresses the reader, with a storyteller’s intimacy:

> Now you will ask me, how is it that in a middle class family a mistress was a standard piece of furniture? Well, the reason is that my mother tolerated it and that is the mystery. Why did she?

> So what role do I play in this game? I am a pawn. Sadie is supposed to be there as my teacher and actually you, mother, are using me to keep track of your husband. This is child abuse (p. 44).

Switching from past to present tense, the narrator’s outrage at this situation turns, in the second paragraph, into a child’s struggle to make sense of the ‘mystery’, and the demands being place on her. No longer of central importance, she endures the narcissistic blow of being relegated to a ‘pawn’—visually evoked by the right-hand image of a marble sculpture with a female head, lying helplessly as though discarded. With this metaphor in mind, the two female figures in the photograph appear like queens on a chessboard, in a privileged position with regards to the adult world of sexuality. In such a
scenario, it is the child who bears the brunt of the adults’ secrecy and lies: ‘this is child abuse’. While the mother emerges as perpetrator in this account, once again a subtle sub-textual layer redirects the child-narrator’s accusation. By echoing Dora, whose protest was by contrast directed toward the father, Bourgeois’s narrator inhabits the identity of daughter-come-analysand, such that the text draws attention to its own application of this gendered narrative frame. In this light, emphasis on the ‘mystery’ of the mother’s tolerance may be seen as a means of indicting a culture in which women are dependent upon men.


On the right-hand page, there is a photograph of a model for Bourgeois’s sculpture *Fallen Woman* (1981), which the accompanying text suggests is a symbol of Sadie. At the same time, a layer of irony is added to this suggestion by the wash of bright pink colour, which – like the text on the first spread of this essay – simulates the style of a women’s magazine. As Betty Friedan famously observed, the editorial decisions in such magazines were mostly made by men, resulting in the propagation of the ideal woman as happy
housewife (Bourgeois notably kept a copy of *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) in her bedroom library). The narrator of ‘Child Abuse’ continues to describe how Sadie ‘betrayed me’, again in a way that seems to affirm a patriarchal narrative according to which the women are to blame – first the mother, now Sadie. The text continues:

*I was betrayed not only by my father, damn it, but by her too. It was a double betrayal. There are rules of the game. You cannot have people breaking them right and left. In a family a minimum of conformity is expected* (p. 45).

The father is only cited in the context of the ‘double betrayal’ with Sadie: the negative formulation implying that the narrator does not want to dwell on his role (‘not only’). However, irony again creeps in with the allusion to Jean Renoir’s 1939 film, *The Rules of the Game*, a farcical satire depicting the moral callousness of upper-class French society on the brink of the Second World War. The reference is apt, since – as the cast of wives, husbands and lovers meet for secret liaisons in a countryside estate – the ‘rules’ pertain to the proper way in which to carry on an affair. As the sexual antics spiral out of control, Renoir depicts the violence beneath the light-hearted veneer of bourgeois etiquette, with a long hunting scene foreshadowing the tragic murder at the end of the film. Allusion to this film thus underscores the serious consequences of the adulterous game played by the adults of ‘Child Abuse’, of which the child is an innocent victim. Furthermore, the implication is that ‘a minimum of decorum’ is not, in fact, expected, and that a family mistress is indeed a common but nevertheless tragic feature of bourgeois life. The text thereby implicitly critiques the very narrative it espouses, using irony to flag the hypocrisy of the outward order of the Bourgeois homestead.

The final spread takes the viewer into the interior spaces of a home, with each picture displaying a staircase containing works by the sculptor. Dark and shadowy, these images are evocative of clandestine meetings in corridors. In
the left-hand photo, the view is from the top of the staircase, looking onto a tall table with spindly legs, suggesting the sense of childlike proportion. Perhaps representing a dinner table, the archetypal symbol of family life infamously employed by Bourgeois in *The Destruction of the Father* (1974), the sculpture is appositely named *Maisons Fragiles* (1978), linking back to the characterisation of Sadie as a 'standard piece of furniture'. The picture on the right, conversely, looks levelly at a body-sized sculpture of a phallus, hanging from a hook on the ceiling. This is an overdetermined sculptural object: perhaps it implies the narrator is now in possession of the phallus, and has seized control; hung like a piece of meat, the phallus also seems to have been butchered. The text reads:

*Concerning Sadie, for too many years I had been frustrated in my terrific desire to twist the neck of this person* (p. 47).

The castrating image of twisting Sadie’s neck connects her with the photograph of the phallus. Since twisting is a key technique and motif in Bourgeois’s art, making art is in turn conceived as a method of revenge. Alternatively, the image may be seen as standing at odds with the text, implying that the underlying target of anger is not Sadie, but rather the patriarch, embodied here by the phallus. The implication, perhaps, is that in a misogynistic culture, the only narrative that can be told is one of female guilt.

The essay ends with an expression of the suffering that drives the artist’s work: ‘Everyday you have to abandon your past or / accept it and then if you cannot accept it / you become a sculptor’. These lines are notably offset by the picture of the comically oversized penis dangling to their left: the sculpture in fact constitutes a rough version of the sculpture named *Fillette* (1968) in latex and plaster, playing on an identification of little girl with phallic object. Mocking Freud’s theory that the daughter’s sense of Oedipal exclusion stems from her ‘envy of the penis’, the image in this context has the effect of parodying the psychoanalytic account of female desire as the wish for a penis; as well as highlighting the failure of this theory in holding to account the traumatising hypocrisy and confusion of the adults’ behaviour. Furthermore, it implies the caricatured nature of the portrayal of this female artist *qua* abused child, and her art as uncontrolled catharsis: a portrayal that this work itself contradicts through the contrivance of its form.

‘Child Abuse’ self-consciously parades concepts of penis envy, castration anxiety and the Oedipus complex, assembling its narrative of girlhood trauma
with a range of idioms, tropes and intertexts. Significantly, I suggest, the multiple threads offer a counter-story that ultimately apportions blame to the father. Attentiveness to this trope of weaving reveals how, through parodic inhabitation, two perspectives are sustained simultaneously: that of a child whose point of view replicates the misogynistic narrative; and that of an adult who casts critical light on the culture in which such a narrative arises. Thus, as well as presenting a portrait of the child’s needs that cannot but be read as a critique of family life and the treatment of children, the ‘abuse’ of this piece lies in the fact that patriarchal discourse is the one through which the child can most readily articulate her experience. Importantly, Bourgeois’s use of parody does not negate the affective power of ‘Child Abuse’. Indeed, the traumatic present of the child is preserved, enhanced by the photographs that convey a sense of being startled, perplexed and excluded. However, to use a neologism coined by Linda Hutcheon in her theory of parody, it ‘trans-contextualises’ childhood affect in a way that superimposes two different layers of time, past and present (2000, p. 101). As a result, ‘Child Abuse’ exhibits a temporal interval that allows the artist to gain distance from the traumatic past, both identifying with the abused child and exceeding this identification by drawing attention to its narrative framing.

‘Little orphan Annie’

The same parodic mechanism can be discerned in Bourgeois’s archival writings, in which the artist both inhabits and exceeds the Freudian account of the little girl’s accession to the Oedipus complex. Bourgeois’s authorial voice often identifies with the abandoned, orphaned, or dispossessed child. As she writes in c. 1959:

Personne

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22 Hereafter, transcriptions and translations of Bourgeois’s writings are provided by the Louise Bourgeois Archive, unless otherwise stated. A number of the inconsistencies reflect the challenges of presenting these writings to the reader. Bourgeois’s handwriting is often unclear and at times indecipherable. Moreover, spelling and grammar mistakes, such as verb disagreement or missing accents, and words that fuse English and French forms are difficult to render in translation.
ne m’aime, personne ne m’aime, Little orphan
Annie, je vais me tuer parce que personne ne m’aime
ou plutôt j’ai bien peur d’avoir à me tuer parce que
personne ne m’aime (LB-0273)

Nobody
loves me, Nobody loves me, Little orphan
Annie, I am going to kill myself because nobody loves me
or rather I am really afraid to have to kill myself because
nobody loves me.

Assuming the identity of ‘Little orphan Annie’, the plucky orphan of the
eponymous American newspaper comic strip (1924-2010) and, again, a
popular musical of the era, these lines provide a snapshot of the way
childhood trauma is mediated via popular culture.

Positing a series of identifications, another text written in the same year
provides an apposite illustration (LB-0231; all the excerpts in this section are
taken from the same loose sheet). It is possible here to trace a dual thread of
abandonment and dispossession, which is in turn linked to the little girl’s lack
of penis. The passage begins with a scene of abandonment:

Elle a trouvé la maison vide alors elle
est allée se jeter dans la rivière –

She found the house empty so she
went to throw herself into the river –\(^\text{23}\)

\(^{23}\) I have altered the translation of this line provided by the Louise Bourgeois Archive from ‘went and
threw herself into the river’ to ‘went to throw herself into the river’, in order to reflect more accurately
the meaning of the original French (with permission from the Archive granted on 22\textsuperscript{nd} November,
2019).
This miniature narrative appears elsewhere in Bourgeois’s writings, and might refer to the artist’s suicide attempt. However, the account now features in the third person, and is followed, after a line break, by another image of abandonment:

Brigitte a fondé un musée des enfants malheureux

Brigitte founded an unhappy children’s museum

The museum in these lines suggests the unhappy children are preserved in time, where they can be displayed and examined. Equally, removed from context, their meaning may appear ambiguous, obsolete. In the lines that directly follow, the image is associated with a scriptural intertext:

Doolittle Moses sauvé des eaux —
Toutes les femmes accourt [SIC] La fille du roi et ses suivantes et elles disent en le trouvant “Mon Dieu qu’il est beau [SIC]

Doolittle Moses saved from the waters —
All the women run up. The King’s daughter and her ladies-in-waiting and they say “My God, how beautiful he is [SIC]

Bourgeois thus alludes to the story of Moses in the Book of Exodus, who was adopted as a foundling from the Nile River and grew up with the Egyptian

24 A reference to Brigitte Cornand, a French filmmaker who was Bourgeois’s close friend and collaborator.
royal family. Whereas Moses is rescued, adored and ultimately reunited with his mother, however, ‘Dans le musée il n'y à jusqu'à / présent que des petites filles cassé [SIC]’ (‘In the museum there are only up to / now broken little girls’). The passage continues to draw attention to gender:

la Préréré est une poupée 1920 avec
ses têtes retenues par une ficelle
[…]
de L’avoir cassé elle en a presque
perdu la tête.

the Favorite is a 1920 doll whose heads are attached by a string
[…]
to have been broken it almost made her lose her mind.

Punning on the expression of losing one’s mind, suggesting both physical and psychical loss, these lines can also be read as an allusion to castration. Later in the same passage, Bourgeois places emphasis on examining these childhood scenes, comparing the horrors of the past:

Je ne veux pas le réparer ce n'est
pas nécessaire puisque c’est un musée
des poupées cassées – On n’a qu’à comparer
les horreurs

I don’t want to repair them it is not

25 I have altered the translation of this line provided by the Louise Bourgeois Archive from ‘to have been broken it almost made her’ to ‘to have broken it almost made her’, in order to reflect more accurately the meaning of the original French (with permission from the Archive granted on 22nd November, 2019).
necessary since it is a broken
doll museum – It is enough to compare
the horrors

The dolls are immobile, seized in their brokenness, evoking a freeze frame, a moment of pain or trauma. The image of a doll museum in this text interestingly anticipates the fabric works Bourgeois would produce in the 1990s, whose dismembered bodies are exhibited within glass vitrines. Often assembled from old garments of clothing, these dolls are coarsely stitched together in a manner suggestive of sutured wounds. Identifying with the ‘1920 doll’ in this passage, Bourgeois’s narrator asks, ‘Est-ce que ma tête s’en va’ (‘is my head going’), and subsequently connects this feeling of castration with the death of her father:

\[ De \\
\text{perdre mon Père. C’est comme si on me castrait} \\
\text{je perdis tout même} \\
\text{l’équilibre – Scène post – mortem} \]

Losing my Father — it is as if I was castrated
I lose everything even
my equilibrium – Post – mortem scene

The post-mortem metaphor again suggests a frozen scene, adding connotations of investigating a murder, which builds on the violence implied by the mutilated bodies of the dolls. It thus poses the question of culpability, of the identity of aggressor/dispossessor.

This text illustratively inhabits the dual identity of broken doll and museum custodian, suggesting associations, respectively, with the traumatised child and adult exploring the anatomy of affect. The final lines, which shift tense as though turning to the narrator’s current predicament, implies a motivation for
this exploration: ‘il y a 11 / jours que Lowenfeld est parti — La Peine’ (‘it has
been 11 days since Lowenfeld left – The Pain’). This feeling of abandonment,
seemingly prompted by her psychoanalyst Lowenfeld’s departure, is then
characterised in terms of childhood affect:

Disposition à
withdrawal j’ai peur de quitter mon
lit refuse d’en sortir si tirer [SIC] de mon
repair tantrum

Disposition to
withdrawal – I am scared to leave my
bed refusal to get up and if drawn out of my
lair tantrum

Weaving between child and adult identities, French and English languages,
identification here with the figure of the abandoned or dispossessed child
offers a means of examining affective states. Crucially, Bourgeois self-
reflexively draws attention to this act of identification in a way that allows her
to stand outside of the victimised subject position. The construction of a
parodic frame through which to examine scenes from the past, assembled
from a range of cultural, literary and psychoanalytic allusions, notably informs
Bourgeois’s distinctive sculptural idiom. One might think of the scenario of the
Freudian primal scene staged by a pair of Cells entitled Red Room (Child)
and Red Room (Parents) (1994). This prevalent feature of intertextuality
raises the question, to be explored in the next section of this chapter, whether
parodic narrativity in Bourgeois’s writings might offer a means of exploring
childhood traumatic affect, whilst at the same time gaining distance from it.

Literary Daughters
As I have suggested, Freudian ideas around the little girl’s Oedipus complex are used knowingly, often ironically, by Bourgeois rather than featuring as a direct expression of the artist’s unconscious. Having noted the richly allusive quality of Bourgeois’s writings, here I want to observe how Bourgeois’s exploration of infantile fantasies traverses the canon of French literature. Spun from literary yarn, her portrayal of the past constitutes an intertextual and multimodal web, enforcing an association of weaving and storytelling. Crucially, the parodic mode foregrounds the process of composition, such that writings hold up a mirror to their own fictional practices. I propose that the narrative of girlhood trauma is constructed via identification with daughters in French literature, particularly focusing on two works of French fiction to which Bourgeois’s writings frequently refer: Balzac’s *Eugénie Grandet* (1833) and Sagan’s *Bonjour Tristesse* (1958). So far, archivists have counted eleven explicit references to the former, and six to the latter, though the process of cataloguing is ongoing.⁴⁶ Seen in conjunction with other moments of her oeuvre, these novels represent important intertexts in Bourgeois’s writings.

In both novels, the narrative centres on the position of a daughter within the family and, in different ways, her coming of age. Parodically inhabiting these literary identities allows Bourgeois to explore the perspective of the daughter, and her experience of different allegiances within the family, whilst also retaining creative agency. The metaphor of inhabitation is especially pertinent, since the drama in each novel unfolds within an enclosed domestic space (a seaside villa in *Bonjour Tristesse*, and the Grandet family homestead in *Eugénie Grandet*). Bourgeois notably returned to the trope of the home in a range of media throughout her career: from the *Femme Maison* paintings (1945-1947), the sculptural *Lairs* in the early sixties, to the three-dimensional *Cells* (1991-2008). As I will suggest, the archive writings show how Bourgeois’s exploration of the home – particularly as the site of childhood experience – also takes place within a novelistic topography, such that

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⁴⁶ Ascertained in personal conversation with the Louise Bourgeois Archive during my research visit on 5th-9th June, 2017.
personal and literary memory is intertwined. Drawing attention to the web of literary allusions in Bourgeois’s oeuvre demonstrates how narrativity, rather than representing personal testimony, functions as a frame for interpreting feelings of rejection, rivalry, fear and loss. By imposing a coherent scenario onto what would otherwise be undetermined affects, it thereby functions as a means of both exploring and gaining distance from intense affective states.

In Bourgeois’s writings, explicit references to the Oedipus complex often cite Sadie, the father’s mistress. Bourgeois writes of her ‘jalousy [SIC] and hate of / Sadie’ (15 November, 1957); of her feeling of being usurped, ‘it is never my turn’ (c. 1956), and ‘LEFT OUT’ (c. 1963); and the sense that Sadie took her place: ‘Sadie has dislodged me’ (c. 1963) and ‘I lost my father to Sadie’ (c. 1960). Current archival research indicates that references to Sadie are particularly condensed in the 1950s and 60s, the period following the death of Bourgeois’s father, an event that also seems to have prompted the artist’s decision to undergo psychoanalysis. During the writings of this time, Sadie acquires the symbolic status of a rival for the father’s affections; she assumes the symbolic figure of the usurper, and her affair with the father relegates the daughter to third position. As Bourgeois puts it in a diary entry made on July 30, 1984, she suffers from ‘Sadie syndrome’. Sadie’s name thus becomes idiosyncratic shorthand for Oedipal rivalry, but in a way that also crucially indicates the artist’s playful appropriation of psychoanalytic concepts.

In fact, while Bourgeois’s narrator experiments with an Oedipal model in order to reconstruct her childhood, these reconstructions are often supplemented by a distinctly literary quality. The following passage, written in 1958, demonstrates Bourgeois’s fluency in psychoanalytic discourse, but additionally the novelistic nature of her depiction of the past:


28 Ascertained in personal conversation with the Louise Bourgeois Archive during my research visit on 5th-9th June, 2017.
Depossédé de mon plus grand bien
soudainement = the felling [SIC] is known
a chock [SIC] sends me spinning – what is it
what happened — Decapitation [SIC] encore
Maman qui après avoir été trompé pendant
dix ans, au moins, trouve un poulet dans
la poche son mari et soudain elle
s’assied et elle pleure – realization
je crois que la decapitation [SIC] a été [SIC] exa
minee; “Sadie” a provoqué une reactivation [SIC]
de ce foyer n°1 d’infection – (LB-0444)

Dispossessed of my biggest asset
Suddenly = the feeling is known
a chock [sic] sends me spinning – what is it
what happened – Decapitation again
Maman who after having been cheated on for
ten years, at least, finds a love letter in
her husband’s pocket and suddenly she
sits down and she cries – Realization
I think that the decapitation has been exa
mined; “Sadie” has provoked a reactivation
of this nº1 source of infection –

Weaving between past and present, these lines follow the trajectory of
treads from childhood as they re-emerge in adult life. Their markedly
diagnostic language emulates the idiom of psychoanalytic inquiry, seeking to
determine the origin of traumatic affect. Indeed, feelings of dispossession and
decapitation – terms that allude to Freudian concepts of castration and penis
envy – are traced back to a scene in which Bourgeois’s mother discovers a
love letter in her husband’s pocket, presumably from Sadie. However, the
reconstructed scene equally well conforms to a literary trope. Notably, the
French word ‘poulet’ is used: an archaic term for a love letter with resonances of the French literary and intellectual tradition (one might think of epistolary novels such as Les Liaisons dangereuses (1782)). The passage thus constructs an archetypal scene of betrayal, enhanced by the mother’s theatrical response. Meanwhile, “‘Sadie’” is placed within quotation marks, implying a literary excess of the literal whereby Sadie represents an iteration of the universal figure of ‘the mistress’.

Developing my suggestion that the Oedipus complex is often mediated through the literary canon in Bourgeois’s writings, I would like to situate the story of Sadie against the backdrop of one of Bourgeois’s favourite novels: Sagan’s bestselling debut work Bonjour Tristesse, from which Bourgeois selected four extracts for her ‘Artist’s Choice’ in a 2003 Phaidon publication (Storr et al., pp. 106-109). Written when the author herself was still a teenager, the novel tells the story of seventeen-year-old Cécile, who spends the summer with her widowed father, Raymond, in a villa on the Côte d’Azur. Raymond is characterised as a feckless yet lovable philanderer, who affectionately calls Cécile ‘my little accomplice’ (2008, p. 19). The narrative is driven by Cécile’s jealousy of her father’s fiancée, Anne. She successfully engineers a situation in which Anne discovers Raymond kissing another woman, leading to Anne’s fatal car accident. Bourgeois’s choice of four extracts of the novel highlight the Oedipal arc of the plot.

The first depicts the morning after what Cécile describes as Raymond and Anne’s first ‘night of love’. In the second extract, Cécile’s heightening jealousy of Anne is portrayed, as she tries to reason with herself that “this desire to separate her from my father is vicious”. The third extract includes the novel’s most explicit articulation of Cécile’s sense of occupying a special position vis-à-vis her father, as she asserts, ‘I was always more important to him than his love affairs’ (p. 106). The fourth extract jumps to Anne’s funeral, where Cécile is relieved that ‘everyone was deploring the dreadful, senseless accident’. With her father in the car on the way home, she comforts herself with tears,
“we are alone and unhappy”. Gradually, both daughter and father resume their life before Anne. Only when she is in bed, at dawn, does her memory betray her: in the final words of the novel (reproduced in Bourgeois’s fourth choice of extract), ‘something rises in me that I call to by name, with closed eyes. Bonjour, tristesse!’ (p. 109).

I suggest that Bonjour Tristesse provides a map for charting the fantasy positions of the girl child that are positions also explored in Bourgeois’s writings. Like Raymond, the father is depicted as a womaniser with a ‘Don Juan ability’ (c. 1968), whose affair arouses the daughter’s intense jealousy (LB-0941). In each case, the wish to kill Anne or Sadie can be seen as a daughter’s matricidal fantasy transferred onto the father’s mistress. Moreover, both narratives are premised on the basis of a dead or sick mother (Bourgeois’s writings often return to the scene of her mother on her deathbed), implying that, in fantasy, a murder has already taken place. Juxtaposing the stories of sex and death highlights how literary and fantasy worlds are interleaved in Bourgeois’s writings – as a passage written in March 18, 1964 illustrates (LB-0153). Beginning with an expression of violent anger, ‘I have the missing link – Kill *’, Bourgeois’s narrator then asks, ‘is it Sadie [SIC] back of it all’, indicating that her murderous rage is ultimately directed towards her rival for her father’s love. As she reiterates, ‘ma jalousie est mortelle / Regarde comme le triangle s’établit’ (‘my jealousy is deadly / Look how the triangle establishes itself’). Having given a list of triads, including ‘Sadie Bourgeois Louise’, the segment ends:

This fills in a quandary that I have had this last week the wish to kill, the need to kill put me in a depression sort²⁹ is the Sagan tristesse

Sagan’s novel is thus cited as an explanatory narrative for Bourgeois’s feelings of rage, neatly demonstrating how a literary scenario is used to make sense of affect.

Interestingly, the reference to ‘fate’ echoes a passage in the closing chapter of *Bonjour Tristesse* (also included in the last of Bourgeois’s chosen extracts), where Cécile reports:

> Soon we could speak of Anne in a normal way as of a person dear to us, but whom God had called to Himself. I have written God, and not fate – but we did not believe in God. In these circumstances we were thankful to believe in fate (p. 109).

Such an appeal to fate, while seeming to evoke matricide, may be read as an allusion to the myth of Oedipus, retold in this novel from the daughter’s perspective. However, the irony of *Bonjour Tristesse*, and what made the novel scandalous on its publication, is that the daughter sees fate merely as an alibi. Since she remains unpunished, the outcome of the story gratuitously licenses Oedipal desire. As Rachel Cusk writes in her 2008 foreword to the novel, ‘morality, and its absence, is the novel’s defining theme’ (p. 2). With their addition of a meta-fictional layer, Bourgeois’s writings suggest another angle from which to view this novel whereby the unreliability of the young narrator comes to the fore. Consequently, Cécile’s sense of omnipotence can be seen as the other side of vulnerability, resulting from bad parenting and specifically the lack of a father figure following her mother’s death. In Bourgeois’s borrowing, then, blame of the daughter is redirected into a critique of bourgeois family life.

Thus, parody allows Bourgeois’s writings to exist simultaneously inside and outside the fictional world of *Bonjour Tristesse*. While Bourgeois’s authorial voice seems to take a wicked pleasure in Sagan’s fairy-tale fiction of Oedipal
fulfilment, she also steps out of this triangular fate by drawing attention to her own act of identification. Indeed, references to Sagan provide an example of how Bourgeois’s writings serve as a storehouse for collecting material for her artworks. A passage written in 1997 suggests how inhabiting the literary world of *Bonjour Tristesse* allows her to explore the topic of the “bad daughter”:

"Francoise Sagan, *Bonjour tristesse*,

[…]  

_"fille qui deteste [SIC] sa mère, mère qui deteste [SIC] sa fille"

[daughter who detests her mother, mother who detests her daughter]

“The bad mother” has been done (in Prints, Pouran)

the “bad daughter” has _never_ been done

“you betrayed me.” the destruction of the mother is crazy. something is missing a piece in the puzzle nothing is missing (LB-1803).

This passage significantly suggests how the character of Cécile offers Bourgeois insight into the subject position of a daughter who hates her mother, whilst also showing that this expression of hatred of the father’s rival is not unmediated. Replaying and re-contextualising Sagan’s narrative, inverted commas around ‘bad daughter’ imply that the literary identification opens up new ground to be explored in her art. Indeed, three years later Bourgeois would make her monumental steel spider entitled *Maman* (2000), which powerfully evokes, among other things, a child’s ambivalent feelings towards her mother. The final lines of this passage have a markedly playful character, with the contradiction – something is missing; nothing is missing – suggesting the dynamic quality of fantasy positions.

Balzac’s *Eugénie Grandet* is another prominent intertext in Bourgeois’s oeuvre, transforming the family structure into a cast of literary characters: the domineering, tyrannical father; the weak, submissive mother; and the
daughter whose fate lies – unlike that of Cécile in *Bonjour Tristesse* – in unfulfilled sexuality. Bourgeois writes in a diary entry on October 7, 1994:

> I don’t need to read Eugénie Grandet
> I’ve lived E. G.
> — if you don’t want to repeat Balzac
> be informed

This identification comes with a warning, and indicates how Eugénie’s story is used both to construct the past, and to go beyond the confined space for the daughter in this novel. The events of *Eugénie Grandet* mainly unfold within the enclosed family world of the Grandet household in the provincial town of Saumur, where Eugénie and her mother live under the stringent miserliness of Monsieur Grandet, until their routine is interrupted by the arrival of Eugénie’s Parisian cousin, Charles. Eugénie’s sexual awakening by Charles — who leaves to make his fortune overseas, with the empty promise of returning to marry her — brings her into direct conflict with her father. Enraged that Eugénie has given Charles the gold coins he had given her each year on her birthday (symbolising the castrating redirection of her libido), Monsieur Grandet locks his daughter in her room; meanwhile, mortally traumatised by the conflict, Madame Grandet takes to her bed where she eventually dies, ‘without uttering the slightest complaint’ (2003, p. 161). Towards the end of the novel, the daughter is described as retreating into the ‘cold, dark house which was her whole universe’ (p. 167), without having ‘experienced any of the joys of life’ (p. 169).

Referring to *Eugénie Grandet*, Bourgeois told an interviewer in September 2009, ‘I love that story. It could be the story of my life’. Of course, it is not the story of her life: she left her family home and became an artist, as well as marrying and having children. Instead, Eugenie’s story is enacted, used to dramatise affect. Bourgeois thus plays on the theatrical imagery of the novel itself: Balzac’s narrator describes the familial drama as ‘a bourgeois tragedy
without poison, dagger, or bloodshed, but, as far as the actors were concerned, more cruel than all the tragedies enacted in the renowned house of Atreus’ (p. 136).

Harnessing this notion of tragic destiny born of inherited guilt, Bourgeois’s ‘bourgeois tragedy’ is similarly staged in her oeuvre. The oppressive interiority of the Grandet household is, for example, legible in the dimly-lit Gothic world of Bourgeois’s *Cells*, room-sized installations that enact the threat of incarceration and no-exit entrapment. Similarly, the patriarch Monsieur Grandet, who scrimps on candles, firewood, even sugar lumps (in one scene, he ‘amused himself in his spare moments by cutting them up’ (p. 65)), could be the ‘tyrant’ on whom Bourgeois enacts a scenario of revenge in the sculpture *The Destruction of the Father* (1974), which was originally called *The Evening Meal*. The artist has described how ‘we grabbed [the father], threw him on the table, dismembered him, and proceeded to devour him’, ritualistically performing the cutting-to-pieces of paternal authority (cited by Nixon: 2005, p. 258).

Thus, while *Bonjour Tristesse* can be seen to gratify a fantasy of matricide, *Eugénie Grandet* shifts the murderous impulse onto the father by casting him as a tyrant, and thereby mobilises a different daughterly perspective on the sexual dynamic within the family structure. Monsieur Grandet’s dominion over the household notably stands in direct relation to his fetishistic ‘monomania’ for gold: as Balzac writes, ‘his tyrannical tendency had developed in proportion to his avarice’ (p. 157). Eugénie’s bestowal of the libidinally charged gold coins on Charles is consequently what brings about the shattering confrontation with her father. Ironically, then, the daughter’s demise results from spending so freely what her father had hoarded. Her desire frustrated and betrayed, she is forced to live out the paternal decree.

Eugénie’s sexuality is in fact the key point of reference for Bourgeois in her writings. As she writes in c. 1996, ‘*mon / centre est ma sexualité.* […] *C’est le*
Point fixé le point fixé [SIC] à Eugénie Grandet’ (‘my / center is my sexuality [...] it is the fixed Point the fixed point of Eugénie Grandet’) (LB-0107).

Eugénie’s love is unconsummated, her life instead entwined with that of her mother, always ‘breathing the same air as they slept’ (66). After the mother’s death, she inherits a treasured thimble that she used for her embroidery, ‘a Penelope’s web undertaken only to put on her finger the memory-laden trinket’ (170).

Serving here as a symbol of conjugal fidelity, Penelope represents the archetypal image of ‘feminine’ passivity, relating to the female world controlled by men. In a passage written on October 20, 1966, Bourgeois adopts this scenario in which Eugénie’s devoted care of her mother is associated with chastity:

become moral about it –
[...]
I stayed with her and gave up men –
depressed, revengeful, and sacrificing
retrouver cette époque (LB-0998)

Seeking a return to the ‘epoch’ characterised by Eugénie’s punitive sexual experience, allegiance to the mother means giving up men: playing the ‘good’ (or ‘moral’) daughter involves denying her sexuality. However, the melodramatic language of sacrifice indicates that Bourgeois is writing with tongue in cheek, indicating an ironic expression of a wish to return to that time. Indeed, Eugénie’s loyalty to her mother, and the corollary of her sexual purity, also functions as a point of departure in the writings. For example, Bourgeois’s narrator admits in a 1959 passage about the mother that ‘I was definitely / relieved by her death and I put myself in her bed / and forbade people to come in her room’ (LB-0124). These lines ambiguously suggest a desire to usurp the mother, but also to unite with her in death.
Elsewhere in the writings, Bourgeois explicitly establishes distance from Eugénie’s position: ‘Eugénie Grandet est celle que je plains […] l’économie domestique et Eugénie Grandet’ (‘Eugénie Grandet is the one I pity […] the Domestic economy and Eugénie Grandet’ (LB-0102)). In the novel, Eugénie is ultimately defined only in relation to men: as Balzac writes in the final lines, ‘such is the story of a woman who, made to be a magnificent wife and mother, has neither husband nor children nor family’ (2003, p. 192).

Through her parodic authorial identification with Eugénie, Bourgeois is able to transcend the rhetoric of fate, both inhabiting and exceeding the limited space for female autonomy in this novel. In 1993, she writes a text that constitutes a draft version of the lines pencilled into the leaves of a drawing called ‘Ode to Eugénie Grandet’ (2007), and later published in a volume entitled Moi, Eugénie Grandet accompanying Bourgeois’s final exhibition before she died (2010). In this text, Bourgeois performs Eugénie’s position:

I have spent my life making a trousseau
I who has never been trussed up

The pun on ‘trousseau’, the garments collected by a bride before her marriage, and being ‘trussed’, like a chicken ready to be cooked, typifies the comic irony of this ‘ode’. This poetic text notably repeats the phrase ‘I have spent’ eleven times, stressing the sense of a wasted life attending to domestic chores. For example, ‘I have spent my life making openwork pulling threads for / the bed sheets / and table clothes’. The dramatic irony of these lines, of course, is that Bourgeois did spend her life ‘making openwork’, but, like Penelope, appropriated thread for her art. Notably, Bourgeois’s exhibition, Moi, Eugénie Grandet (2010), was set in Balzac’s former home in Paris – thereby literalising the metaphor of inhabitation, and suggesting an affinity with the novel’s author as well as protagonist.
Following on from this overview of Bourgeois’s engagement with Sagan and Balzac, I propose that literary scenarios such as these function like *tableaux vivants* in her writings, used for decoding memories in ways that allow Bourgeois to arrange and rearrange different fantasy positions. The construction of girlhood trauma in Bourgeois’s writings is carefully posed, with the artist both identifying with a character within a scene, and the one putting this scene together. Parodic identification with the daughters of *Bonjour Tristesse* and *Eugénie Grandet* allows the artist to examine oscillating allegiances, with the complex articulation of a daughter’s feelings towards her parents suggesting that these feelings are neither static nor final. A note written in c. 1997 plays on the association of storytelling with weaving/mourning: ‘Je suis née dans la chiffre et non / dans la Bouffe’ (‘I was born in the rag business and not/ in the Food business’) – a reference to the Bourgeois tapestry repair studio where the artist assisted as a young child (LB-0782). The image of a ‘rag’, as a piece of cloth torn from a larger piece, evokes the remnants of her inheritance. The passage continues:

*Chaque vêtement a une*

*histoire, un passé, une raison d’être*

derrière chacun vêtement il y a une

*personne pas moi […]*

*verify [SIC, reverifier [SIC], revivre le passé*  

c’est de l’archéologie – le lit  

*l’histoire du lit, en ordre et en désordre*

Each garment has a  

*history, a past, a raison-d’être*

*behind each garment there is a person not me […]*  

*verify, reverify, relive the past*

*it is archeology – the bed*
the history of the bed, in order or in disorder.

Each garment constitutes an enigmatic object that comes with a story. The work of verifying, re-verifying and reliving the past is a description of Bourgeois’s process in her writing and art of this period, recalling the winding thread of Penelope at her loom, plying her shuttle as she makes, unmakes and then remakes her cloth again. Similarly, ‘archeology’ as the study of artefacts and other physical remains, relates to the activity of assembling and re-assembling the dynamics of the bed, and the elaborate history of sexual fantasy. These lines anticipate the title of Bourgeois’s 2000 installation at the Tate Modern, ‘I do, I undo, I redo’. Such a repetitive process of doing, undoing and redoing characterises her use of language in these writings, and also relates to the artist’s praxis more generally, according to which a certain set of key themes are reworked across different media.

**Parody and Mourning**

For Freud and, later, Jean Laplanche, weaving is associated with the feminine as mourning for the lost phallus. Referring to Freud’s ‘intuition’ that led him to ascribe to woman the invention of weaving, Laplanche writes the following:

Numerous paths open up from this starting point:

That of Greek etymology, such that it is reflected in Homer’s text, where [iston]\(^{30}\) is at once the penile mast of the loom and the cloth which is rolled onto it, veiling it. In the same way, the pubic tissue is at once what veils (*verhüllen*) and, symbolically, what is veiled [...].

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\(^{30}\) Laplanche here cites the term for ‘fabric’ or ‘cloth’ in Homer’s text, which he notes is named by the same word as the ‘erected mast’ (Laplanche: 2005, p. 251, fn. 36).
A questioning of the privileged relation of woman to, at the same time, weaving-unweaving, mourning and melancholia.

The setting up of a relation between the lost object, in mourning and/or melancholia, and the lacking or lost penis (2005, p. 253).

The parodic element of Bourgeois’s writings facilitates their play with this association. ‘Freud has written nothing on women’, Bourgeois writes in 1954 (LB-0484) – a provocative and counterfactual statement that I suggest might be read as a claim that Freud did not write anything for women, or anything meaningful about them. This chapter has proposed that the artist may be seen as a Penelope-figure, not just as mourner wedded to loss; but also and perhaps more emphatically as storyteller, whose tales are ambiguous, refusing the imposition of interpretative control and reduction to psychoanalytic and autobiographical narratives. Attention to the formal properties of Bourgeois’s writings highlights the artist’s creative and intellectual agency in her exploration of girlhood trauma, as her threads ravel and unravel along the skeins of literature and open up new ways of situating the daughter both within the family and the cultural canon.

Moreover, drawing from psychoanalytic and literary intertexts, I hope to have shown how the dimension of parody in Bourgeois’s writings politicises the narratives on which she draws. Mediating infantile fantasies through fiction allows an exploration of the situation of daughter within the family, in a way that playfully and critically interrogates patriarchal convention. Bourgeois both is and is not Eugénie Grandet: this is a position she can inhabit in fantasy, even while she exceeds it by making art. At the end of a passage written in 1993 (the first draft of her Ode to Eugénie Grandet), Bourgeois writes, as if commenting on her own use of parody as a means of avoiding Eugénie’s victimhood: ‘un peu d’humour / s’il vous plaît, pas de pitié […] je ne suis pas bête je suis / seulement malheureuse’ (‘a little humor / please, no pity […] I am not dumb, I am / simply unhappy’ (LB-0105)).
As I have noted, the *Moi, Eugénie Grandet* exhibition, as well as inhabiting the character of Eugénie, also inhabited the author, Balzac's home. Bourgeois thereby situates herself as a daughter of the male canon, with parody offering a way of establishing a place for the female artist. As I observed in Chapters 3 and 4, parody plays a similar role in the work of Sylvia Plath. Interestingly, the oeuvres of Bourgeois and Plath express a comparable ambivalence towards the father, who is figured both as an object of desire from whom approval is sought, and as a tyrant inhibiting the daughter's freedom. This expression of ambivalence can be read as an articulation of the woman artist's position in relation to her patrilineal aesthetic inheritance.

This chapter has also suggested that parodic identification with literary scenarios provides the artist with a temporary shelter for housing intense emotions. Weaving fictional narratives in response to traumatising enigmas of the past, the writings give provisional form to affect, but also show how different, at times contradictory, narratives can co-exist. Parody thus offers a means of coming to terms with childhood trauma by developing knowledge that is not one-dimensionally objectifying or narrowly cognitive, but rather involves affect. As this chapter has argued, Bourgeois’s writings enact an effort to articulate and rearticulate the interplay of affect and representation, whereby the parodic dimension of indeterminacy allows a continual back and forth between the re-activation of the past and the aesthetic sublimation of pleasure. The lightness of touch in these writings does not deny suffering but rather suggests that it is contemporaneous with, and to some extent lifted by, play.
Chapter 6

Scenes of Childhood Trauma:
Gothic Literature in Louise Bourgeois’s *Cells*

This chapter analyses a selection of Louise Bourgeois’s ‘cell’ installations (1986-2008) in the context of an exhibition entitled *Structures of Existence*, curated by Julienne Lorz at the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art in Denmark (October 29, 2016 to February 26, 2017).\(^{31}\) Constituting a sculptural form unique to the artist, Bourgeois’s *Cells* are room-sized constructions that, as Lorz observes, ‘hover somewhere between a museal panorama, a theatre set, an environment or installation’ (Lorz: 2017, p. 33). Marking the first occasion on which the *Cells* are taken as a single subject, *Structures of Existence* offers the opportunity of analysing how the works interrelate, as well as the transitional space of the gallery setting. This chapter especially focuses on two sets of *Cells* that are explicitly interlinked: *Cells I-VI* that were made as a series for the Carnegie Hall in 1991, and a pair of *Cells* entitled *Red Room (Child)* and *Red Room (Parents)* made by the artist in 1994. These works instigate a sequential mode of viewing, creating passages through space analogous with the unfolding of a narrative.

The term ‘cell’ carries multiple associations. It might designate a small room in which a prisoner is locked up, or in which a monk or nun sleeps; intended for the occupation of a single inhabitant, such a room thereby suggests solitude, solitude or confinement. In biology, a cell refers to the smallest structural unit of an organism or, more generally, a small compartment in a larger structure. The term also has connotations of clandestine political activities, in which contact between members of an organisation is restricted. Bourgeois’s *Cells* intertwine these diverse meanings, attesting to the artist’s interest in teasing out semantic crossover. Significantly, the notion of a series is integral to each use of the term, inviting the viewer to imagine narrative connections.

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\(^{31}\) The exhibition also travelled to the Garage Museum of Contemporary Art, Moscow (September 25, 2015 to January 24, 2016) and the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao (March 18, 2016 to September 4, 2016).
This chapter draws attention to a resonance with the spatial image of the sequestered cell or chamber in Gothic fiction, such that the series of Cells simulates the shadowy interior of an old dark house in which Gothic narratives are often set. Like the ‘cell’ of Thornfield Hall in which Bertha is incarcerated in Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* (1847), Bourgeois’s enclosed structures evoke the attempt to conceal a sinister secret, positioning the viewer as a Gothic ‘reader’ lured into their mystery (1999, p. 194). Thus, while Bourgeois’s Cells are often considered to be the artist’s most autobiographical works, this chapter shows how they might also be situated within the context of the Gothic literary canon. Indeed, by drawing attention to the ways in which the Cells evoke Gothic literature, it can be seen how they playfully undermine interpretations based on Bourgeois’s life.

Assembled from weathered materials signalling the passage of time, the Cells throughout the exhibition simulate scenes from a long ago era, which, as I will suggest, are particularly redolent of a distant infantile past. These installations might then create an impression of a family home from the perspective of a child, extending on an architectural scale Bourgeois’s career-long exploration of the house as a site of childhood experience. As this chapter observes, alluding to a Gothic literary aesthetic permits the Cells to capture a sense of childhood fear in the face of the perplexing unknown, as well as mediating this fear by way of the melodramatic, at times humorous excesses of the Gothic genre. I identify two intertexts that might inform an approach to Bourgeois’s Cells, E. T. A. Hoffmann’s ‘The Sandman’ (1816) and Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* (1847), narratives that both feature a child protagonist seeking to make sense of mysterious goings-on within the family home. Similarly setting in motion a fictional protagonist, Bourgeois’s Cells illustrate how childhood affect takes form through a Gothic literary imaginary.

As I will propose in the first section of this chapter, the Cells’ Gothic evocation of childhood fear dramatises what Freud termed the ‘primal scene’ of trauma,
in which the child is confronted with the enigma of adult sexuality. Presenting the viewer with a series of cryptic tableaux, the Cells invoke a sense of the child’s uncomprehending witness within an introverted and familial space of private fantasy. Gothic tropes materialise the fantasies that result from the child’s anxious attempt to interpret the mysteries of grown-up life. Furthermore, Gothic narrative form plays a part in the Cells’ enactment of the temporality of the primal scene. Freud outlines in his case study on the ‘Wolf Man’ (1918) that the primal scene is an experience that becomes traumatic retroactively; missed in the original encounter, it is subsequently triggered by a memory that painfully repeats. Invariably driven by a past that returns to haunt the present, Gothic plots provide an idiom for performing traumatic memory as a repetition of scenes. In turn, Bourgeois’s Cells highlight how Freud’s concept of the primal scene is itself indebted to Gothic fiction. As this chapter will argue, the Cells’ Gothic scenery engages with a problem that plagues Freud’s Wolf Man case study: that is, the ultimate inaccessibility of the primal scene to subjective memory. Indeed, Freud is unable to determine the historical veracity of an original trauma. Constructing the past via intertextual allusion, the Cells indicate the contrived nature of the primal scene. Equally, as I will propose, this metafictional strategy also indicates the way that literary narratives might be used to formulate amorphous emotional states.

The second part of this chapter will focus on Red Room (Child) and Red Room (Parents) (1994), two interlinked Cells that exemplify how Bourgeois’s portrayal of the primal scene is mediated via an allusion to Gothic fiction. The Gothic idiom typically combines, in Chris Baldick’s succinct formula, a ‘fearful sense of inheritance in time with a claustrophobic sense of enclosure in space’ (2009, p. xix). Bourgeois’s Red Rooms dramatise this coalescence of time and space, enfolding the viewer within a Gothic literary setting. My analysis of these works will propose Jane Eyre (1847) as a literary intertext, conceiving Jane’s childhood incarceration in the ‘red room’ as a form of primal scene that reverberates throughout the novel. Situating the Red Rooms
against the backdrop of this novel emphasises the stylised nature of childhood memory, as well as the way that fictional narratives might help to order disorganised infantile psychic states. Furthermore, playfully enacting an identification with the character of Gothic heroine haunted by a traumatic past, the Red Rooms satirise autobiographical readings of Bourgeois's art that rely on a narrative of the artist's own childhood trauma.

Thirdly, this chapter will turn to Cells I-VI (1991), works that have not been analysed as a series in scholarship to date. I will observe how motifs of spectres, doubles and sinister secrets evoke a sense of the Uncanny, which Freud attributed to a return of repressed childhood memory. Placing Cells I-VI in dialogue with Hoffmann's Gothic tale of 'The Sandman' (1816), the centrepiece of Freud's essay on 'The Uncanny' (1919), shows how the narrativity of Bourgeois's Cells stages the determining power of traumatic scenes. Not only reading Bourgeois's Cells through Gothic literature, but also reading Gothic literature through Bourgeois's Cells, I will suggest that these two bodies of work are mutually illuminating with regards to the construction of childhood trauma. Highlighting the imagery of the gaze in 'The Sandman', the Cells register the trauma of the primal scene specifically on the visual plane. The Cells thus draw attention to the capacity of installation-form for evoking a child's perspective of the family home and the dark secrets it contains, whilst simultaneously imposing their enigma on the viewer.

At the same time, however, it can be seen that Cells under study in this chapter stand in parodic relation to the Gothic genre. Bourgeois's installations deploy Gothic narrative techniques of building suspense through the enigma imposed by their labyrinthine form; and yet, they do not ultimately reveal the secret they seem to anticipate. Thus, through ironic inversion, they exceed the very form that they inhabit, delineating a non-event at the apex of the drama. Foregrounding their literary artifice, the Cells invite the viewer to look, and then expose us in the very act of looking. They thereby reflect the viewer's
voyeuristic interest in witnessing scenes of trauma, such that we ourselves become the target of the parody.

The narrativity of Bourgeois’s *Cells* also suggests an analogy between the Gothic plot and Freud’s Wolf Man case study, according to which the Gothic trope of a secret corresponds to the ‘primal scene’ of trauma. From this perspective, the *Cells*’ deployment of a Gothic voice in turn parodies Freud’s quest to uncover a secret, a primal scene at the origin of his patient’s neuroses — even as the Freudian narrator doubts his own hypothesis. Indeed, lack of evidence that the primal scene took place motivates Freud’s introduction of the concept of a primal phantasy acting as a universal psychical substrate. Bourgeois’s *Cells* can be seen to isolate this moment of self-doubt in Freud’s text, posing a challenge to the theory of a ubiquitous castration anxiety. They thereby highlight the fundamental epistemic uncertainty at the heart of the Wolf Man case study, not only disputing the possibility of accessing the truth of the past, but also the idea that there is such a truth to be found. The *Cells* instead present a seemingly infinite series of rooms to which there is no master key, showing how the primal scene may be a simulacrum of something that simply is not there.

Thus, the study of Bourgeois *Cells* in this chapter links to an overarching question of my thesis, regarding the extent to which the parodic mode may offer a means of representing childhood traumatic experience. As my reading of the *Cells* suggests, parodying the Gothic idiom is a way of constructing the traumatic temporality of rupture and return, whilst also establishing a self-reflexive distance that permits provisional escape from the temporal cycle of

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32 The notion that Freud’s texts can be read as fiction is not new. Stephen Marcus cites Dora's narrative as an exemplary instance of modernist fiction, noting the dissolution of linear narration into multiple, often competing, perspectives in ‘Freud and Dora: Story, History, Case Study’ in In Dora's Case: Freud, Hysteria, Feminism (1985), edited by Bernheimer, C. and Kahane, C. In ‘Freud’s Secret: The Interpretation of Dreams was a Gothic Novel’ (in Marcus: 1999), Robert Young argues that ‘Freud took the increasing psychological preoccupation of the gothic novel to its logical conclusion: instead of portraying the psychological through a fictional narrative, he wrote a novel that pretended to be a real work of scientific psychology’ (p. 2). My argument in this chapter is not that the Wolf Man case study is identical to a Gothic story; but rather that Bourgeois’s *Cells*, by picking out the Gothic threads in Freud’s concept of the primal scene, ironise the Freudian narrator’s ‘scientific’ quest to discover the secret of the psyche.
traumatic affect. And yet, that perspective achieved by parody is liable to be lost, by virtue of the fact that parody often already inheres within Gothic literature itself. ‘The Sandman’, for example, presents both a character who is overwhelmed by terror, and a narrator who ironizes his protagonist’s overly susceptible imagination, an irony that Freud notably misses in his interpretation of the tale. As I will suggest, the Gothic emerges as a genre that foregrounds the instability of parody, as a defensive attempt to gain distance from terrifying affect. This chapter will thus point to the circularity of parodying a self-parodying genre in Bourgeois’s *Cells*, considering whether the resultant oscillation between narratorial control and affective terror ultimately enfeebles the parodic mode as a shield against traumatic repetition.

Secondary Literature: Confessing Trauma

Scholarship on Bourgeois’s *Cells* has been relatively limited by the logistical difficulty of exhibiting these large-scale works collectively. My review of the literature will thus start by sketching some general trends in criticism of Bourgeois’s plastic art, before addressing specific responses to her *Cells*. Like her writings, Bourgeois’s sculptures and installations have attracted interpretations that draw a causal link between the artist’s childhood trauma and her art. For example, writing on Bourgeois’s installation entitled *The Destruction of the Father* (1974), which can be seen as a precursor to the *Cells* in scale and scope, Elisabeth Bronfen argues that ‘the violence Louise Bourgeois imagined in her childhood home in Antony is relived not in mind but as sculpted scene’. A risk of such readings is that Bourgeois is characterised as the passive channel of an irrepressible force, denied of a symbolic, intellectual grasp of the past, as my previous chapter has shown.

Assigning the artist a more active role, other critics have suggested that making art is precisely what allows Bourgeois to retrieve knowledge of her childhood trauma. Envisaging Bourgeois’s sculptural work as equivalent to a symptom, Juliet Mitchell suggests the following formula:
The talismanic precept of psychoanalytic treatment is ‘where id (unconscious) is, there ego (conscious) shall come to be’; for Bourgeois it is ‘where id (unconscious) was, there a sculpture (consciousness) shall come to be’ (2012, p. 48).

For Mitchell, Bourgeois thereby accesses what is unbearable or unknowable, making it conscious in visual form (p. 51). Griselda Pollock similarly thinks of Bourgeois’s creative process as an encounter with trauma, whereby the artist gives structure to hitherto unconscious childhood experiences. For Pollock, Bourgeois’s method thus mimics psychoanalysis by ‘formulating a passage towards the trauma which registers as an insistent and disturbing affective pressure constantly seeking form’ (2013, pp. 89-90; emphasis Pollock’s). Both Mitchell and Pollock are thus attentive to the way Bourgeois’s art gives form to otherwise undetermined traumatic affect. Developing this insight, my analysis of Bourgeois’s Cells will explore the distinctive potential of installation for staging traumatic memory.

The online catalogue for a Louise Bourgeois exhibition at the Tate Modern, London in 2007-2008 summarises the view that ‘the cells are perhaps Bourgeois’s most autobiographical works, acting as tangible manifestations of psychic space’. By the same token, the catalogue accompanying Structures of Existence (2016) — which features the most extensive range of criticism of the Cells to date — tends to promulgate the notion that the artist’s life inhabits the work it yields, shaping and forming its affective power. For example, arguing that Bourgeois’s art is ‘infinitely enriched by the revelations of emotional and psychic abuse that she shares’, Nancy Spector suggests that the narrative ‘embedded’ within the work is that of Bourgeois’s personal trauma, such that the Cells represent ‘architectural chapters in a memoir’ (2015, p. 73). The Cells are similarly referred to as ‘three-dimensional diaries’ in a published conversation between Jerry Gorovoy, Bourgeois’s long-time
assistant, and Kate Fowle. Gorovoy further observes a ‘powerful connection to guilt’, claiming that ‘all of the Cells have a confessional tone’ (2015, p. 44).

However, a premise of this chapter is that the traumatic memory staged by the Cells need not necessarily be attributed to the artist’s own past. In Louise Bourgeois’s Spider (2001), Mieke Bal eloquently highlights the reductive character of what she calls ‘anteriorty narratives’, which use the prior text or image as a measuring stick for interpreting Bourgeois’s art. As she argues, such an iconographical approach forecloses the possibility of an encounter with Bourgeois’s art in the present of viewing: for example, ‘the spiders are metaphors for the artist’s mother; the tapestries come from, hence, are metonymies of, the parents’ workshop’ (2001, p. 33). Instead, Bal observes, the Cells present memories as found objects, ‘just put there’ rather than narrated (p. 27). Bal’s analysis is worth keeping in mind, given that a psycho-biographical approach continues to predominate in scholarship on Bourgeois’s Cells.33

Complicating matters, the Cells themselves seem to invite a confessional reading: evoking the intimate space of a family home, they contain numerous personal effects, including shabby garments of clothing and empty bottles of Shalimar perfume, the artist’s signature scent. The incorporation of textual fragments further enhances the Cells’ diaristic tone: Cell I, for example, contains pillowcases embroidered with lines such as ‘I need my memories: they are my documents’. Rather than reading these words as the artist’s unmediated self-expression, however, this chapter examines how the Cells aesthetically stage a dynamic of revealing and concealing. In her chapter in the exhibition catalogue, Pollock helpfully stresses that the Cells’ meaning remains obscure: the signifying elements within the Cells, while ‘rich in cultural and even biographical potential […] are not articulated to form visual sentences that yield a meaning’. Indicating the manner in which Bourgeois’s

33 The catalogue accompanying Structures of Existence (2015), which features the most extensive range of criticism of the Cells to date, tends to promulgate the notion that the artist’s life inhabits the work it yields, shaping and forming its affective power.
*Cells* play with their viewer, Pollock suggests that “desperately wanting to know what all this means” might itself be the affect created by the artwork’ (2015, p. 66). Building on Pollock’s observation, this chapter analyses the way Bourgeois’s *Cells* lure the viewer by employing the rhetoric of a ‘secret’.

A *Cell* entitled *The Confessional* (2001) offers a preliminary insight into the way that *Structures of Existence* engages with the dynamics of self-disclosure, provoking the viewer’s gaze. Emulating a Catholic confession box, the steel walls of this *Cell* stand in a gloomy compartment of the gallery space. Its arched doorway opens onto a deep blue-painted interior, in which a shaft of light evokes a stained glass window. Small square prayer cushions are placed on the wooden stools where a priest would sit and a penitent kneel, poised for the revelation of a secret. The words ‘*je t’aime*’ are embroidered on the confessant’s cushion, as though this is specifically a secret shared between lovers. Notably, the latticed window in the partition wall for the penitent’s confession matches the wire mesh material of many of the *Cells*’ walls: this then becomes the medium through which the artist ostensibly speaks. However, *The Confessional* is devoid of a confessant or confessor, enhancing the sense of silence. Similarly, the *Cells* throughout *Structures of Existence* incite intrigue by presenting a mystery, but ultimately disappoint the very desire for revelation they have aroused. Moreover, catching the viewer in a moment of illicit prying, they invite reflection on the voyeurism of our gaze. Indeed, the door of *The Confessional* is open as though inviting us to enter, turning the demand for a confession onto the viewer.

1. *Structures of Existence* and the Gothic Primal Scene

Combining architectural elements, the large-scale structures of Bourgeois’s *Cells* attest to the artist’s persistent preoccupation with habitat.34 The worn down materials of these works especially evoke a dwelling place from an

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obscure past. Self-enclosed spatial units, their exteriors are made up of reused and converted elements from buildings: objects from an abandoned sewing factory in Brooklyn where Bourgeois worked, as well as a variety of worn domestic or industrial doors, crisscross wire mesh screens and windows. These materials allow varying degrees of physical or visual access into the interior, offering partial, hazy or distracting views that arouse the viewer’s desire to see what lies within. Inside, the Cells contain objects that, showing clear traces of the passage of time and previous use, conjure the sense of a scene preserved through time: antiquated or makeshift furniture, an eclectic array of domestic and personal items, as well as strangely shaped sculptural objects made by the artist.

Forming mysterious sculptural tableaux, the Cells thus stage enigmatic domestic scenarios that seem to arise from a bygone era. Cluttered with objects acting as visual signifiers, they have the particular quality of psychic space, invoking the imagery of a dream, memory or fantasy. Like storehouses of the mind, they suggest the faraway landscape of childhood, which is nevertheless palpably proximate in adult life. Indeed, the vivid sense of the past conjured by Bourgeois’s Cells might simulate the sensation of memory resurfacing, bringing the viewer back to the experience of being a child navigating the family home. The interconnecting Cells in Structures of Existence can be conceived as a series of rooms in a stately home, creating the impression of walking around a large house of distorted proportions via a series of passageways, corridors, stairs and thresholds. Thus, the viewer is positioned behind the scenes, perhaps like a servant who is required to turn a blind eye to the clandestine activities of a bourgeois household. Dark metal screens function as veils, drawing attention to the fact that there is something to be seen as well as blocking visual access. Peepholes made into the walls of the Cells are often levelled at child’s height, particularly dramatising the child’s experience of domestic space excluded from the main rooms of the house. Similarly, intersecting structures create shadowy spaces in which a
child might seek shelter, hide or spy, secretly observing the goings-on of the adult world.

As I would like to propose, Bourgeois’s *Cells* can be approached as representations of the Freudian ‘primal scene’, both drawing from and developing this concept of childhood trauma. For Freud, the primal scene referred to the sight of parental sexual intercourse, whether observed, constructed and/or fantasised by the child. By staging the scenic nature of traumatic memory, the *Cells* expand on the theatrical imagery that is already implicit in the Wolf Man’s account of his dream in ‘From the History of an Infantile Neurosis’ (1918), the text in which Freud’s notion of the primal scene is developed most fully.

According to Freud, this dream of the five-year-old child triggered a memory of the primal scene. The Wolf Man recalls how he was lying in bed when all of a sudden the window ‘swung open’, an image redolent of a stage curtain. The Wolf Man himself is positioned as audience: peering out, he saw six or seven white wolves sitting motionlessly on the branches of a tree outside his bedroom, their eyes fixed on him. Notably, his own paralysed witness is reflected back at him: ‘it seemed as though they had riveted their whole attention upon me’ (2001, p. 29). This dream made such an impression on the Wolf Man that he made a sketch of it for Freud, and produced several paintings of it in later life. Likewise, Bourgeois’s *Cells* show the potential of visual art for conveying the child’s impression of the primal scene, especially evoking the uncanny sensation of being looked at in advance.

As indicated by Freud’s inference of parental sexual intercourse on the basis of a dream, the primal scene cannot be encountered directly; it is rather a retrospective interpretation of something that could not be understood at the time. Following Freud, Jean Laplanche has reconceived the primal scene in more general terms, as a fantasy resulting from the child’s traumatising encounter with the enigma of adult sexuality. Laplanche introduces the useful
concept of the ‘enigmatic signifier’, a message that is charged with unconscious sexual significations, which the child must try to interpret. Rereading the Wolf Man case study with this concept in mind, it can be seen how the child pieces together an interpretation of his parents’ sexual intercourse from his Nanya’s threat of a ‘wound’, which contributes to the child’s building castration anxiety (2001, p. 24). Notably, the Wolf Man’s interpretation is formed through a textual encounter: Freud suggests how the child’s phobia evolves through seeing pictures of wolves in fairy-tales such as ‘Little Red Riding Hood’ (2001, p. 25). This example anticipates my exploration of the way literary images merge with reality in the child’s mind, and how memory might in turn be located in the books one has read in childhood. Enacting such an elision of literature and life, Bourgeois’s Cells draw on Gothic imagery to emulate the child’s interpretation of confusing adult behaviour. The architectural form of the Cells embodies the child’s perspective, attesting to the way that images seep into the child’s mind, affecting the way it sees.

The Gothic literary aesthetic is an apt genre for conveying childhood terror in the face of family secrets. Throughout Structures of Existence, the dim lighting of the gallery casts macabre shadows over threadbare tapestries and antique-looking mahogany furniture; while locked rooms, cabinets and mysterious document cases hint tantalizingly at a morbid revelation. As I propose, the main Cells under study in this chapter — the Red Rooms and Cells I-VI — can be seen against the backdrop of two canonical texts of Gothic literature: Hoffmann’s ‘The Sandman’ (1816) and Charlotte Brontë’s Jane Eyre (1847) respectively. Like Freud’s case study on the Wolf Man, these narratives stage a form of ‘primal scene’, following the plight of a child protagonist trying to make sense of the mysterious adult world. Each text conjures a landscape that is populated by strange and frightening messages from adult others, which incite the childish imagination and precipitate the traumatic impact of the primal scene. As I will observe, the effect of these messages on the children escalates at a visual level, epitomised by the childhood motif of
picture books — of which ‘Little Red Riding Hood’ in the Wolf Man case study can be seen as a model. Portraying the child’s visual experience through the material form of installation, Bourgeois’s Cells convey the significance of the ocular in childhood, presenting scenes of trauma through the child’s lens. Gothic motifs in the Cells double up as projections of the childish imagination onto the unfathomable. Significantly, the Cells thereby perform the way that traumatic scenes are filtered through the child’s imagination, with the Gothic components enacting the process by which traumatic elements are encoded in a mise-en-scène.

At the same time, however, allusion to well-known Gothic tropes accentuates the artifice of the Cells’ construction of the primal scene. As a result, they point to a difficulty that such an allegedly formative traumatic experience is inaccessible to conscious recollection. As noted, the inability to prove the historical reality of the primal scene is a persistent frustration for Freud in the Wolf Man case study, and can be seen as a motivation for his introduction of a temporal model termed Nachträglichkeit (‘deferred action’ or, in Laplanche’s translation, ‘afterwardness’). According to this temporality, the primal scene is not registered at the time, but becomes traumatic retroactively when a memory of it is triggered by a dream. The concept of Nachträglichkeit thereby offers a means of positing the aetiological significance of an event that evades memory. Ultimately, however, the primal scene is postulated in face of the failure of a recollection of the original trauma to emerge. Towards the end of the Wolf Man case study, Freud concedes that his patient may have manufactured the primal scene, as the outcome of a reconstruction during the analysis. Of course, Freud could equally have manufactured the scene himself.

Self-reflexively alluding to the Gothic genre, Bourgeois’s Cells foreground the epistemic uncertainty of Freud’s hypothesis, playfully suggesting that the primal scene is itself a fictional construct. As this chapter suggests, the Cells’ allusion to the Gothic attests both to the way that the primal scene is originally
formulated in the mind of the child, and the possible influence of literature in the retrospective attempt to construct memory of an infantile past. The next section considers how Bourgeois’s *Red Rooms* both portray and parody the primal scene of trauma, thereby maintaining a sense of the disparity between narrative construct and traumatic affect.

2. Rupture and Return in the *Red Rooms*

This section explores how *Red Room (Child)* and *Red Room (Parents)* (1994) conjure the affective whirlwind of childhood experience. Evoking the upstairs, intimate setting of family bedrooms, the pairing of ‘Child’ and ‘Parents’ immediately suggests an allusion to the Oedipal triangle, and the exclusion of the child from the parental couple. As in Bourgeois’s *The Destruction of the Father* (1974), another work that knowingly engages with psychoanalytic mythology, the vivid redness of these *Cells* evokes the fantasy realm of amorous and/or violent passion. I would like to suggest that the duality of the *Red Rooms* implies not only a synchronous distinction between the child and its parents, but also a diachronous distinction between the past and the present. That is to say, the same scene is viewed from the perspectives both of a child at the time and of an adult remembering the experience. As a result, the *Red Rooms* instigate two moments of time running in parallel, delineating the way in which childhood trauma exists in the past and the present concurrently. At the same time, the *Red Rooms* bear witness to a process of (re)constructing a past that remains elusive. The way in which the rooms appear meticulously preserved, despite the absence of living inhabitants, might suggest a crime scene ready for forensic investigation. (As discussed in the previous chapter, in her personal writings in c. 1959 Bourgeois writes of a ‘Post – mortem scene’ and her wish ‘to compare the horrors’.) Enforcing this association with crime, the doors of these *Cells* are taken from an old courthouse in Manhattan, New York. The *Red Rooms* can thus be envisaged as staging a trial, making a demand for justice in relation to an unresolved
past; or, more fundamentally, seeking the truth about whether something (anything) happened at all.

The helical periphery of Red Room (Parents) means that the viewer must walk around the outside of the structure before finding an opening. The exterior is thus configured as an invitation, guiding us along its curving passage. Slats between interconnecting doors enable flickering glimpses into the interior, the view from each angle cumulatively revealing more objects. Fragments of a scene thus slowly come into view, like pieces of a puzzle. Eventually, the viewer arrives at a doorway, with the words ‘fermez la porte svp’ etched onto the wood. As though this instruction has been disobeyed, the door is ajar, implying a breach of privacy. Denied an overview of the interior space, the viewer must crane their neck around the corner to see the innermost part of the Cell. A large double bed is finally revealed at the heart of Red Room (Parents). Between the two pillows, there is a white cushion embroidered with the text, ‘je t’aime’ — perhaps words of affection whispered by lovers turned towards one another. The embroidery is also redolent of a sewing exercise at school, invoking the child nestling itself between the parental couple. As mentioned, the same words are stitched onto the confessant’s cushion in The Confessional (2001), perhaps implying here the child’s penetration of a sexual secret, the intimate nature of a confession into which viewers are also invited to participate.
Louise Bourgeois: Red Room (Parents) (1994)

Throughout Red Room (Parents), symmetry sustains an emphasis on the couple, drawing the viewer into the mystery of their sexuality. Two matching mahogany cupboards are angled towards the bed on either side; on each there is a carved marble statue, appearing to depict a nude from behind but draped in folds of fabric at the front. Both statues face towards the bed, directing the viewer’s eye and enforcing a dynamic of revealing and concealing. A small hutch next to the bed, in which an animal might crouch, similarly suggests the promise of a secret; like a cell-within-a-cell, it arouses the viewer’s curiosity in an obscured interior. The bed itself can only be seen fully in the reflection of a large cheval glass. Notably, the mirror is placed such that the hypothetical couple would also be able to see a reflection of the witness, thereby exposing the viewer in turn.

The mirror also suggests the imaginary register through which the scene of Red Room (Parents) is mediated. Indeed, objects within this Cell are not quite what they seem: for example, instead of a mattress the bed is topped with a smooth, red board, like the surface of a table — a recurring trope in Bourgeois’s work indicating the presence of sexuality at the heart of family life. Emblematic of childhood play, the two objects at the foot of the bed — a red toy train on a track, and a closed xylophone case — also have the coded quality of dream symbols. The arrangement of these objects might evoke the surrealist motto that André Breton derived from the Comte de Lautréamont’s Les Chants de Maldoror (1869), ‘as beautiful as the chance encounter of a sewing machine and an umbrella on an operating table’ (Canto VI, Chapter 3).35 Meanwhile, strange and visceral sculptural elements further allude to the dream world: a sack of red liquid dangles over the bed, overlaying the conjugal bed with the image of a blood transfusion. On the opposite wall,

35 For a discussion of this phrase and its impact on surrealist artists, see https://sites.dartmouth.edu/library/2014/08/01/surrealists-inspired-by-lautreamont-2/ [Accessed 27 Nov. 2019].
there hangs a long rubber sack of flesh-like pink, punctured with various sized needles, signifying the rupture of skin. The red and blue threads match the numerous spools in Red Room (Child), which, as I will suggest, evoke the imagery of fairy-tales, weaving a line of continuity between child and adult worlds, and the blood ties of DNA.

Contrasting starkly with the ordered, repressive atmosphere of Red Room (Parents), Red Room (Child) immediately strikes the viewer with a sense of chaos. Reflecting a jumbled-up state of mind, the Cell is littered with an eclectic array of densely symbolic objects. As a result, the scene as a whole is difficult to take in, emulating the intensity of affect associated with traumatic experience. Signifying movement and travel, numerous suitcases and ladders imply a sense of panic and the urge to take flight. At the centre of the Cell is a tree-like structure with arms extending like a large spool, whose turning movement is visually connected to the spinning wheels and red spiral hourglasses that convey the urgency of time. The room itself is shaped like a spiral, so that the entire Cell seems to spin on an axis, enforcing a feeling of disorientation.
Louise Bourgeois: *Red Room (Child)* (1994)

Amid the close-packed world of *Red Room (Child)*, a series of threads, torches and paraffin lamps further suggest a child’s sense of being lost, and its effort to find a way in the dark. Numerous pairs of clasping wax hands might intimate a desire for comfort and protection; yet their bright red colour and texture is raw, as though they have been skinned. Indeed, the shininess of the wax mimics the appearance of wet blood, making the gesture of human contact grotesque. The violence of these mutilated bodies is enforced by the shattered window panes, suggestive of forceful intrusion. Resting on a ledge there is a bloodied plaster cast of a fawn’s head, carrying connotations of violence, torture and decapitation, which Freud notoriously linked to castration. But for Hélène Cixous, decapitation is the equivalent of castration for women, used as a violent suppression of speech and, ultimately, thought itself.\(^{36}\) *Red Room (Child)* also plays on the figurative association of losing one’s head with madness and hysteria, invoking both the child in a state of emotional turmoil and, through allusion to Gothic fiction, the ‘madwoman’ who has been held captive.

The letters ‘RIVAT’ are printed on the door of *Red Room (Child)*, with the wearing away of the letter ‘P’ implying privacy’s corrosion. Oddly, they are printed on the inside of the door, appearing to the viewer in reverse but legible from within the *Cell*. This suggests that the child is barred from the outside world, trapped within its room – an effect that is enhanced when seen in conjunction with ‘*Fermez la porte*’ on the door of *Red Room (Parents)*. The interlocking doors that comprise the walls of the cell, and a lack of room to move inside, further generate claustrophobia and isolation. Again engaging with the *Cells*’ theme of incarceration, *Red Room (Child)* recalls the macabre fairy-tale trope of being locked in a tower, an association that is reinforced by

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\(^{36}\) As Cixous argues: ‘if man operates under the threat of castration, if masculinity is culturally ordered by the castration complex, it might be said that the backlash, the return, on women of this castration anxiety is its displacement as decapitation, execution, of woman, as loss of her head’ (43). The imagery of decapitation recurs in *Structures of Existence*, which features a series of stuffed heads that often hang from the *Cells*’ ceilings (as in *Cells XI, XII, XIX and XXI* (2000), and *Cell XXIV* (2001)).
the spinning wheels and reels of thread. One might also think of the room in which the heroine of Bluebeard discovers the tyrant's former wives, a plot that is subsequently echoed in *Jane Eyre*. Fairy-tale allusions in *Red Room (Child)* imply a child’s psychic landscape, especially identified with the predicament of the Gothic heroine, and the filtering of experience through fantastic and macabre imaginings.

The imagery of thread recurs throughout Bourgeois’s oeuvre, bearing mythological resonances of spinning stories. In *Structures of Existence*, this imagery takes on a particularly sinister hue. A *Cell* entitled *Lady in Waiting* (2003), for example, features a creature that is half-woman and half-spider, with threads emanating from her mouth. The motif of thread running through *Red Room (Parents)* and *Red Room (Child)* emphasises the narrative passage between these two *Cells*. I suggest that the narrativity they evoke draws on Gothic literature, inhabiting a world full of secrets and suspense, incarceration and isolation, taboo sexuality and the reawakening of infantile fears. Such Gothic projections may thus be conceived as the child’s production of fantasy in response to a traumatic encounter. As their titles suggest, the *Red Rooms* can be placed in the context of Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*, a narrative installing the childhood trauma of the ‘red room’ as a formative event. The scene in which Jane is locked up as a child functions, I will argue, as a form of primal scene, re-echoing throughout the novel.

Significantly, in *Jane Eyre* the terror of the red room is directly preceded by a scene of Jane poring over Bewick’s *History of British Birds*, ‘shrined’ behind a window seat. Brontë’s narrator describes how ‘each picture told a story; mysterious often to my undeveloped understanding and imperfect feelings, yet ever profoundly interesting’ (1999, p. 4). Jane’s mind is filled with shadowy impressions of the ‘death-white realms’ of the Arctic, which will come to bear upon her otherworldly experience of the room where her uncle had died.

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37 In *Jane Eyre*, the narrator describes Mr Rochester’s house, Thornfield Hall, as ‘some Bluebeard’s castle’ (p. 92).
years ago. Jane’s fear is subsequently escalated by the words of her aunt as she locks the child inside the red room: ‘Say your prayers, Miss Eyre, when you are by yourself; for if you don’t repent, something bad might be permitted to come down the chimney and fetch you away’ (p. 8). Brontë thus shows how the events of the red room are depicted through the lens of the child’s imagination, which, like that of the Wolf Man, is catalysed by fantastical words and images.

A number of resemblances can be discerned between the red rooms of Brontë’s novel and Bourgeois’s Cells. In Jane Eyre, the room is described as ‘one of the largest and stateliest chambers in the mansion’ (p. 8), with furniture of darkly polished old mahogany like that of Bourgeois’s Red Room (Parents). Everything is very plush and ornate, but also dark, secretive and oppressive — the blinds of the two windows are always drawn down, as the narrator notes (8). Like the Cells, the colour red permeates the room: ‘the carpet was red; the table at the foot of the bed was covered with a crimson cloth’, which, with its ‘blush of pink’ hints towards sexual passion. Indeed, as in Red Room (Parents), emphasis is placed on the bed, ‘supported on massive pillars of mahogany, hung with curtains of deep red damask’, which ‘stood out like a tabernacle in the centre’. Recalling The Confessional, the simile of the tabernacle combines connotations of religion and sexuality, conveying the child’s apprehension of an impenetrable mystery. Jane takes note of ‘the piled-up mattresses and pillows of the bed, spread with a snowy Marseilles counterpane’ (p. 9) — a virginal white contrasting with the blood red, echoing the colour scheme created by the white marble statues in Red Room (Parents).

Like the cheval mirror in Red Room (Parents), ‘a great looking-glass’ repeats ‘the vacant majesty of the bed and room’ in Brontë’s red room, invoking the Gothic trope of doubling and phantasmagoric worlds through the looking glass. Brontë describes how, as Jane crosses the room, her ‘fascinated glance involuntarily explored the depth it revealed’. In this world of reflections:
All looked colder and darker in that visionary hollow than in reality: and the strange little figure there gazing at me, with a white face and arms specking the gloom, and glittering eyes of fear moving where all else was still, had the effect of a real spirit (p. 9).

Jane’s encounter with her own reflection attests to the workings of the child’s imagination. Gothic phantoms arise from her frightened state, ‘prepared as my mind was for horror, shaken as my nerves were by agitation’. At the end of the chapter Jane is overcome by fear, as ‘unconsciousness closed the scene’ — a line that is indicative of traumatic dissociation from a scene that henceforth generates the force of repetition compulsion. The splitting of Jane and her reflection anticipates the appearance of Bertha who, it might be argued, represents a return of the unassimilated trauma of the red room.

Later in the novel, the scene of the red room is explicitly recalled in Bertha’s incarceration in the third storey of Thornfield Hall, Mr Rochester’s isolated mansion with innumerable unused rooms (the multiple Cells of Structures of Existence are similarly devoid of an occupant). On encountering Bertha, Jane’s fear is so intense she loses consciousness: ‘I was aware of her lurid visage flamed over mine, and I lost consciousness: for the second time in my life – only the second time – I became insensible from terror’ (p. 250).

Attesting to the way the traumatic scene from her childhood is recalled by the present, Jane describes how ‘that night I never thought to sleep; but a slumber fell on me as soon as I lay down in bed. I was transported in thought to the scenes of childhood: I dreamt I lay in the red-room at Gateshead; that the night was dark, and my mind impressed with strange fears’ (p. 282).

Exemplifying repetition as a form of doubling, Brontë hints at various parallels between the ten-year-old Jane and Bertha. For example, Mrs Reed sees in the child ‘all fire and violence’ (p. 211), which prefigures Bertha’s rage. In the only scene in which Bertha is seen directly, she is forcibly ‘pinioned’ and
‘bound’ (p. 259) to a chair, the threat of which led Jane, in the red room, to sit on her hands as evidence of self-restraint (p. 7). Again, Bessie and Miss Abbot were ‘incredulous of my sanity’ (p. 8). However, it seems that Jane saves herself from madness by suppressing the part that Bertha allows full rein. In *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (1979), Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar argue that Bertha’s Gothic disruptions can be seen as Jane’s rebellions in exaggerated form. Yet it is also possible to see Bertha as an externalised psyche that persists, timeless, to register the traumatic shock of that first experience. Bertha may thus represent an embodiment of a sealed-off segment of Jane’s psyche, an unassimilated traumatic experience that, like Bertha, has been locked up.

In *Jane Eyre*, the spatial echoes between the red room and attic evoke a return of the traumatic past. The double site of Bourgeois’s *Red Rooms* similarly suggests how past and present are superimposed. Reading an allusion to *Jane Eyre* in Bourgeois’s *Red Rooms* thereby underscores the traumatic temporality of rupture and repetition, according to which fantasmatic prototypes act as templates for subsequent dramas. The *Cells* exploit the narrative possibilities of relaying the experience of a literary protagonist over time (notably, the first four editions of *Jane Eyre* were subtitled ‘An Autobiography’). Such a subjective experience of time is a prerequisite for staging the traumatic rupture of a chronological sequence. Invoking this novelistic genre, the *Cells* highlight how traumatic scenes are layered one upon the other in the manner of a textual palimpsest, delineating the persistence of childhood affect as lived and relived experiences overlap. At the same time, however, reference to established Gothic tropes attests to the scripted aspect of the *Cells*’ portrayal of childhood trauma, drawing attention to processes of literary construction. Pointing to their own fictitious nature, they offer a mocking rejoinder to Freud’s desperate attempt to locate a primal scene. They also, I suggest, indicate a possible way of responding to this lack
of explanatory narrative, showing how literature might be used to formulate free-floating traumatic affect.

Bourgeois’s evocation of a fictional protagonist in the Cells might be seen to tap into the tradition of the ‘Female Gothic’, a term commonly applied to narratives of persecuted women risking incarceration. The Female Gothic is often read as a subversive genre, presenting a coded expression of anxieties of entrapment and dependency within a patriarchal society (Wallace and Smith: 2009; p. 2). Bourgeois’s parodic identification with the victimised gothic heroine might analogously reflect the woman artist’s struggle for self-definition. In a BBC Four Arena documentary entitled No Trespassing that is screened on loop in a dark room on the top floor of the gallery space, Bourgeois is portrayed as an eccentric old woman, going about ironing newspapers to kill germs and smashing her artworks on the floor, whilst male art critics interpret her work. Given the Gothic resonances that I have been observing, the film and its spatial location in the gallery might evoke Brontë’s image of a ‘madwoman’ in the attic. However, a clapperboard featuring the text ‘no trespassing’ that Bourgeois theatrically shuts in front of the camera highlights how the artist is collaborating in the presentation of her public persona. Throughout the exhibition, the self-reflexively intertextual construction of Bourgeois’s Cells satirises critical approaches that seek to locate origin of Bourgeois's art in in her childhood trauma. Furthermore, by enlisting the pleasures of Gothic fiction, they lay bare the questionable desire to peer into the artist’s psyche. The next section will further explore the relation of childhood trauma and voyeurism, particularly through the image of the gaze.

3. Staging the Uncanny in Cells I-VI

Originally created for the Carnegie International Exhibition in 1991, Cells I-VI were reunited and shown together for the first time in Structures of Existence.
As yet, they have not been written about as a series; however, approaching them collectively allows insight into the way they inhabit a Gothic literary world. The hushed, dimly-lit exhibition room in which the strange structures of the Cells appear immediately creates a mysterious, otherworldly atmosphere. The Cells share certain features: exteriors composed of old doors, eroded from use; interiors combining familiar household objects with sculptural creations. The same cerulean blue paint is used on their doors and certain items of furniture, immersing the Cells in a cool, eerie light that intensifies the aura of their outmoded contents. Their walls too are composed of shabby old doors covered in thick layers of paint, which, flaking off in pieces, show another layer of paint underneath and thus a history of past use.

The careful arrangement of objects within gives the character of a mise-en-scène, frozen in time like an old photograph or film still. These assemblages conjure ghostly presences that suggest an unbidden return of something that is past, with their intimate, domestic spaces recalling a relation with childhood. As I will propose, these domestic structures give rise to a sensation of the Uncanny (in German, das Unheimliche): the presence of the ‘un-homely’ within the homely, the strange within the familiar, which Freud attributed to a return of repressed childhood trauma. As Freud writes, ‘whatever reminds us of this inner “compulsion-to-repeat” is perceived as uncanny’ (2001, p. 238). Cells I-VI stage this uncanny return by superimposing the family home with the Gothic trope of the haunted house. For, as Anne Williams observes, the Gothic is determined by the rules of the family: ‘Gothic plots are family plots; Gothic romance is family romance’ (1995, p. 23).

Before entering the first room of Structures of Existence, the viewer is met with an extract from a text by Bourgeois printed onto the wall:

Each Cell deals with fear. Fear is pain. Often it is not perceived as pain, because it is always disguising itself.
Each Cell deals with the pleasure of the voyeur, the thrill of looking and being looked at (p. 124)

These introductory lines of the exhibition invoke the affective topography of the primal scene: fear comingle with sexual excitement evoked in the child-witness, and replicated now in the viewer. They also suggest an affinity with Gothic literature, ‘designed to produce fear and desire within the reader’ (Halberstam: 1995, p. 2).

The labyrinthine exterior of Cell I immediately arouses intrigue, creating anticipation for what might be revealed around the corner. Cracks between the doors allow a glimpse inside, drawing attention to the act of looking, and the possibility of being seen. Cell I thus instigates the visual interplay of the Wolf Man’s dream in Freud’s case study: the child is riveted by the sight of the wolves, which stare back at him in turn. The Cell’s only window directly overlooks the pillow at the head of a rusty old iron bedstead, highlighting the intimate, vulnerable nature of this scene. A corner lamp tilted towards the bed casts a spotlight, guiding the viewer’s line of sight. Concentric circles have been drawn on the pillow, evoking an eye that returns the viewer’s gaze. Bourgeois has imagined a scenario for the subject of this Cell: ‘He fears people are going to pry into his privacy. Yet he is projecting his fear of being seen, for he himself is a voyeur’ (2016, p. 175). By implication, the viewer is placed in the role of voyeur, prying into this subject’s privacy; but we are equally subjected to his voyeuristic gaze. Implying an exchangeability of viewer and viewed, Cell I thus exemplifies the way that the Cells produce the disconcerting feeling of being watched.

This sense of an invisible subject looking back at the viewer enforces the ghostly ambience of *Cell I*, setting the tone for the series throughout. Its eclectic jumble of contents shows signs of an inhabitant who is no longer present: as well as the bedstead, a small table with an array of objects on its surface, a clothes stand and a chamber pot. Meanwhile, two lamps create a flickering yellowish light that casts phantasmatic shadows on the Cell’s walls. Drawing continuity between narrative and sculptural form, the chimerical world of *Cell I* resonates with the literary space of a child’s imagination encountering the unknown. Casting shadowy forms that give shape to childhood fears, the motif of the bedside lamp in Bourgeois’s *Cells* has literary forerunners. Writing on nineteenth-century representations of childhood fear, Sally Shuttleworth notes the recurrent imagery of light and shadows, apparitions and phantasmagorias, conjuring ‘an image of Victorian childhood as one defined by terror’ (2010, pp. 196-197). Similarly, Harriet Martineau’s childhood recollections, upon reading which Charlotte Brontë is reported to have said it was like reading her own ‘fetch’, or ghost, describe how ‘many an infant is
terrified at the shadow of a perforated night-lamp, with its round spaces of light’ (cited by Shuttleworth, p. 197). Transforming this literary imagery into sculptural form, the uncertain domain between light and dark in Bourgeois’s Cells evokes imaginative states of fear. One might also think of the uncanny projections created by the magic lantern in the opening scene of Proust’s Swann’s Way (1913), which, ‘after the fashion of the first architects and master glaziers of the Gothic age’, appeared on the child’s bedroom walls as ‘impalpable iridescences’ and ‘supernatural multicoloured apparitions’ (2003, p. 13). Just as the bedroom becomes unrecognizable to the young Marcel, so Bourgeois’s Cells suggest the emergence of the unfamiliar within the familiar.

The protagonist of Cell I might also be identified with the figure of Proust the writer, acting out the trope of the insomniac in the throes of involuntary memory. Indeed, Proust’s famous cork-lined bedroom could almost be seen as a literary precursor to Bourgeois’s Cells, similarly evoking the sense of a confined interiority. Enforcing a sense of unrest, the surfaces of this Cell are inhospitable: the bed is without a mattress, so that the iron springs would dig into the body; while the chair is being used as storage space, cluttered with hard, spiky objects. Meanwhile, a jumble of tools piled on top of each other carries connotations of sinister scientific experiments: from scraps of metal, a pair of pliers, a machete and a whisk to a collection of glass bottles and long-necked phials. Seeming to belong to a distant past, these outdated objects act as a metaphor for the remnants of a tortured mind, incarcerated within this Cell’s claustrophobic confines.

Giving the artistic persona of this Cell an eerie kind of voice, fragments of text are embroidered onto the threadbare bed linen: ‘I need my memories: they are my documents’; ‘art is the guarantee of sanity’; and ‘pain is the ransom of formalism’. Enforcing the idea of an artist trapped within their own mind, the bed linen itself is composed of folded mailbags from Postes France, recalling the tradition of inmates sewing mailbags. Deep red in colour as though written in blood, the messages sewn onto the bags suggest their author was
desperately trying to get in touch with the outside world. The stifling, festering quality of this used, intimate space is enforced by references to illness and death. A book with ‘tuberculosis’ written on its front cover is perched on the bedside table, while a first-aid kit, hot water bottle and old-fashioned medical instruments create the impression of a sanatorium. Historically, tuberculosis has been conceived as the romantic disease, a cultural marker of artistic genius (Yancey: 2014). However, the fact that the scene of Cell I is carefully staged, rather than representing Bourgeois’s actual bedroom, indicates a tongue-in-cheek attitude towards this clichéd image of the artist — the excesses of which are enhanced by Gothic tropes of incarceration, illness and madness.

Cell II appears like another chamber inside an abandoned house, made up of dilapidated doors with cracked glass suggestive of neglect or violent entry. At the centre of the Cell stands a cylindrical table with a mirror top. On one side of its surface, there are nine bottles of Shalimar perfume of varying size, a collection implying a lifetime of use, and the absent body for which this is a signature scent. Perfume carries classical connotations of femininity and intimacy, a woman at her dressing table; however there is no human figure here, and so it is as if the viewer were walking through a deserted home, trespassing on a private space. Cell II might then recall Charles Baudelaire’s poem, ‘Le Flacon’ (1857), particularly the second stanza:

_Ou dans une maison déserte quelque armoire_  
_Pleine de l’âcre odeur des temps, poudreuse et noire,_  
_Parfois on trouve un vieux flacon qui se souvient,_  
_D’où jaillit toute vive une âme qui revient_

(Or in a deserted house, some cabinet  
Full of the past's acrid odor, dusty and black,
Sometimes one finds an antique phial which remembers,
Whence gushes forth a living soul returned to life.)\(^{38}\)

Registering this literary echo reinforces an association between perfume and the spectre of the person who once wore it. Continuing this personification, the bottles are assembled in a way that implies the relations between human figures: they are bust-shaped, with blue semi-circle tops like heads turned towards the viewer. Arranged in rows like a family portrait, they capture the sense of a pose fixed in time, whilst also intimating the emission of a ghostly vapour over the scene. Indeed, the transparency of the glass, magnified by its reflection in the table-top mirror, gives the bottles a floating, ethereal appearance. The impression is amplified by the indistinctness of the border between the bottles and their reflection, like a Gothic landscape shrouded in mist, a mysterious world through looking glass.


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On the other side of the table, there is a pair of disembodied wax arms with hands clasped and wrists joined as though perhaps rubbing in the perfume. Reminiscent of a death mask, this sculpture evokes the paraphernalia of mourning. Remarkably lifelike but deathly pale, the dismembered body parts are chillingly suspended between animate and inanimate as if they might move of their own accord.

In his 1906 essay ‘On the Psychology of the Uncanny’, Ernst Jentsch observed that wax-work figures, dolls and automatons are particularly productive of uncanny effect (1997). As Freud comments, a blurring of the distinction between living and lifeless objects is especially prevalent in childhood (2001, p. 226). Facing inward, the hands oddly situate their owner in the place of the mirror, with the result that the mirror is turned into an eye. For the viewer, the palms can only be seen in the mirror reflection, allowing us to see but not enter their space of intimacy. Since we might imaginatively project ourselves onto the scene, the Cell works as a self-portrait of the viewer, placing us at its centre. As our perspective rebounds off the surface of the mirror, the interplay of self and other displaces the fixed locale of subjectivity, creating the uncanny effect of doubling. The dappled decoration around the circumference of the mirror adds to the visual distortion, enhancing the sense that nothing is quite what it seems.

Cell III stages a scene that especially evokes a world of taboo sexuality. At the centre there is a slab of cratered rock placed on a metal plinth, the height of a table or bed, from which emerges a wax leg cut off just above the knee. Like a pallid limb erupting from a grave, this morbid image figures the return of a buried memory. Notably, the toes of the foot are curled, tensed as if in pain or sexual pleasure. Mirroring the shape of this posture, against one of the walls of the Cell there is a wooden box with a marble figure of a woman placed on top. She is bent in what Bourgeois termed an ‘arc of hysteria’, a pose that recurs throughout the artist’s oeuvre, invoking the psychoanalytic notion of childhood sexual trauma that has been repressed. Supported by her
feet and hair, the middle of her body is raised towards a large metal knife that is poised and ready to slice her in half. The sculpture is thus suspended on the cusp of a movement that fuses sex and violence, extreme pleasure and pain. An elliptical mirror on a wall inside the Cell, shaped like an eye, incorporates the dimension of spectatorship within the scene as though watching for something to happen. Denied of an overview, however, the Cell instigates a form of looking comparable with a cubist breaking down of objects into a two-dimensional flatness. Disembodiment creates confusion, since the parts do not add up. The Cell thereby shifts the focus back onto the viewer, watching and trying to makes sense of events. Significantly, however, despite eliciting intrigue, Cell III is ultimately empty: it stages a non-event.

Louise Bourgeois: Cell III (1991)

Cell IV also features a grave-like slab of rock at its centre, from which protrudes an oversized ear. Combined with a wooden stool placed beside the rock, the impression is of a sick- or deathbed scene. The ear upturned as though in readiness to listen, and a corner lamp angled towards it casting a spotlight, gives the scene a theatrical character. Yet the sharp sense of
anticipation for what might be heard only intensifies the mummified sense of silence in the room, attesting to the weight of what is not being said: something perhaps forbidden, or that cannot be heard or understood. On the far wall, there is a large circular blackboard with a wooden tool hanging down from the top centre. This sculpture is suggestive of a clock face, with its pendulum signalling the relentless passage of time; and yet, completely still, the Cell seems to be poised on the precipice of death. Overall, like the other Cells in this series, the scene silently suggests something very ominous, which nonetheless remains enigmatic to the viewer. In fact, the sense of expectation invoked by this Cell is ultimately disappointed; there is no secret to be overheard.

Louise Bourgeois: *Cell IV* (1991)

*Cells V and VI* may be seen as a pair since they are smaller than the other Cells in the series and similarly shaped. *Cell V*’s exterior is made entirely out of glass-paned doors, like a summerhouse, allowing light to flood in. Inside, two large spheres carved of wood rest next to each other on floor; though they are not touching, they look friendly, placid. With cracks or veins running through the wood like skin, these soft, organic forms might evoke breasts,
bellies or testes; a nub on the left hand sphere resembles a navel or nipple. These spheres are perhaps like conversation partners on the cusp of speech; yet, they are immobile, dumb, lacking in meaning. There is a primitive quality to these sculptural formations, perhaps redolent of a child’s reality made up of part objects. Whilst not conforming to any one symbol, this pair of orbs nevertheless seems to imply partnership and connection between two.

Louise Bourgeois: *Cell VI* (1991)

*Cell VI*, conversely, features a single low stool in the centre, surrounded by windowless doors that, covered in thick blue paint, create a sense of being submerged. The stool is a motif of Bourgeois’s *Cells*, often used to evoke pity: for example *Cell XXII* (Portrait) (2000) features a child doll in white fabric sitting on a wooden stool, her unsupported body drooping helplessly as though wounded. In *Cell VI*, the low stool similarly suggests a small child, secluded as if banished from adult life, perhaps in punishment. While the
doors of this *Cell* are low enough for the viewer to see over, the child’s own sight would be obscured, blocked by the wooden doors that isolate the stool from the world outside. *Cells V* and *VI* suggest a series of contrasts: between togetherness and isolation, inclusion and exclusion, sight and blindness. In the context of the domestic metaphor of the *Cells*, the objects within easily appear as members of a family. As such, they provide an example of how Bourgeois often personified objects and items of furniture, arranging them into scenes that lend themselves to multiple narrative arrangements or hypothetical scenarios.

Through their recurring Gothic motifs, *Cells I-VI* stage a series of domestic scenes that combine to evoke a stark sense of the uncanny return of repressed memory. In ‘The Uncanny’ (1919), Freud illustrates his thesis that the Uncanny is characterised by the return of childhood trauma through his reading of Hoffmann’s story, ‘The Sandman’ (1817). Freud suggests that the uncanny effect of this story turns on the protagonist Nathaniel’s childhood dread of the Sandman: a figure that, in Nathaniel’s frenzied imagination, reappears throughout the story in various guises. As I will suggest, Bourgeois’s *Cells* similarly convey an uncanny return of childhood trauma, particularly focalised around the primal scene, through the medium of Gothic imagery. In turn, they draw attention to Freud’s debt to Gothic literature, seen especially in his concept of the compulsion to repeat.

I propose Hoffmann’s ‘The Sandman’ as a site of encounter between Bourgeois’s *Cells* and Freud’s discourse on the Uncanny, for reading each of these works of art through the lens of the other produces fresh insight into the scenic quality of traumatic memory from childhood. Moreover, such an approach stresses the fundamentally inscrutable quality of such scenes, showing how they resist the Oedipal model that Freud sought to apply to ‘The Sandman’, according to which uncanny sensation is ultimately tracked down to castration anxiety. Indeed, as I will suggest, the Gothic functions to forestall a solution to the perplexing puzzle of the past, thereby keeping alive the
perspective of the child. Particularly highlighting the imagery of the gaze that recurs throughout Hoffmann’s story, I will observe how Bourgeois’s Cells dramatise the traumatising enigma of the primal scene on the visual plane, through their three-dimensional form. However, while Cells I-VI emulate Gothic narrative technique, they do not ultimately reveal a secret. Hence, the final part of this chapter will consider the way this lack of revelation parodies the Freudian endeavour to find a master key to the psyche.

‘The Sandman’ opens with a letter from the protagonist Nathaniel to a friend recounting events from his early childhood, the horror of which have been reactivated in the present. Nathaniel describes how after dinner the family would go into his father’s study, where he would ‘tell us many wondrous tales’. But, as he explains, this fondly-remembered routine would be interrupted on occasions when the father:

would give us picture-books and sit silent and motionless in his armchair, blowing such clouds of smoke that we all seemed to be swathed in mist. On such evenings our mother would be very melancholy, and hardly had the clock struck nine than she would say: ‘Now, children, time for bed! The Sandman is coming, I can tell’ (2000, p. 86).

The child Nathaniel is notably given ‘picture-books’ instead of words, a detail that is suggestive of the un-coded quality of visual memory in childhood, and the sense of an enigma resistant to narrative. While Nathaniel notices his father’s silence and mother’s low spirits, the reason for his parents’ mood is unclear. The only clue is the imminent arrival of ‘the Sandman’, a terrifying figure who takes the eyes of children who refuse to go to bed. In response to his anxious enquiries, it is Nathaniel’s sister’s old nurse who tells him about the Sandman: “‘Why, Natty’, replied the old woman, “don’t you know that yet? He’s a wicked man who comes to children when they don’t want to go to bed and throws handfuls of sand into their eyes; that makes their eyes fill with
blood and jump out of their heads” (2000, p. 87). Thus, as in *Jane Eyre* and indeed the Wolf Man case study, Hoffmann’s tale includes the motif of a nurse-figure whose stories fan the flames of childhood fear.

The Sandman henceforth becomes an obsession for Nathaniel, representing a figure that gives shape to the mystery of his parents’ altered behaviour. In Nathaniel’s attempts to penetrate this mystery, he creeps around the house and listens outside rooms — much like the figure of the child spying on adult scenes in Bourgeois’ *Cells* — creating the conditions for what I will suggest functions as the ‘primal scene’ of this story. From his hiding hole in his father’s study, Nathaniel recognises Coppelius (whose name means eyes), an acquaintance of his father. Merging the two in his mind, the ‘Sandman’ is transformed from a generic ‘bogy man in the nursery story’ to a particular ‘spectral monster’ (p. 89). As Coppelius cries, “‘Bring the eyes!’”, Nathaniel is gripped by uncontrollable terror, diving from his hiding-place onto the floor. Responding to Nathaniel’s father’s plea that his son might keep his eyes, Coppelius suggests instead, “‘let’s examine the mechanism of his hands and feet’”. This conception of Nathaniel as a mechanical doll notably anticipates his amorous encounter with an automaton later in the story, which can therefore be seen as an instance of repetition in the form of doubling. At this point, ‘everything went black and dim before my eyes […] and I felt nothing more’ (pp. 90-91). Thus, the scene ends with Nathaniel’s ego being completely overwhelmed, just like that of Jane in the red room scene in *Jane Eyre*, indicating a break in consciousness that forms the basis of a traumatic repetition.

Devastatingly, Nathaniel’s childish terror of the Sandman whom he believes to be Coppelius turns out to be justified by the latter’s involvement in events leading to the father’s death, with the effect that Nathaniel is no longer able to distinguish between reality and fantasy. This confusion comes to the fore when, as an adult, he falls blindly in love with the beautiful doll, Olimpia. At the climax of the story, Nathaniel is re-immersed in affective terror, as the
distinction between past and present breaks down. Discovering that Olimpia is only a simulation of a woman, he perceives ‘only too clearly that Olimpia’s deathly pale wax face had no eyes, just black caverns where eyes should be’ (p. 114). It is tellingly the detail of Olimpia’s lack of eyes that is fixed upon, her ‘black caverns’ effectively reflecting back Nathaniel’s own blindness. This moment of shock recalls the events surrounding his father’s death: namely, the discovery of his father’s body ‘in front of the smoking fireplace’ (92). In the present, his garbled speech confuses the two scenes: ‘Spin, spin, fiery circle! Come on! Spin, wooden dolly, hey, spin, pretty wooden dolly…[SIC]’ (p. 114).

The story ends with Nathaniel catching sight of Coppelius from a tower overlooking the market square: ‘with a piercing shriek of “Beautiful eyes-a! Beautiful eyes-a!” he jumped over the parapet’ (p. 118). The traumatic repetition of the Sandman leads in the final instance to Nathaniel’s death. The story of ‘The Sandman’ thus depicts a series of scenes unleashed by an originary primal scene — both that of Hoffmann’s narrative and of Nathaniel’s biography — with the figure of the Sandman embodying a traumatic reserve. Notably, the proliferating series of scenes is governed by an original mise-en-scène, which condenses the traumatic elements of Nathaniel’s early childhood.

As I would like to suggest, Cells I-VI enact the metaphor of the gaze pivotal to ‘The Sandman’, specifically constructing traumatic repetition on the visual plane through their spectral ciphers. For Lacan, an encounter with the gaze is a way of conceiving the trauma of the primal scene, insofar as it constitutes an optical symbol for the ‘central lack expressed in the phenomenon of castration’. Reflecting the subject’s nothingness, the gaze is said to ‘look back at me’: an intimate part of the self, projected outside. The gaze might thus be expressed in Olimpia’s ‘black caverns’ that reflect Nathaniel’s own blindness, or indeed the wolves that stare back at the Wolf Man in his dream. Reminding the viewer that visual perception, tied to the body, is necessarily partial, Cells I-VI invoke what Lacan describes as ‘the pre-existence of a gaze’, whereby ‘I
see only from one point, but in my existence I am looked at from all sides’ (2004, p. 32). Enacting a split in the field of vision between the eye and the gaze, between conscious sight and that which is eluded in it, the Cells construct a blind field: a space implied by the composition, but not shown, which incites anxious reverie.

Yet the sense of fearful anticipation generated by the Cells’ allusion to Gothic literature ultimately enhances their anti-climactic dénouement, for Cells I-VI fail to deliver the terrifying event that they portend. As such, they stand in parodic relation to the Gothic genre, sustaining two voices of affective terror and ironic distance simultaneously. On the one hand, they emulate Gothic narrative technique: like rooms in a secluded Gothic manor, they dramatise the suspenseful unravelling of some ghastly family secret. Their allusion to the Gothic evokes a forbidden world steeped in memories of an unhappy childhood, suggesting a past that erupts within the present and deranges it. On the other hand, however, while the Cells arouse the viewer’s curiosity, they ultimately disclose only their lack of a secret. The Cells seem to be on the verge of telling a story, but attempts to spell out the drama simply slide off. The objects do not add up to anything, just as the cocked ear in Cell VI is met with silence. By drawing attention to their own act of displaying, the Cells in turn expose us in our wish to watch scenes of sex and/or pain. As a result, the Cells implicitly poke fun at the viewer’s hopes for the revelation of a secret or, analogously our voyeuristic desire to discover a trauma.

Conclusion: Gothic Parody and the Primal Scene

Significantly, the Cells discussed in this chapter use the narrative techniques of the Gothic genre to build suspense, but ultimately refuse to provide a climax. As such, they stand in parodic relation to Gothic fiction. An excerpt from Jane Eyre can be used to accentuate this parodic function. The narrative unfolds as a passage through space as Brontë describes Jane’s ascent to the attic room in Thornfield Hall with Mr Rochester:
[W]e mounted the first staircase, passed up the gallery, proceeded to the third storey: the low, black door, opened by Mr Rochester’s master-key, admitted us to the tapestried room, with its great bed and its pictorial cabinet […] He lifted the hangings from the wall, uncovering the second door: this, too, he opened. In a room without a window […]’ (p. 258).

The viewer of Bourgeois’s *Cells* is similarly led through the exhibition space, effectively positioned as a Gothic reader. The temporality of viewing is instigated by the labyrinthine series of passageways, with topos of tapestries, cabinets, keys and secret, windowless chambers enforcing the Gothic ambience. However, unlike a Gothic narrative, the labyrinthine passage of the *Cells* culminates in a non-event: there is no ‘mad’ woman locked up in the attic, no suicidal frenzy triggered by a vision of the terrifying Sandman. Exceeding the very Gothic literary aesthetic they inhabit, the narrative passage of the *Cells* thus thwarts the viewer’s expectation — the viewer of the *Cells* ultimately encounters the absence of a secret/spectacle around which a climax could take place. The *Cells* thus take a tongue-in-cheek approach to the melodramatic excesses of the Gothic genre, incorporating a parodic dimension.

The effect of this parodic stance can be considered in the context of the analogy Bourgeois’s *Cells* suggest between a Gothic plot and Freud’s account of the primal scene. Indeed, the Wolf Man case study overall becomes legible as a Gothic narrative, an ornate and convoluted plot involving the attempt to decode the enigma of the traumatic origin, to uncover the secret behind the patient’s neurosis. Meanwhile, the analyst plays the role of Gothic hero, piecing together clues as he ventures into the dark recesses of Wolf Man’s psyche. Significantly, producing an anticlimactic dénouement, Bourgeois’s *Cells* challenge the assumption of the existence of an originary event that could be decoded or tamed within a singular, confining frame, both
exemplifying and parodying Freud’s attempt to find a definitive explanation of traumatic affect. However, while the Cells suggest that there is no secret to be uncovered, they produce affect that cannot altogether written off. Indeed, they highlight a disconcerting discrepancy between the scenes that structure childhood memory and the ungraspable enigma of the (other’s) unconscious.

Coda: Parody and the Representation of Trauma

The Cells’ parodic relation to Gothic literature is complicated by the fact that parody is often a characteristic of the Gothic genre itself, reflecting an eighteenth-century tension between science and the supernatural, reason and paranoia. Natalie Neill observes that parody is already a feature in what is generally regarded as the first Gothic novel, Horace Walpole’s The Castle of Otranto (1764). The novel was notably presented in Walpole’s Preface as a translation of a real medieval manuscript, a rhetorical claim to authenticity that is a typical rhetorical strategy employed by the genre to make the implausible plausible. Then, as Neill suggests, ‘following the publication of The Castle of Otranto, parody – no less than haunted castles, prophetic dreams and family curses – became a fixture of Gothic’ (in Wright and Townsend: 2016, p. 185, 189). Indeed, Gothic fiction often seeks to play with its reader by challenging the border between the real and fantastic.

Furthermore, the target of parody tends to shift in Gothic texts, such that it is not always possible to pin it down. For example, Ann Radcliffe often parodies her own rationalizations of the supernatural through the very improbability of the ‘rational’ explanations that she provides, as well as through the self-reflexive references to her own technique. Similarly, the tone of Matthew Lewis’s The Monk (1796), a significant influence for Hoffmann, wavers ‘between comic irony and full seriousness’ (2010, p. 61). Thus, Northanger Abbey (1803), perhaps the most famous Gothic parody, is in fact a parody of Gothic parodies. While emulating the Gothic Quixote genre, which reflected concerns about Gothic’s harmful influence on susceptible reader, the
protagonist's book-fuelled fantasies to an extent turn out to be justified. Indeed, the dark plot validates Catherine Morland's Gothic imaginings, satirising the didacticism of Gothic Quixote. The narrator draws the story to a close by inviting readers to determine for themselves 'the tendency of this work' (Austen: 2002, p. 240), in a sense restoring Gothic's affect of uncertainty.

Bourgeois's *Cells* similarly parody a genre that is itself already parodic. In this final section, I would like to consider the effects of parody's circularity with reference to the narrative technique of Hoffmann's 'The Sandman', which provides an apt illustration of the parodic mode in Gothic literature. According to the duplicity of the parodic mode, 'The Sandman' instigates two voices running in parallel: that of the protagonist within the story, and that of the narrator drawing attention to the story's aesthetic artifice. Indeed, ironising the plight of his protagonist, Hoffmann's narrator subjects Nathaniel to gentle mockery throughout the tale. This becomes explicit in the description of his feelings toward Olimpia: 'I was the only one to arouse her loving gaze [...] only in Olimpia's love do I recognise myself' (p. 111). Attesting to the force of a projection overlaid onto reality, these lines make the reader question the trustworthiness of Nathaniel's perception. He cries to Olimpia: 'no one but you, you alone, understands me perfectly', in a satiric representation of a particular male fantasy of the woman who exists as the perfect listener. Readers who already know or suspect that Olimpia is a doll are thereby prevented from empathising with Nathaniel, or taking seriously the tragic occurrences that befall him. This effect is enhanced by the character of Clara, Nathaniel's childhood sweetheart and fiancée, who consistently provides a rational explanation for Nathaniel's apparent delusions.

Hoffmann's tale also epitomises Gothic *self*-parody, exemplified by the narrator's identification with Nathaniel in a textual excursus (pp. 97-100). Hoffmann's narrator breaks the fourth wall, directly addressing his reader:
Have you, my kind patron, ever had an experience that has entirely absorbed your heart, your mind, and your thoughts, banishing all other concerns? [...] You had a strange, fixed stare as though you were trying to make out forms, invisible to any other eyes, in empty space, and your words faded into obscure sighs (p. 97).

Establishing the register of misperception and madness, this excerpt describes the overwhelming nature of experience that affects the visual faculty, causing one to see something that is not there. In this context, the narrator significantly signals his own loss of perspective, informing the reader that he is ‘filled with a vision as I have just described’. This implicit identification with Nathaniel has the effect of undermining his narratorial reliability. The narrator then self-reflexively draws attention to his technique in telling the story: ‘because, dear reader, I have to put you in the right mood to endure an odd tale’ (p. 98). Writing on this excursus, John M. Ellis observes ‘the narrator's bantering tone undermines the reader's commitment to the world of the story’ (1981, p. 2). As this chapter has suggested, the Cells similarly display meta-fictional awareness of their literary frame. Harnessing the parodic double voice, they situate the viewer both inside and outside the world of terrifying affect, adopting Gothic tropes yet asserting their own realism.

Significantly, however, the Gothic genre epitomises the instability of parody, and the liability of ironic distance to collapse. For, in ‘The Sandman’, the narrator's realist assertions might be seen to belie a disavowal of an apprehension of the frightening unknown. Signalling the precarious status of the dominance of rationality over the supernatural uncanny, Hoffmann’s tale demonstrates the cyclical movement of parody in much Gothic literature. Attesting to this circularity, the story ends with a sense of false closure as the narrator paints a picture of Clara with her husband and two children:
This would seem to suggest that Clara had succeeded in finding the quiet domestic happiness which suited her cheerful, sunny disposition, and which she could never have enjoyed with the tormented, self-divided Nathaniel (p. 118).

Whilst *seeming* to signal toward a happy resolution, in fact this clichéd coda implies a sinister replication of family life in which, as the story has shown, the most terrible things can happen. ‘The Sandman’ thus draws attention to a cycle of repetition, with uncanny return threatening to exceed the confines of the narrative. Like ‘The Sandman’, the *Cells* denote the persistence of real terror within the family home: something still lurking in the dark, inexplicable and unresolved. In their parody of the Gothic, parody itself becomes the target, revealed as a defensive gesture against traumatic affect. Thus the *Cells*’ depiction of suffering teeters between two poles — genuine fear and ironic distance, sincerity and self-reflexive artifice — with neither one convincingly conclusive.

Analysis of Gothic parody in Bourgeois’s *Cells* has allowed this chapter to pursue my question about the extent to which the parodic mode can offer an escape from the eternal present of traumatic affect. I have argued that the *Cells* invoke the repetitive temporality of childhood trauma by calling on the Gothic, whose plots are fuelled by a past that has not been laid to rest. As I have indicated, both ‘The Sandman’ and *Jane Eyre* comprise narratives that exemplarily stage scenic sequences driven by the force of repetition, embodied in persecutory figures of a daemonic or spectral other and bound to originary, traumatic scenes. Frozen in time, the suspended scenes of the *Cells* enact the way that traumatic experience refuses integration into narrative memory, consequently imbued with the seemingly autonomous power of repetition. At the same time, parodying the Gothic genre, the Cells apply a literary frame that allows a provisional distance from the compulsion to repeat. And yet, parody emerges simultaneously as a defensive gesture against traumatic affect, and is thus at risk of re-assimilation into the cycle of
repetition. I will continue this evaluation of the parodic mode in response to trauma in my conclusion.
Conclusion

This thesis has opened up an intertextual approach to the art and writings of Sylvia Plath and Louise Bourgeois. Departing from traditional readings of confessional art that equate the artist with the ‘I’ constructed by the work, I have demonstrated how their oeuvres in fact parody cultural, literary and psychoanalytic narratives of trauma. The works of Plath and Bourgeois thereby subvert the notion of woman artist as passive conduit of emotion, and simultaneously refuse identity with the subject position of victim. In particular, their depictions of childhood trauma both inhabit and exceed Oedipal stories – the death or adultery of the father in Plath and Bourgeois respectively – and in so doing draw attention to the patriarchal framework in which these stories are the ones that are most readily available. Thus evading diagnostic interpretations, they instead give voice to the perspective of the daughter, both in the family and the aesthetic canon.

My inquiry has analysed how the works of Plath and Bourgeois present parody as a mode of working through childhood trauma. As I have argued, they indicate how the parodic mode provides a means of representing an experience that is not available to conscious recollection, but that nevertheless exerts pressure for assimilation or translation. Indeed, the trauma may have occurred when, because of the immaturity of the infant’s ego, there was no recourse to a narrative about its life. Through a range of formal properties, confessional art is able to instantiate the repetition of undetermined or free-floating affect within subjective experience. Furthermore, the works show how parodying established narratives allows trauma to enter the terrain of shared human experience. Thereby, memory can be shaped and reshaped in relation to others, mediated via the symbolic milieu that in turn determines the extent of traumatic impact.

In Chapter 3, I drew attention to the way in which Plath’s journals parody the melancholic subject position, exemplified by the figure of Shakespeare’s
Hamlet. As I argued, the journals suggest a critique of the idealisation of melancholia in response to traumatic loss, while indicating how the cultural status accorded to melancholic genius privileges male lack. Chapter 4 explored how Plath’s so-called ‘Holocaust poems’ parodically identify with Jewish victimhood, by situating them against the backdrop of Paul Celan’s ‘Death Fugue’ (‘Todesfuge’) (1948). I observed how Plath’s poetic speakers perform their own complicity in the cultural assimilation of the Holocaust, in turn provoking critical reflection on the erotic appeal of victimisation.

Chapter 5 examined the way in which Bourgeois’s writings parody the Freudian narrative of girlhood trauma, mediating a construction of the past via literary scenarios in Honoré de Balzac’s *Eugénie Grandet* (1833) and Françoise Sagan’s *Bonjour Tristesse* (1954). Exploring the daughter subject position, the writings constitute a feminist engagement with psychoanalytic theory and especially the overvaluation of the phallus in patriarchal society. In Chapter 6, I observed how parodying Gothic literature in Bourgeois’s ‘cell’ installations – particularly with reference to E. T. A. Hoffmann’s ‘The Sandman’ (1816) and Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* (1847) – dramatise infantile affect in the face of family secrets. By staging an anticlimatic denouement, the *Cells* poke fun at the viewer’s voyeuristic interest in scenes of trauma, while also highlighting the fundamental epistemic uncertainty at the heart of Freud’s theory of the ‘primal scene’.

It is now possible to evaluate some of the capacities and limitations of the parodic mode for mourning traumatic experience. As I discussed in Chapter 2, the classical model of trauma risks turning trauma into an epistemological category, the ultimate unrepresentable capable of breaking with totalitarian thinking. However, parody disrupts the totalising gesture of representation by displaying its own frame, while simultaneously offering the traumatised subject a way of articulating grief. Indeed, assisting the work of memory, the parodic mode facilitates the construction of narratives in relation to the traumatic past. It thus presents the possibility of formulating an experience
that may have fragmented the psyche or taken place before the psyche formed. Literary and psychoanalytic intertexts act as a tangible cultural object through which to communicate suffering, while offering the psyche an oblique approach to affect that cannot be confronted head on.

However, the works of Plath and Bourgeois also suggest the partial and provisional nature of parody’s success in translating traumatic experience. Indeed, appropriating a narrative that is self-consciously not one’s own can operate as a strategy of avoidance. Plath’s journals indicate how fictionalising the past might be a way of skipping over painful feelings, while her poems show that the self-directed critique of victimhood may ultimately deny the poetic speakers the right to mourn. Redirecting parody outwards, Bourgeois’s writings playfully weave and reweave narratives in a way that suggests a more liberating outcome. Nevertheless, the instability of parodying and parodied perspectives in the artist’s Cells implies a failure to keep affect definitively at bay.

The parodic mode may thereby constitute a double-edged sword in response to trauma. On the one hand, the dual voice of affect and representation makes an expression of traumatic experience possible. On the other hand, the two poles of intense emotion and reflective distance may refuse to be finally reconciled. Consequently, there remains a danger that one might override the other, resulting either in reliving the traumatic experience or numbly dissociating from it altogether. Performing a dialectical relationship between affect and representation, the works of Plath and Bourgeois analysed in this thesis portray how parody initiates a process that is nevertheless ongoing.

Drawing on psychoanalytic and clinical concepts of traumatic experience, my engagement with the art of Plath and Bourgeois has explored the extent to which parodic narrativity facilitates processes of mourning or working through childhood trauma. Such an approach to their works may in turn point to the possibility of an interdisciplinary dialogue between literary studies and
theoretical literature relating to therapeutic practice. For example, enacting how narratives of trauma may be woven from intertextual thread, the works of Plath and Bourgeois suggest the potential addition of parody to psychoanalyst Jean Laplanche’s theory of ‘translation’ (Laplanche: 1989; 2001), which describes the attempt to make sense of the traumatising enigmas of the past. As I have proposed, the parodic mode may offer a response to the particular challenge presented by the elusive temporality of trauma, often compounded by the amorphous quality of early childhood experience. Performing how the double-voiced discourse of parody helps to establish temporal distance from the intense present of traumatic affect, the aesthetic construction of traumatised subjectivity in the works of Plath and Bourgeois produce insight that might fruitfully be brought to bear on a clinical setting.

My attention to parody in this thesis has also shown how women artists actively manipulate the rhetoric of confession, contributing to a new understanding of confessional art as an intertextual, self-reflexive and playful genre. As I have demonstrated, the works of Plath and Bourgeois employ an array of aesthetic techniques in constructing narratives of the self, while maintaining a sense of the indeterminacy of language and subjectivity. By emphasising the formal innovations of their works, I hope to have opened up new avenues for future studies of confessional art, a category that includes writing but can also be extended across a wide range of artistic media.

In the introduction to this thesis, I proposed the bell jar as an image of confessional art. My study overall has shown that the bell jar is not a transparent medium allowing a view into the artist’s interior life, but rather a reflective surface that is inscribed with a diverse range of intersecting cultural codes. Indeed, foregrounding the mechanism of display within the artwork itself, confessional art presents the bell jar as a surface to be looked at rather than through.
**Bibliography**


