



'The Coagulate' and 'Not Simply a Case:' The Development of Form, Style and the Mentally Ill 'I' in Frank Bidart's 'Herbert White' and 'Ellen West'

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The Coagulate

and

**‘Not Simply a Case’: The Development of Form, Style and the Mentally Ill
‘I’ in Frank Bidart’s ‘Herbert White’ and ‘Ellen West’**

A thesis submitted to The University of Manchester for the degree of

PhD

in the Faculty of Creative Writing

2015

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Abstract

‘The Coagulate’ and ‘Not Just a Case: The Development of Form, Style and the Mentally Ill ‘I’ in Frank Bidart’s ‘Herbert White’ and ‘Ellen West’

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Creative Writing PhD

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

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

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

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

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

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To
my daughter,
Nienna Leigh Sleight

The Coagulate

Part I

When Words are on the tip of a Tongue

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

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

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

Heron's Rest Mass Energy

Heron downloaded,
splayed a crest
of lakeskin.

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

This coruscation
of back-building potential energy
positioned to enliven all that moved
underneath.

Its black eye
spilled out
calculated filaments of bird speech
without ever parting its beak.

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

Roosting

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

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

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

Narrowboat Positives

I.

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

II.

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

III.

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

IV.

The Welsh accent trimmed his speech,
 and with it, the instructor guided a newbie.
 "Use your butt," he said while prying
 open the tall lock doors.
 At the end of the first burn,
 the first instance of dominating the water's position,
 the boat is caught,
 then released.

Then the burn lights up again,
streaking over the extremities as bright angles
stretch from cloud to cloud. The door shutters
in response. Swans join in the train,
tracking the cuts in the slow black skin
as a heron's keen beak
of light froth, peeling backwards.
If not for the hoary engine, the parade
would slip by, equally as placid
as the muted cows, stoic and sidelined.

In Absentia of Cancer

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

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

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

What would we do if the vomiting meant something?

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

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

How many more years do I have until the pinching means something?

At *That* Age and Single

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

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

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

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

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

Marple

Like in The Full Monty, I think you said
though it has been over a week.

Sheffield is shit; therefore we did not ride a fancy train.

We shared a padded bench and the blonde haired, brown-eyed toddler
in front of us smiled but remained quiet (for a child). He wanted to look.
I was careful not to say I wanted a child like that.

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

At the Roman Lakes, the names of birds escaped me;
I had never cared about coots or tufted ducks. They waded just offshore,
away from visiting children. I saw and knew the male peacock,
his brightness reined in while he tolerated the pitchy human squeals
that tagged along with released breadcrumbs.
Despite the sunglasses dimming your expression,
I saw you set your jaw against that youthful energy like the geese

carefully sidestepping the annoyance to peck crumbs out of the mud.
We stopped short of those hungry birds, hands empty but for gloves,
and made for a vacant strip of wet shoreline.
This happiness reminded me of our hike to the Bollin River,
where the sheep held their breath as we glopped by.
I proved how quietly I could walk through this boot-sucking paste.

Learning to Wait

I. Green

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

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

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

II. Amber

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

III. Red

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

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

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

Aquarium

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

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

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

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

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

Mam Tor I

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

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

Mam Tor II

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Stickle Ghyll

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

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

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

Dafad

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

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

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

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

Lyme Park

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

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

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

Box

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

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

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

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

Porridge is a mess in the mouth -

like their relationship,

bit of their grainy phone conversations

rolling around on my tongue.

If I was a toddler,

their words would clot up,

come drooling out

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

But I'm grown.

These relative issues stick to the spoon and my teeth.

Even milk cannot soften these women up.

I struggle to find the words of a meaningful reply.

Other contents of the box that represent my supposed self:

Texas Style Yellow Cornbread mix / yellow rose pollen from Nana's favorite flower

real Campbell's Tomato Soup / baby bush of pink flowers tended by Papa for me

Keebler Club House Crackers / bee time of year for the red-bud tree

Jiffy Buttermilk Biscuit mix / whitened-over cow pies used in throwing competitions

McCormick's Mild Taco Seasoning/ summer cicadas at dusk

tortillas / Tang drinker while sitting in the St. Augustine

and then the letter.

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

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

Escapism solves my dilemmas.

Rolled up

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

On this day,
 I’m mistaken.

The murderer was not

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

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

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

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

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

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

Tea I

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

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

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

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

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

This altered green tea let me pretend
I understood ceremony.
This was the artificiality I carried
with me to England where sun-tea fails.
My tea had no planted place,
no weight as an offering where coldness
prevailed. A scarf couldn't exclude
this country's chill any more than their snow.

Tea was already here, strong
and Yorkshire; a synonym as peated whiskey
is to Scotland. Someone here, a Northerner,
said, "Tea is magic."

I'm using it,
hounding after the balance
I'd only had in the place
where I could stand on toddler legs,
looking out of her backdoor
when I had no use for tea.

Tea II

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

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

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

Shiori

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

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

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

Kintai-kyo Bridge

I. Nishiki

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

It gave,
 overwhelmed;

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

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

II. Iwakuni

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

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

Rice screen walls, unfurling eaves, tea rooms
 were not watered away in a keen tide,

but gently dismantled, humiliated
 by human capability
 succeeding where the storms failed.

III. Nowaki

Across the Kintai-kyo,
 those low to the stony earth
 treaded through the winds,
 tidal waters
 parts of Susanoo's sword.

The quotidian weighted bodies
 as if dense stones pulled chests to the ground.
 The village still maintained breath,
 beat,
 below the surface.
 Watercraft stayed close to home,
 that which might rise when
 commoner homes sank a little further
 the mud sucking on scant foundations.

These costs were customary,
 even in the trawling dark.

IV. Amaterasu

The sunny sister, daughter of the left eye;

 the landscape righted itself beneath her paintbrush.

The bridge,
 its dragon curves
 pleated up again,

 poised and ready to snap back with stony supports.

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

Old Persimmon Leaf

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

whose rice is thrown away.

But his and her ignominy will acquire a symmetry
when their family monument goes unwashed
and the strokes of their name remain
un-whetted by plates of mochi
and cups of warm sake.

He will join her under a carpet
of spring blooms, then autumn leaves -
over and over. In the cold, the air above them
will be vacant with a lack of incense wisps
and rice to refuse.

Love – In Anime

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I am sorry.
I cannot fit into these frames
right now.

Kaidan: A Story for a Night of 100 Lamps

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

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

It began to pine after him.

Its wish:

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

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

It cast aside its stripped tail,
shape-shifted into a woman –
one dead and drying,
whose outline had sprouted,
stayed rooted like camellias
stippling the boundaries of the garden.

Magic painted
its robber face.
It ensconced itself in her life's image.

This gamble dared disturb

the cold sheets, the samurai's heated failure.

The returned
form materialized, substantial

while disregarding the mind's insistence

that the female form before him must contain

an apparitional nature.

This eidolon, so petite and tactile
within the circumference of his arms.

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

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

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

The tanuki's femininity dissolved.

Not even its body could be found
until dawn.

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

Kokkuri: Phenomenon

*“Kokkuri-sama,
Kokkuri-sama,
please descend,
please descend.
Come now,
please descend
quickly.”*

-Kokkuri invocation

I. Inoue Enryō

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

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

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

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

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

But still,

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

II. Tengu

Ku:

a character

meaning dog but not dog.

The transference of meaning
shifted the word and its strokes
to the tengu.

Sometimes the tengu was a crow-
the black karasu.

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

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

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

Warlike perfection subsisting as art.

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

yōkai.

Its value as a sensei-
worth the danger
of being stripped
of one's earned magical coat

if the bird pecked out pretension
 and second sight
 in the learner's nature.

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

*

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

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

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

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

Nyotaimori

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

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

She is rare –
 no –
 This is rare.

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

She, this, cannot be clean enough
 for the everyday. The idea of human salvers
 causes this string of eastern islands to blush.

Kuchi-sake-onna: Slit-Mouthed Woman

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

-Michael Dylan Foster, from "Pandemonium and Parade"

The woman hunts;

asks,

“Am I pretty?”

And a cram-school boy is caught.

He hears,

“Watashi kirei?”

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

a scythe.

The murk of nightfall
highlights her surgical mask.

She has positioned herself
between school and school.

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

He has the option to run,
but the magazines print factoids that pinpoint a problem:

she is fast like an athlete.

If he could just make it to a place of numbers and halogen lights,

a store

with a crowd,

the demon would shrink back into the landscaped park.

He would be safe from her self-exposing.

The slit extensions of her too-wide mouth
make her
ready to eat
more than he has.

She would cow the boy
just like his kyoiku mother:

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

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

A third option,
to do nothing,
is as absent in his adrenaline accented head
as the correct answers he's always assumed to have.

N.E.E.T.

A soda drinker downs sweet, bubbling liquid -
 a gurgle flagging his attention to the on-coming
 end of the can, some remains

beading inside the straw.

The icebox next to his desk means he can linger,

affixed in front of a computer screen,
 imbibing webpages;

One of the net's many philosopher gods.

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

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

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

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

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

Sometimes, the socially nervous otaku confuses the computer screen for a window,
 as if it were a barrier keeping them from the immediacy of the city air,

women on cell phones,
 children in school jackets,
dogs on leashes,
 globes of skin at summer music festivals,
the mixed smells of food and car exhaust on the main streets.

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

....
.
· _ ..
· _ _ .

The sound sinks in to the receiving object,
goes nowhere.

This is enough.

Inari: Fox in an Asylum

I.

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

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

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

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

II.

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

Curiously, foxes like to ride newness –
 like trains; gain a new tail as a modern
 emperor setting at dusk,
 wonder at the immigrating eyes

of different colours, shapes; the whiter
 skin, transforming the katana into museum art.
 The era was without a fox
 needing to lift an artful claw.
 Kitsune lived for millennia,
 was that victory enough?

III.

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

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

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

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

she toured the inside of me,

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

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

.

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

Bipole

White light run through a prism; the outer edges
were sharp. But if you got a good look
 at the in-between,
the colours melded together. We decided that you couldn't
 pinpoint exactly where
one colour stopped and the other started.

 This was an apt comparison with how he shifted between his acute facets,
 he was a visible spectrum you couldn't help but see.

He said, "*A rainbow, even one created through a prism
wasn't really crisp, vivid enough.*"

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

 He mentioned teeth often.

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

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

He would develop headaches that spread into his eyes.

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

Then, he couldn't help
 growling to himself,
 punish his pillows with fists and blades,
 but on a bad day,
 like he needed to castigate his skin
 for the guilt, his blustering and spasms.
Later, the shame spread over him, sudden like the sweat on bread when heated.

When he could joke about the fury,

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

He knew the coping-mechanism recitations: Good to have schedules and good to have a pet.
Seek out

distraction

wake up and roll out of bed at a set time each day.
Go outside.

The problem was that, "*Everything rushes in at me even when I have a coat and scarf on.*"
But still,

the doctors direct him to go, go, go –
engross him in motion.

He can't say why he cries for hours after watching a sad TV show.

"*My logical side,*

it knows.

My eyes pee anyway."

The best times occur between awake and sleep,
when the dark and cosy warmth of his favourite bed-sheets
help him achieve that slow-down, slide in to a stop
but less cool than Tom Cruise in *Risky Business*.

The nearness of his cat, the dim features of his room,
neat happy lights, the worn out and in of it all –
his mind becomes the pouring of molasses,
his brain can take a stroll in the quiet.

The Often Nuisances

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Stigma

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

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

A physician may try
 to convince me the snow didn't fall
 then disappear from the sidewalks
 scant hours afterwards
 dissolved by the rains
 that make people here forget
 all of the stars.

Perhaps the patient remains a sceptic,
 but still unheard, ignored like livestock –
 once grown
 their bleats and bays
 blend in to the notion of country.

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

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

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

In The Muir

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

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

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

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

to irrigate a city.

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

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

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

III.

I've just sort of flopped down
and donned a slight smile
 with lips like a red space-saucer.
The mulberry tree from next door
 seems to hover
 though it's been caught
 by the grappling-hook jasmine.
Most of the year,
 this spot is home
to a welcoming, green canopy.
I'm prone
 here,
 on the brown lattice formed
 from last year's cast-off leaves.

Earlier today
I paced the train-tracks

and decided markedly
 that they would not do.
 The tearing off of parts
 writes well on paper
 but is still a different kind of
 tearing.

The body parts may fly solo
 but someone has to clean the mess.
 And then there are those amberous moments...
 It is not fair to scare conductors
 even if the rail-side rocks lay hot and aloof.

It will be an indeterminate date
 I always assume
 unless it ever pulls up
 as if I should have expected company
 and made tea.

But if I can't watch
 my yellow rosebush as I catapult
 to the moon
 it's wrong, wrong, wrong.

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

Part II
LEE COLE POEMS

Three

I.

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

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

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

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

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

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

I had nursed expectations about what an angel would say.
 Leaving Christ's side wasn't it.
 Christ is love, charity, humility,
 and all sorts of good things you can't find

in today's churches. Following the bodily trail
of Judges wasn't. Here this angel was
instructing me with those teeth and hidden hands.

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

II.

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

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

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

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

My neighbour gathered up his hose.
I saw him, the human, understood

the decency in his humanity.
 He volunteered in a soup kitchen
 and never hit his wife or children.

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

This new work operates in ways
 more covert than atoms.

III.

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

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

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

Where I attended university,

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

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

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

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

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

These limbs, not mechanical,
are willing in their ministry.

But now, a new partition
has buttressed itself up
in these weeks after our first conversation –
short boxwoods seeded between
the shell of my neighbour, the stone
of my movement and the nothing
I've done since. Just been Lee.

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

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

Shearing

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

Locusta

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

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

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

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

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

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

The work was pretty,
 trickling down from her,
 pupil by pupil. She absorbed her students' achievements.
 We call them "copycats,"
 their mimicry bolstering the reputation
 of a hand already caught.
 A legacy is one of the few positive mementos
 a jailed murderer nurtures.

Without Nero, the psychology of the idea
of *her*
sickened. Her death mythology
fattened with stories of rape
by a giraffe, her body dismantled
while manacled to sturdy animals.

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

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

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

Bill

*“I pay homage to you? For what?
Have you ever relieved
The burdened man’s anguish!
Have you ever assuaged
The frightened man’s tears?”*

~Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, “Prometheus,” 1773

It’s a good name.

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

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

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

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

Plot

*“Not needing a military band
nor an elegant forthcoming*

*to tease spotlights or a hand
from the public’s thinking*

*But be In a defiant land
of its own a real right thing”
~ Frank O’Hara, “To the Poem”*

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

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

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

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

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

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

Things to Avoid

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

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

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

This last item is the most important.

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

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

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

Replant

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

Chew them cold.

This is something not to do,

like burying;
the carpals shoot up sooner
than the rest of the whole.

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

in need of companions,
additions to a collection.

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

Earnest is the field
that holds these graves close.

I cover this old freshness with a pair
of daf
fo
dils.

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**‘Not Simply a Case:’ The Development of Form, Style and the
Mentally Ill ‘I’ in Frank Bidart’s ‘Herbert White’ and ‘Ellen West’**

Introduction

Frank Bidart's poetry was first published as the dominance of the Confessional movement began to wane during the 1970s. The main Confessional poets like W.D. Snodgrass, Anne Sexton, Robert Lowell, John Berryman and Sylvia Plath wrote lyric that was 'linked with the idea of poetry as a highly personal statement, not altogether detachable from the poet as biographical individual.'¹ A student of Robert Lowell's, Bidart would follow this movement in divergent ways: by adding to its discourse directly with poems like 'Confessional,' and 'Golden State,' which granted Bidart mediums to achieve catharsis and communicate the truth of feeling without focusing on empiricism. He also insisted on writing poems which turned away from the art of confessing and towards the more fictive displays of experience used by dramatic monologues. Poems like 'Herbert White,' 'Ellen West' and 'The War of Vaslav Nijinsky' have become hallmarks of Bidart's style.

The speakers in Bidart's dramatic monologues tend to be disturbed individuals, suffering from hyperbolic versions of mental illness. These characters exhibit personalities and narratives that are worthy of news headlines and anomalous from the everyday. The eponymous characters of 'Herbert White' and 'Ellen West,' the poems addressed in this thesis, attempt to live what they perceive to be lives of normality. When confronted with a different reality, their fantasy worlds fail to serve as adequate crutches for their neuroses. In spite of these attempts, they fail; the disparity between themselves and what they perceive is the correct way to exist accentuating the absence of resolution found in the form.

Bidart's delivery of his speakers' disordered selves is framed differently from the neat stanzas and metre of his contemporaries. Lowell's 'meters and rhyme,' are not 'neat rational

¹ Laurence Lerner, "What is Confessional Poetry," *Critical Quarterly*, 29:2 (1987), 46-66 (pp. 46-48).

statements,' but instead, 'contain powerful feelings' and 'intensity.'² Bidart also conveys dense intensity, but one of a different sort. One would not find capitals and erratic indentations meant to manipulate the very speech of the reader in a Lowell poem. Marjorie Perloff writes that the majority of poets of the 1950s and 60s composing free-verse did not 'do much to exploit the white space of the page or to utilise the material aspects of typography.'³ And while Language poetry began as a movement in earnest in the 1970s, Bidart was one of the few mainstream poets that maintained narrative and reference while simultaneously manipulating white space as a method of managing voice.⁴

Jeffrey Gray writes that Bidart's unique manner of addressing the self as a process designates him as the originator of the post-Confessionals; whose work, 'in its melancholy, its sense of loss, and its working out, from beginning to end, of a finally insoluble problem,' utilises the 'incorporation of theoretical ruminations within the mostly past-tense recounting.'⁵ But Bidart's writing goes farther, challenging the very identities that his speakers attempt to convey. His prosody also possesses 'peculiar [...] scoring of his syntax' combined with 'horror-movie awfulness.'⁶ Bidart galvanises the reader when he writes:

I got in the truck, and started to drive,
and saw a little girl ---
who I picked up, hit on the head, and
screwed, and screwed, and screwed, and screwed, then

buried,
in the garden of the motel . . .⁷

The absence of a lofty tone and presence of a quiet, informal locution calls into question a speaker's ability to impart the heaviness of his situation to the reader. Bidart's frames his

² Alan Williamson, *Pity the Monsters: The Political Vision of Robert Lowell*, (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1986), p. 11.

³ *Poetry On & Off the Page: Essays for Emergent Occasions*, (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1998), p. 153.

⁴ Steve McCaffery, 'Language Poetry,' *The Cambridge Companion to American Poetry Since 1945*, ed. Jennifer Ashton, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. - (p. 143).

⁵ "'Necessary Thought": Frank Bidart and the Postconfessional,' in *Contemporary Literature*, 34: 4 (Winter, 1993), 714-739 (pp. 718 & 725).

⁶ Tom Sleight, 'Frank Bidart's Voice,' in *On Frank Bidart: Fastening the Voice to the Page*, (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2007), pp. 22-30 (pp. 22 & 24).

⁷ 'Herbert White,' in *Golden State*, (New York: George Braziller, Inc., 1973), pp. 3-7 (p. 4, ll. 34-39).

lyric in a manner that arrests the aural experience by way of visual and punctuative mediums. Bidart's exclusion of heavy-handed poetic speech heightens the complexity of his work rather than oversimplifies it.

'Herbert White,' invades the space of the everyday: the breaking of the voice augments the insanity permeating the narrative. White's 'blur' becomes plausible and, in spite of his abhorrent addiction, the reader is able to suspend the judgment of his person.⁸ Instead, Robert Langbaum argues, the despicable character will receive our sympathy for the duration of the poem because his is the only voice present.⁹ White's position is as anti-Confessional as Bidart's; the full extent of what could be shared is implied as existing outside of the poem's physical borders.

With the release of *Book of the Body* in 1977, Bidart introduced a new character: Ellen West. In this poem, he more readily matches the disordered dissonance of his characters with the structure and mechanics of his prosody. In this cardinal post-Confessional book, Bidart endeavours to make his lineation more frantic and the sound the reader hears (either in the mind or by utterance) desperately loud. Bidart writes:

Only by
acting; choosing; rejecting; have I
made myself ---
discovered who and what Ellen can be . . .

--- But then again I think, NO. This *I* is anterior

to name; gender; action;
fashion;
MATTER ITSELF, ---
. . . trying to stop my hunger with FOOD
is like trying to appease thirst
with ink.¹⁰

Seamus Heaney wrote that Bidart is 'a poet who stands in the place where extremes meet – extremes of behaviour, of intuited obligation, of artistic expression.'¹¹ With 'Ellen West'

⁸ ll. 113

⁹ Robert Langbaum, *The Poetry of Experience: The Dramatic Monologue in Modern Literary Tradition*, 2nd ed. (London: Chatto & Windus, 1952), pp. preface & 83.

¹⁰ 'Ellen West,' in *Book of the Body*, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977), pp. 30-44 (p. 40, ll. 228-238).

and perhaps the entirety of *Book of the Body*, Bidart finalised the form of his distinctive prosody and penchant for dramatic monologues containing characters almost too hyperbolic to be believed. His form became an extension of their madness. In the moments that these characters speak, Bidart reveals characters that live out their lives in unbreakable patterns.¹² And yet the physical form on the page is described as a ‘scar’ by one of Bidart’s most dedicated critics, Dan Chiasson. These poems might also resemble compound fractures if the comparing of prosody to injury is maintained. Their rigid and wilful existences violently break apart, the last lines of each poem representing the jagged surfaces of their circumstances that will remain unhealed and unresolved. The physical shape of each poem serves as a conduit between everyday speech and their extraordinary abnormalities.

Critical work on Bidart’s poetry is still in its infancy but the majority of serious contributions to the discourse about his work tends to focus his use of punctuation within the confines of four of his poems: ‘Herbert White,’ ‘Ellen West,’ ‘The War of Vaslav Nijinsky’ and ‘The Second Hour of the Night.’ The former two are the focus of this dissertation in respect to Bidart’s revealing of the mentally ill self through poetry that was distinctive not only by virtue of the physical shape, but by reciprocal elements that concurrently exposed and made understood the poet and fictional characters. The universality then found in the fictional characters make their life events accessible to the reader. The revealing of the poet through the dramatic moments of an ‘other’ prevented his biography from becoming needlessly bathetic.

These poems are addressed as dramatic monologues. There is, however, no agreed upon, exacting definition of a dramatic monologue. Many critical studies exist and all contain slightly different criteria by which their authors examine a poem’s viability as a

¹¹ ‘Frank Bidart: A Salute,’ in *On Frank Bidart: Fastening the Voice to the Page*, (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press), pp. 5-6 (p. 6).

¹² ‘An Interview --- With Mark Halliday (1983),’ *In the Western Night*, (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1990), p. 238.

dramatic monologue. And while Bidart is not the only present-day poet to use the ‘mask lyric and the persona poem,’ his use of it as more than a ‘counterweight to the novel’ presents a great opportunity for discussion on Bidart's role in contributing to and the advancement of the form.¹³ The narrowest definition of the dramatic monologue, writes Alan Sinfield, requires that it should:

include a first-person speaker who is not the poet and whose character is unwittingly revealed, an auditor whose influence is felt in the poem, a specific time and place, colloquial language, some sympathetic involvement with the speaker, and an ironic discrepancy between the speaker's view of himself and a larger judgment which the poet implies and the reader must develop.¹⁴

But the dramatic monologue, Sinfield continues, should be analysed using a much broader definition. He writes that it is much simpler to say that a dramatic monologue is ‘a poem in the first person spoken by, or almost entirely by, someone who is indicated not to be the poet.’¹⁵ However, such a wide scope would then qualify the soliloquy as a dramatic monologue. Langbaum argues that there is a difference between the two in that, ‘the soliloquist's subject is himself, while the speaker of the dramatic monologue directs his attention outward. [...] The soliloquist is concerned with truth, [...] while the speaker of the dramatic monologue [...] is not concerned with its truth but with trying to impress it on the outside world.’¹⁶ W. David Shaw contends that the form often breaks the very rules that are set for it.¹⁷ Shaw offers another definition, arguing that the dramatic monologue:

has three defining features. As a species of talking verse, it is a poem of one-sided conversation in which a speaker, not to be confused with the poet, addresses a silent auditor. Secondly, as M.H. Abrams recognizes, a monologue's unconscious self-revelations are usually more important than the meanings its speaker is conscious of expressing. A third feature of the genre is the speaker's unpredictable apostrophes or swerves of voice.¹⁸

¹³ Jahan Ramazani, *Poetry and its Others: News, Prayer, Song, and the Dialogue of Genres*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), p. 20.

¹⁴ *Dramatic Monologue*, (London: Methuen & Co Ltd, 1977), p. 7.

¹⁵ *Dramatic Monologue*, p. 8.

¹⁶ *The Poetry of Experience*, p. 146.

¹⁷ *Origins of the Monologue: The Hidden God*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999), p. 14.

¹⁸ *Origins of the Monologue*, p. 12.

Bidart's acceptance and rejection of various guidelines concerning the dramatic monologue indicates that for his monologues, more than one definition of the form can be applied to a discussion of 'White' and, most notably, 'West.' Categorizing 'West' amongst the 'sub-classifications' set by Ina Beth Sessions proves to be the most accurate. Sessions lists seven characteristics that a 'perfect dramatic monologue' would have: 'speaker, audience, occasion, revelation of character, interplay between speaker and audience, dramatic action, and action which takes place in the present.'¹⁹ The degree to which a poem adopts these seven characteristics causes it to then be classified as perfect, imperfect, formal, or approximate.²⁰

But Sessions also argues that defining a poem as a dramatic monologue or not is not the only important discussion concerning the form. One must also take into consideration the 'extent of dramatic effectiveness of a poem.'²¹ Bidart's deviations from the strictest scope of the form tend to enhance the dramatic effect rather than lessen it.

Bidart defines both 'Herbert White' and 'Ellen West' as dramatic monologues that work as the 'Yeatsian "anti-self"' and through those 'all that I was not' characters, Bidart was able to 'settle those issues for [him]. It drained those subjects of their obsessive power.'²² The 'anti-self,' that Bidart refers to is the character type 'who is in conflict with his age and destiny.'²³ 'Those issues' were the strained relationships Bidart had with his father and mother. By channelling his problematic experiences into the dramatic monologue form, he was able to 'gain a formal and emotional distance from his preoccupations' while still exploring the link between poet and subject.²⁴ A poet wearing a mask was able to

¹⁹ 'The Dramatic Monologue,' in *PMLA*, 62: 2 (June, 1947), 503-516, (p. 508).

²⁰ Ibid 508

²¹ 'The Dramatic Monologue,' p. 514.

²² 'An Interview – With Mark Halliday (1983),' in *In The Western Night: Collected Poems 1965 – 1990*, (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1990) pp. 223- 241(p. 233);

H.L. Hix, 'In Conversation with Frank Bidart,' in *Literary Review: An International Journal of Contemporary Writing*, 53:1 (Fall 2009), 191-198 (p.194).

²³ Robert Langbaum, *Mysteries of Identity : A Theme in Modern Literature*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 149.

²⁴ Sinfield, pp. 17 & 25.

‘penetrate through the ordinary self to remote depth where the real interest lies.’²⁵ Not only can the poet become the art, but the poet can use the dramatic monologue to make his views or biography more engaging. This particular type of self-exploration was another reason why the dramatic monologue was often referred to as ‘the poetry of psychology,’ ‘psychological monologues’ and ‘case-history-like studies’ by critics during the Victorian period.²⁶ Bidart’s monologues possess qualities that make psychoanalytic analysis possible, but one cannot forget that the speakers and the poet we find on the page are created rather than naturally occurring and the result of ‘the reification and anthropomorphisation of concepts.’²⁷ Considering Bidart’s confessional poems through the histories he shares with the speakers of his dramatic monologues ushers the poet into a role that ‘lends his name to an archetype.’²⁸ By using the poet’s interests, views, and/or history as part of his characters’ formulation, Bidart’s lyric exhibits universal qualities that help the reader ‘recognize a psychological feature of the persona.’²⁹ Bidart brings the speaker to the reader so that the reader may, as in a Browning dramatic monologue, engage in a ‘spirit of tolerance.’³⁰ Often, the mentally ill are stigmatised and excluded. Bidart’s dramatic monologues incorporate the mentally ill into a social fabric. He directs attention towards not what these characters can be defined as, so much as their reactions to the situations he places them in and their histories that substantiate their identities in their poems’ present. For example, while it is largely accurate to describe Herbert White as a paedophiliac necrophile, the poem’s locus rests in the progression of memory that culminates in the realisation of his monstrous actions. With ‘Ellen West,’ the poem focuses on the progression of an identity that is prone to mercurial fluctuations. Both

²⁵ Langbaum, *Mysteries of Identity*, p. 168.

²⁶ Ekbert Faas, *Retreat into the Mind: Victorian Poetry and the Rise of Psychiatry*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), pp. 14 & 20.

²⁷ Joseph H. Smith, *The Literary Freud: Mechanisms of Defense and the Poetic Will*, ed. Joseph H. Smith, M.D., (London: Yale University Press, 1980), p. xv.

²⁸ Langbaum, *Mysteries of Identity*, p. 165.

²⁹ Faas, p. 149.

³⁰ Faas, p. 164.

poems are created spheres; that kind that Langbaum refers to as another ‘realm’ in which the anti-self is the ‘ultimate self’ which then becomes ‘manifest.’³¹ Bidart also creates the voices and landscapes of Herbert White and Ellen West, and these in turn form an idea as to what the anti-Bidart is so that the image of the poet becomes clearer.

This dissertation, then, proposes to view ‘Herbert White’ and ‘Ellen West’ through Bidart’s use of what Kate Hamburger has called a ‘feint’ as used in dramatic monologues.³² The use of a feint provided Bidart a way to speak of himself by creating someone to speak for him. Langbaum writes that ‘the speaker of the dramatic monologue dramatize[s] a position to which the poet is not ready to commit himself intellectually.’³³ Both poems end in annihilation; Ellen West commits suicide while Herbert White’s fragile, delusional world is stripped from him and he is forced to confront his true, murderous self. The feint allows Bidart to approach the concept of the condemnable self and the annihilation of self without ever truly attributing it to his person.

This concept also allows for an intertextual reading of ‘Herbert White’ and ‘Ellen West.’ Bidart’s use of the dramatic monologue creates an ‘other’ that is resistant to Bidart’s own voice and is, at the same time, inextricably linked though the feint. The dramatic monologue, then, serves as a vehicle for Bidart to separate his poetry from the confessional style of his contemporaries. On one level ‘Herbert White’ functions as a poem about ‘a necrophiliac and serial killer’³⁴ and one another, the initial, representational piece in a book about his relationship with his father.³⁵ His next dramatic monologue, ‘Ellen West,’ operates in place of forthright confessional work concerning a number of topics like mental illness, aging, art, the ‘mind-body,’³⁶ and the knowing of self. Bidart refers to these characters as

³¹ Langbaum, *Mysteries of Identity*, p. 203.

³² Sinfield, p. 25.

³³ *Poetry of Experience*, p. 105.

³⁴ Hix, p. 195.

³⁵ ‘An Interview --- With Mark Halliday (1983),’ p. 238.

³⁶ *Ibid.* 239

'shadows' of his own experience, as they are a product of himself without being his actual self.³⁷ That Bidart shares histories with his speakers is also made evident through a number of Bidart's confessional poems like 'Confessional,' 'Golden Gate,' and the newer poems from *Metaphysical Dog*, 'Mouth' and 'Writing Ellen West.'

Bidart's dramatic monologues contain, at the very least, fractions of the poet's history, even if he reveals himself by revealing his opposite. Chiasson writes that, 'to encounter a Bidart poem is very much to encounter Bidart's presence – often contentious – within another, foreign, presence.'³⁸ He has the ability to make himself known through a serial killer, a man who has sex with the corpses of the children he murders. He appears amongst the suffering, feminine voice of 'Ellen West,' not allowing his masculine poet's voice to override her speech but instead, offer an empathetic reinforcement to her authenticity as a character, as a life.

The previously mentioned 'anti-self' allows the poet a sense of freedom not shared by Confessional poetry, where the absence of 'barriers between the reader and the poet' limited the intensity of the drama used to craft the poet's 'personal mythology.'³⁹ Shaw claims that the anti-self:

stretches the heart and mind wide enough to embrace the truth of opposites: the truths of both modern relativism, which allows for only equivocal understanding, and Victorian perspectivism, which concedes that analogical understanding is in theory possible. Perhaps this is just another way of saying that in releasing the poet from accident and incoherence, the wearing of masks far removed from the natural self allows the poet to become 'the mysterious one' invoked by Yeats as his secret double.⁴⁰

Bidart's monologues contain very little objective truth and yet characters like Herbert White are made to be the sole middle-men of information; the truth of the poem derives from the

³⁷ Ibid 239

³⁸ *One Kind of Everything*, p. 80.

³⁹ Robert Phillips, *The Confessional Poets*, (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1973), pp. 16-17.

⁴⁰ *Origins of the Monologue*, p. 208.

one speaker and it is the only truth we can know. In 'Herbert White,' there is a clear sense of opposites in the dual-realities of the poem, one reality for each of White's selves.

There is an exception, though, to Shaw's argument in 'Ellen West.' If Ellen West was the only character present giving the reader information, there would be little choice but to rely on her because she would be the only speaker present, despite recognising the dubious nature of her self-perceptions. Bidart, however, uses two speakers for 'West,' which undermines West's monopoly on truth. With the poem becoming more prone to relativism, what Langbaum terms as 'sympathy' or 'romantic projectiveness' should be in jeopardy.⁴¹ There should be a sense of tension between the amount of sympathy the reader gives to the poem and the judgment the reader would pass on the poem in respect to the accuracy of its perspective.⁴² Bidart is able to create an unyielding sense of tension between truth and sympathy in spite of the inclusion of a second speaker, largely due to the method of lineation and punctuation developed in *Golden State*. He also draws from his ability to present a character with a divided mind, creating tension of another kind that adds to the theatrics of the dramatic monologue.

Bidart's Herbert White appears to suffer from a dissociative disorder, or the 'self-divided mind,' that prevents him from entirely remembering the murders he commits until the end of the poem.⁴³ White literally has two selves housed in one body. 'Ellen West' follows suit as the speaker is drawn to and repulsed by elements like food and people. She claims she wants to put aside her obsessions but at the same time will not and cannot. Essentially, she is 'pulled two ways at once.'⁴⁴ The two selves within each of these speakers work against each other.

⁴¹ *Poetry of Experience*, preface.

⁴² *Poetry of Experience*, preface & pp. 140.

⁴³ Shaw, p.191.

⁴⁴ *Ibid* 191

Anxiety is best expressed in the poem as the Modernist method of ‘pick[ing] through a world of shifting images whilst in doubt of the status of the mind through which they appear to be passing.’⁴⁵ Both ‘White’ and ‘West’ are structured as fragmentary memories and introspection. But Bidart does not fully commit to Modernist principle, as his use of the feint is prominent in his dramatic monologues, particularly as a mode of discussing the emotional hazards of kinship Eliot felt that the poet should remain ‘outside the poem’⁴⁶ and that the form fails in its aim to ‘bring a character to life;’ a dramatic monologue is a poem of mimicry.⁴⁷ Other critics argue that other forms of lyric are prone to ‘stereotypical speakers’ and ‘stock situations.’⁴⁸ But this dissertation argues that the dramatic monologue provides an avenue to for the poet to explore a high degree of specificity and uniqueness which ‘outweigh its more stereotypical qualities.’⁴⁹

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

⁴⁵ *The Dramatic Monologue*, p. 66.

⁴⁶ Langbaum, *Poetry of Experience*, p. 30.

⁴⁷ *On Poets and Poetry*, (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1956), p. 95.

⁴⁸ Faas, p. 152.

⁴⁹ *Ibid* 152

Chapter 1: 'Herbert White' – Formation of the Psychopathic Other

Frank Bidart's development as a poet was guided by some of the most significant poets of the 1950s and 60s, most notably Robert Lowell and Elizabeth Bishop.¹ Where Lowell was given, by this point, to writing confessionally, Bishop's poetry placed more emphasis on metaphysics and travel.² The outpouring of the personal self onto the page wasn't the sole kind of lyric Bidart wanted to compose but he wanted to write poetry that 'confronted issues that the world confronted [him] with.'³ What resulted was *Golden Gate*, a book that glided in and out of Bidart's autobiography, rendering the poet a shadow actor. 'Herbert White,' the first poem of *Golden Gate*, immediately establishes his originality; it behaves as a type of dramatic monologue that makes for a greater impression of Bidart's attempt to break with the existing norms than any of the other poems of *Golden Gate*. Opening a book with the idea of 'not-the-poet' served as a declaration of separation from the popularity of the Confessional movement. The poem's unusual style of typography calls attention to the framing of a histrionic narrative through syncopated rhythms and physical arrangement of speech. Moreover, Bidart's use of punctuation, mingling of opposing speech genres, and handling of time and Freudian theories mark the distance he meant to place between himself and the preceding poetry of the 1950s and 60s. 'Herbert White' solidly categorised Bidart as a post-Confessional poet, which allowed him to draw upon the poetry of his mentors while finding unfamiliar ways to represent sexuality, the violence of a mental disorder that can annihilate the fabric of personal identity, and fragments of his own autobiography that operate in the poem's backdrop.

¹ 'Frank Bidart,' *Poets.org*, < <http://www.poets.org/poet.php/prmPID/162> > [accessed on September 2011].

² *The Wounded Surgeon: Confessionalism and Transformation in Six American Poets: Robert Lowell, Elizabeth Bishop, John Berryman, Randall Jarrell, Delmore Schwartz, and Sylvia Plath*, (New York: W.W. Norton, 2005), pp. 67, 74-75, 86.

³ 'An Interview --- With Mark Halliday (1983),' *In the Western Night*, (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1990), p. 232.

‘Herbert White’ centres on one such narrative of a hyperbolic nature where the imagined, eponymous speaker behaves as a paedophilic necrophile with dissociative disorder. When crafting the poem, Bidart ‘wanted to make a Yeatsian “anti-self”–someone who was “all that I was not,” whose way of “solving problems” was the *opposite* of that of the son in the middle of the book.’⁴ We find, however, that evidence of Bidart’s presence appears in ‘Herbert White’ through the adoption of the dramatic monologue’s ‘feint.’⁵ The experiences of the speaker and poet are similar but their reactions to these experiences are antithetical.

Herbert White’s method of dealing with the emotional weight of his family is to murder young females and transport the bodies to remote locations to have sexual intercourse with them. Repeated visits to these locations result in White masturbating over the remains once the bodies are too decomposed to have sex with. Throughout much of the poem, White appears convinced that he is not the architect of these events; his mind going as far as dissociating during the violent and perverse acts he executes. Bidart maintains that White’s way of working through the problems he has with his family ‘is to give himself to a violent pattern growing out of the dramas of his past, a pattern that consoles him as long as he can feel that someone *else* has acted within it.’⁶ The poem culminates with White’s belated realisation that he is in fact the killer.⁷

One technique Bidart used to construct the psyche of this ‘MONSTER’⁸ was unusual punctuation usage, combined with varying ‘speech genres,’ to use Bakhtin’s term, and psychological, Freudian themes.⁹ The result is a character that is ‘chaos’ and yet personable.¹⁰ Bidart’s use of informal speech creates sections of the poem that cause the speaker to appear

⁴ ‘An Interview --- With Mark Halliday (1983),’ p. 238.

⁵ Alan Sinfield, *Dramatic Monologue*, (London: Methuen & Co Ltd, 1977), p. 25.

⁶ Ibid 238

⁷ Frank Bidart, ‘Herbert White,’ *Golden State*, (New York: George Braziller, 1973), pp. 3-7 (p. 7, ll. 117-121).

⁸ Ibid 238

⁹ Nick Halpern, *Everyday and Prophetic: The Poetry of Lowell, Ammons, Merrill, and Rich*, (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2003), p. 75.

¹⁰ Ibid 238

affable. This particular speech genre is what Nick Halpern terms the 'everyday.'¹¹ Bidart creates a sense of imbalance within the everyday by interspersing what Halpern also terms as the 'prophetic.'¹² The voice produced becomes as variable as the mental stability of the speaker.

White's failure and disorder, then, is rooted in his inability to alter his patterns, psychologically and physically, in a manner that would contribute in a positive manner to his mental health.¹³ He lives out a battle between a constructed ego and id. The conception of this type of character diverges significantly from the confessional use of the 'I,' as Bidart uses a speaker that is clearly not the poet but quietly lends itself to Bidart's autobiography. The poem's more noticeable argument serves as a commentary on how a poet shapes genres of speech to create a mentally disordered character.

¹¹ *Everyday and Prophetic*, p. 19.

¹² *The Everyday and Prophetic*, p. 4.

¹³ 'An Interview --- With Mark Halliday (1983),' p. 232.

I. A Novel Approach to Punctuation: Bidart's Form Established

Bidart composed 'Herbert White' as a collection of memories in a dramatic monologue, disordered as the main character himself. Erratic stanza indentions, italics, capitalisation, and punctuation create a kind of poem that Dan Chiasson calls 'a material scar on the page.'¹⁴

This serves as an embodiment of the character's mental scars on a magnified level, providing access to a character that might otherwise be inaccessible. Bidart uses the visible organisation of a poem to reveal the unseen and unsaid of a character and says of his unorthodox structuring:

As the voice moves through what it is talking about – trying to lay out, acknowledge, organize 'the material' – it needs dependent clauses, interjections, unfinished phrases, sometimes whole sentences in apposition. The only way I can sufficiently *articulate* this movement, express the relative weight and importance of the parts of the sentence – so that the reader knows where he or she is and the 'weight' the speaker is placing on the various elements that are being laid out – is punctuation. [...] Punctuation allows me to 'lay out' the *bones* of a sentence visually, spatially, so that the reader can see the pauses, emphases, urgencies, and languors in the voice.¹⁵

In the case of 'Herbert White,' Bidart not only uses punctuation to make the character's voice clear, but also to display what is said by what is *not* being said: Herbert White's inability to confront memories that reveal reality and responsibility.¹⁶

Punctuation is used to end speech and cease the thoughts of the speaker before self-realisation and reflection can materialise. When faced with remembering his involvement in the murder and rape of a girl, White says:

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

---You see, ever since I was a kid I wanted [...]¹⁷

¹⁴ *One Kind of Everything: Poems and Person in Contemporary America*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), p. 82.

¹⁵ 'An Interview --- With Mark Halliday (1983),' p. 233.

¹⁶ Alan Williamson, 'From 'History Has to Live with What Was Here,' *On Frank Bidart*, eds. Liam Rector and Tree Swenson, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007), p. 101.

Bidart impassively recounts this grisly scene and then truncates it in favour of another memory further back in White's history. Had Bidart continued the scene after 'garden of the motel,' White would have been forced to reckon with his responsibility for the violent act. Repeated use of punctuation to repel the speaker from what he does not want to know creates insulated packets of uneasy memories.

Within these memory packets are what we might consider disordered collections of stanzas or stanza 'families.' These families share a plot and tend to be surrounded by distinctive amounts of white space and punctuation designed to demarcate grand pauses. Bidart opts to separate said stanza sections with ellipsis marks. These marks not only indicate an ending to a story, but also indicate that White has reached an emotional threshold within the narrative. Threshold reached, Bidart causes White's speech to trail off through the use of ellipsis before beginning anew. As with dashes, the frequent use of ellipsis marks becomes a defining mechanical feature of future poems by Bidart, distinctively inflecting the reading of his poems.

The initial use of ellipsis marks in verse occurred in the sixteenth century: 'as a manifestation of the imperfections of the voice: the omissions, pauses, and interruptions fundamental to spoken language.'¹⁸ The same could be said about the use of dashes. By the nineteenth century, though, 'clear distinctions began to be made between the marks. The dash, or continuous rule, had become the most common of the symbols, signalling abrupt changes in or breaks in points, whereas points began to imply a longer, more hesitant pause.'¹⁹ Consequently, the use of ellipsis in 'Herbert White' creates a noticeable length of silence, perhaps even uncomfortably, given that the points occur before stanza breaks, which increases the pause further.

¹⁷ 'Herbert White,' p. 4, ll. 35-40.

¹⁸ J.A. Cuddon, *Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*, 4th edn, rev. by C.E. Preston, (London: Penguin Books, 1999), p. 256.

¹⁹ *Ibid* 256

Of silence, Allen Grossman writes, ‘Some of the meanings of silence are: noise, darkness, possibility, death, ‘woman,’ chaos, ineffability, unconscious life, sin, the curse of God.’²⁰ Many of these interpretations apply to the white space in the poem: Bidart avoids the noise of speech needed to convey a memory that White is uncomfortable with, the darkness of the woods and time of day in which White operates, the possibility that White committed murders during a time when he has convinced himself that he has not contributed to death of the victims, the woman represented by the victims and his mother, and the chaos of his reality, etc. White cannot cope with reality while being aware of memories that cause anxiety or were triggers for dissociation.

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

standing above her there,
in those ordinary, shitty leaves . . .

--One time, I went to see Dad in a motel where he was
staying with a woman; but she was gone²¹

The need White experiences is evident in the acts he remembers (i.e. masturbation) and Bidart draws attention to the position of the corpse in the white space between lines twenty-four and twenty-five. It is just ‘there’ and yet the gravity imposed by the white space indicates the body is something White briefly finds beautiful.²² The ‘ordinary, shitty leaves’ bring White closer to self-revelation as indicated by the manner in which Bidart follows it with ellipsis marks. The ellipsis occurs and White recalls a scene with his father, advancing the poem from the ‘ugly’ to familial comfort.

²⁰ Allen Grossman and Mark Halliday, *The Sighted Singer: Two Works on Poetry for Readers and Writers*, (London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), p. 251.

²¹ ‘Herbert White,’ pp. 3-4, ll. 24-27.

²² ‘Herbert White,’ p. 3, ll. 21 & 24.

Chronology is not static or always known. Through using ellipsis, Bidart works to create these ungrounded moments; there are only abstract time markers that place White in a ‘when.’ Designing moments instead of plot serves as a rejection of the ‘process’ his predecessor and mentor Robert Lowell had employed in the chronological events of *Life Studies*.²³ To Bidart, streamlined and logical does not necessarily mean more ‘effective.’²⁴ White is ultimately savage; it is therefore logical for the ordering of events to be illogical and disordered. Such a finding complements Bidart’s assertion that White represents the ‘chaos [that] everything else in the book struggles to get out of.’²⁵ The result is the ability to access a killer’s mind in manic bursts without being grounded in certain details: how many victims are there in the poem? Where do these events occur in White’s life? From what point in his life does White speak now? The fragmentation of events also divulges how White maintains the ability to live and cope in a fragmented, dual existence.

We know that White is married with children, he can drive, and he was in a position where he could safely bury a corpse in the garden of a motel without legal repercussions. Bidart combines orienting details with those that build upon White’s neurosis. The reader is grounded but just barely; the merger between concrete and phantasmagorical does not occur seamlessly. Rather, time plays out as jagged and convulsive. Scenes separated by white space and ellipsis marks are fragmented thoughts constructed with irregular use of dashes. Used to create a sense of cadence or syncopation of speech, the unorthodox use of the dash has become something one can expect in a poem by Bidart.²⁶

Robert Fast refers to these types of fragments within the dramatic monologue as ‘digressions’ and were used by the Victorians as a way to ‘actualize the process of memory.’ He notes such poems as Browning’s ‘Count Gismond’ and Buchanan’s ‘Nell’ exhibited this

²³ ‘An Interview --- With Mark Halliday (1983),’ p. 238.

²⁴ Lloyd Schwartz, ‘Frank Bidart and Punctuation,’ *On Frank Bidart: Fastening the Voice to the Page*, eds. Liam Rector and Tree Swenson, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007), pp. 31-37 (p. 34).

²⁵ ‘An Interview --- With Mark Halliday (1983),’ p. 238.

²⁶ Schwartz, p. 32.

method, but one of the most notable of poems to use it was D.G. Rosetti's 'A Last Confession,' whose speaker, like Herbert White, is guilty of a murder he does not wish to truly admit.²⁷ Herbert White, however, speaks to his unknown auditor in digressions that are far more fragmented than the Victorians. Where Rosetti's speaker is aware but reluctant to admit guilt, White's mind and illness work against him so that he cannot. The punctuation tends to serve as a blockade against revelation where normal punctuation, like simplistic comma usage, would fail to produce the necessary aural rhythms to convey everyday speech as uttered by a psychopath.

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

“When I hit her on the head, it was good,
and then I did it to her a couple of times, ---
but it was funny, --- afterwards,²⁸

The heightened emphasis on death and murder as comedy infuses White's character with informal speech and the absurdity of his reality. This notion is confirmed in the next aside created by dashes: '--- It sounds crazy, but I tell you | sometimes it was *beautiful*---';²⁹ Silence precedes the start of this line, and also stanza, and confirms the dichotomy of the poem: the halves of Herbert White; ordinary husband and son as one persona, the psychopathic villain as the other. The body these halves inhabit struggles to make themselves understood.

²⁷ Faas, *Retreat into the Mind: Victorian Poetry and the Rise of Psychiatry*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), pp. 158 ;
D.G. Rosetti, 'A Last Confession,' *The Complete Writings and Pictures of Dante Gabriel Rosetti: A Hypermedia Archive*, < <http://www.rossettearchive.org/docs/1-1881.1stedn.rad.html#A.R.16> > [accessed October 7, 2014].

²⁸ 'Herbert White,' p. 3, ll. 1-3.

²⁹ 'Herbert White,' p. 3, ll. 15-16.

Bidart also used the dash to signal irregular movement through time within a scene.

Such a scene occurs toward the end of the poem when White's reality starts to unravel. Bidart positions White in his truck, fighting with himself over his desire to abduct a girl:

I saw her coming out of the movies
saw she was alone, and
kept circling the blocks as she walked along them,
saying, "You're going to leave her alone."
'You're going to leave her alone.'³⁰

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

---The woods were scary!³¹

The temporality of the poem becomes elusive, the white space and dash serving as a vessel where unknown time and action are hidden. In lines one hundred six and one hundred seven, White makes mention of the soil eroding to the point that the skull of a victim becomes visible. With the lines 'you saw more and more | of the skull show through,' Bidart is signalling that the poem has made a temporal progression but the exact 'when' is unclear. The victim has changed from walking down the sidewalk to bone, if indeed the skeleton is the same person. Bidart then returns to using the dash to create a concrete, descriptive aside,³² this time of the skeleton only to return to using the dash to advance time again: 'and the buds, ---erect like nipples. . .'³³ Bidart described the poem as 'chaos,' and in this sense, the plural nature of the use of the dash, unlike the consistent use of ellipsis marks (up to this point), augments the sense of urgency and impending destruction on the reality that White faces. We're propelled forward to an undisclosed point in time where 'nothing *worked*,' signalling an impending deviation within the pattern of White's psychosis.³⁴ Rather than undergo dissociation where a second personality overrides his responsible, everyday persona, 'nothing

³⁰ 'Herbert White,' p. 6, ll. 101-105.

³¹ 'Herbert White,' p. 6, ll. 106.

³² 'Herbert White,' p. 7, ll. 109.

³³ 'Herbert White,' p. 7, ll. 109.

³⁴ 'Herbert White,' p. 7, ll. 111.

worked' becomes the promise of a coherent breakdown where the speaker cannot escape the weight of his actions. 'Nothing' functions as the antithesis of the word's definition: a near concrete boundary or container. Within the vortex of 'nothing' is all of the 'somethings' that White needs to separate himself from. When the 'nothing' fails, all of the horrific 'somethings' come spilling out, which is what occurs shortly thereafter in line one hundred seventeen.

Bidart follows 'nothing worked' with ellipsis marks, as if the pattern of escaping what the speaker does not wish to realise is still trying to assert itself. He uses them to separate descriptive elements in the same way that he had previously used dashes. Punctuation usurps the function of '*nothing*' where all of White's lost memories reside; they are desultory as White's current ability to mentally withdraw from his surroundings and actions. Bidart buries the 'nothing' between white space and ellipsis marks. All that can be assumed that the current time is newer than all previous scenes, second only to the time that White as a narrator exists in. Time is now situated in words as there is no relying on punctuation to use as an escape; dissociation from that which makes White uncomfortable and unstable is not possible.

The '*nothing*' fails a second time in lines one hundred twelve, a reattempt by the speaker to reaffirm the pattern of doing and forgetting. It is cut off from the 'blur' found in one hundred thirteen with a line break; 'blur' being the word used to describe White's dissociative experiences. Here Bidart is using increased amounts of white space to slow the pace down. A heavy sense of dread enfolds White and 'couldn't' is repeated and emphasised as if the word could stop realisation now that 'nothing' has been obliterated.³⁵ The meaning of 'couldn't' is unclear, making time equally unstable. A conflict arises here between reading with respect to the stanza and reading with respect to punctuation. Given that Bidart divides

³⁵ 'Herbert White,' p. 7, ll. 114.

the sentence into two stanzas, one cannot necessarily trust in the authority of the period. If ‘couldn’t’ is paired off with just the two preceding lines that join it in the stanza, then ‘couldn’t’ indicates that White cannot bear to realise what he has done. If paired off with the next stanza, ‘couldn’t’ means that dissociating has failed. Given the organisation of the stanzas, it could be argued that a double-meaning of ‘couldn’t’ is the desired interpretation. The concept of ‘the double’ is already rampant within the poem; double meanings of words created through physical arrangement are equally plausible.

The final failure of the mental wall that separates the mentally bearable and unbearable occurs in line one hundred sixteen. This ellipsis contains the final three beats of White’s fantasy reality. Then a stanza break creates a silence. If silence could be loud, it would be here, where the ‘nothing’ really becomes nothing in terms of a barrier. The ellipsis, then, acts as a gateway forward to realisation rather than the backward motion that typified the ellipsis usage previously. The altering of the function of this punctuation, even if for one instance, when punctuation has proven to be equated with Bidart’s method of revealing a mental state then indicates that there is no simple concept of self or identity within ‘Herbert White.’

The final section of poem is a tumble of single lines that reflect Grossman’s position that ‘the line as lineament is the countenance of the person.’³⁶ Uniform alignment sheds itself from the spine of the poem; White has finally come undone:

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

You’re . . .

just you.’

I hope I fry.

---Hell came when I saw

MYSELF . . .

³⁶ Grossman and Halliday, p. 315.

what I see . . .³⁷

and couldn't stand

The ellipsis marks in lines one hundred twenty and one hundred twenty-four are like pregnant pauses for air as Bidart seems to make White review what he really is. They are preceded by 'you're' and 'MYSELF,' words that direct attention outward and then inward in relation to the speaker and yet, they represent the same being. White becomes aware of his other and the two fuse into a single, conscious entity ending with the final use of ellipsis at the poem's end.

The one-line stanza 'I hope I fry' is positioned in the centre of this fusing and is the only perfectly centred line in the entirety of the poem.³⁸ The white space around this proclamation is filled with what doesn't need to be said, or what John Frederick Nims calls the 'withheld image.'³⁹ The reader has already witnessed what White was unconscious of. The special treatment of the line's position replaces White's earlier desire: 'to *feel* things make sense.'⁴⁰ If the centring of the line is unique within the confines of the rest of the poem, the punctuation is not. Bidart's use of dashes, semi-colons, and ellipsis indicate fragmentation of self and utterance indicative a mind in disarray. The period offers no such movement of consciousness or trains of thought that occur. Bidart uses a period which leaves no room for equivocation; 'I hope I fry' is a firm proclamation and self-admission of guilt that will not offer solace or escape.⁴¹

³⁷ 'Herbert White,' p. 7, ll. 117-126.

³⁸ 'Herbert White,' p. 7, ll. 122.

³⁹ *Western Wind: an Introduction to Poetry*, 2nd edn, (New York: Random House, Inc., 1983), p. 83.

⁴⁰ 'Herbert White,' p. 4, ll. 41.

⁴¹ Ibid 32

II. The Voice of Herbert White: Use of the Everyday and Prophetic Speech Genres

If punctuation and white space exhibit the nothing that White experiences when he dissociates then semantics, like the use of profanity, are Bidart's attempt to translate unusual physical feeling into words. Jeffrey Gray writes that poetry in the last half of the twentieth century aspired 'to achieve a homely flatness through plain diction and declarative sentence structure, and where affective locution is duplicitously underplayed in order to produce heightened affect in the reader.'⁴² But Bidart's language lives in spaces of loud abstraction, fragments of thought and punctuation that reduce breath to gasps; language that Gray says, '[flies] in the face of all poetry-workshop wisdom about being concrete, avoiding abstraction.'⁴³ Robert von Hallberg reasons that 'Bidart is out to find the common ground between the literary and the supermarket culture. He is trying to draw instruction from the sort of story that the tabloid would simply capitalise upon, and for poets the lessons are in the words.'⁴⁴ In the case of 'Herbert White,' Bidart employs 'supermarket culture' speech to aid in a sort of psychological analysis; a poetic long practiced by other poets like Wordsworth, Coleridge, Emerson, and Frost.⁴⁵ Often their poems were held together 'by the voice'⁴⁶ and 'a natural and appropriate use of carefully selected phrases and sentences possessing the rich and homely idiom speech patterns.'⁴⁷ Frost, specifically, adopted a speech pattern that was 'down-to-earth,' 'unaffected' and like the type of speech used in rural America.⁴⁸

⁴² "'Necessary Thought": Frank Bidart and the Postconfessional,' *Contemporary Literature*, 34: 4 (Winter, 1993), 714-739 (p. 719).

⁴³ Ibid 720

⁴⁴ *American Poetry and Culture 1945-1980*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985), p. 193.

⁴⁵ Lawrence Thompson, *Fire and Ice: The Art and Thought of Robert Frost*, (New York: Russell & Russell Inc., 1961), pp. 44-45.

⁴⁶ Robert Frost, *The Notebooks of Robert Frost*, ed. by Robert Faggen, (London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006), p. 133.

⁴⁷ Thompson, p. 46.

⁴⁸ Ibid 46

Bidart draws upon speech pattern cues from predecessors like Frost and amplifies the rhythms of his characters so they straddle either side of the average American dialect. Bidart slips between the speech of the ‘everyday’ and the ‘prophetic;’ the voices where White is at ease, exhibiting anxiety, and that which says urges change.⁴⁹ The speaker’s fluctuation in tone echoes the fluctuation in mental state and a failure to communicate within the scope of a single personality. These ‘tonal juxtapositions’ are, as Bahktin describes, a ‘transfer of one style from one [speech] genre to another’ which ‘not only alters the way a style sounds, under conditions of a genre unnatural to it but also violates or reviews the given genre.’⁵⁰ Such surprising and disturbing shifts were commonly found in Lowell’s work.⁵¹

‘White’ opens with the use of prophetic, Biblical speech from Genesis 1:10; a much loftier sounding speech than that found in grocery store gossip magazines. Bidart pairs the ‘it was good’ with the violence of murder. The poem has started but the reader is not ‘at home’ in it because the line is not at home with itself, it resides in two opposing realms of locution.⁵² The dialect of the second line, however, is uniform and an uneasy ‘settling in’ develops. The prophetic voice is gone and Bidart transmutes the produced friction between each of the halves of line one into something easy going and relaxed. The ‘at home’ in line two, then, comes not from the disparate tones in words, but through the voice conveying a tone that matches the kind normally associated with White’s violent action. White hits his victim ‘a couple of times, ----,’ and views said actions as ‘funny.’⁵³ Bidart uses this quirky, loose language as a sort-of anaesthetic. White is at ease with himself through most of this fragmented retrospection. A Herbert White without agitation means that he can hold together the illusion that ‘somebody else’ carried out the murder.⁵⁴ White is therefore able to envision

⁴⁹ Halpern,, pp. 4-5 & 19.

⁵⁰ Halpern, p. 75.

⁵¹ Halpern, p. 76.

⁵² Ibid 76

⁵³ ‘Herbert White,’ p. 3, ll. 2-3.

⁵⁴ ‘Herbert White,’ p. 3, ll. 4.

himself as upstanding and sane. While a reader will not forget that White is responsible, they can at least step-back from the horror and have a buffer between their reading and the ‘sharpness’ and finality of killing.⁵⁵

Bidart returns to his unsettling use of the prophetic at a number of other points. ‘*The salt of the earth*’⁵⁶ is drawn from Matthew 5:13: ‘You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled underfoot.’ Bidart references this passage three times. The first instance stands alone, the second accompanies ‘man’s spunk’⁵⁷ and the third builds upon the second instance by adding ‘and grows kids.’⁵⁸ The passage takes on an additive nature and Bidart seems to answer this biblical question. Semen re-salts what was lost and when that happens, life grows out of it. These actions ‘make it | somehow come alive ...’⁵⁹ Bidart is not referring to the resurrection of the dead girls, but something that is dead within White, something that elevates White above being ‘no longer good for anything.’ The pairing of the ‘salt of the earth’ with vulgarity becomes the exact kind of genre combination to make White’s speech come alive. Without it, White can only describe sexual violation of the dead as ‘beautiful’⁶⁰ though really, he doesn’t ‘know how | to say it.’⁶¹ The profane additions to the verse are quotes from White’s mother, a representation of a force that can grow life in a manner that White cannot. White must pervert an already perverted concept in attempt to mimic what this nurturing force is capable of. He is not the grower of life so much as containing the catalyst, the semen from which his idea of ‘alive’ can blossom. The

⁵⁵ ‘Herbert White,’ p. 3, ll. 5.

⁵⁶ ‘Herbert White,’ p. 4, ll. 51.

⁵⁷ ‘Herbert White,’ p. 4, ll. 52.

⁵⁸ ‘Herbert White,’ p. 5, ll. 75.

⁵⁹ ‘Herbert White,’ p. 4, ll. 49-50.

⁶⁰ ‘Herbert White,’ p. 3, ll. 16.

⁶¹ ‘Herbert White,’ p. 3, ll. 16-17.

informality of ‘spunk’ and the prophetic tone and implications of ‘salt’ endure the type of war with each other that Halpern says exists between the prophetic and everyday speech genres.⁶²

A war of tonalities might qualify as a more developed version of the ‘cinematic’ language Chiasson observes in Bidart’s early collegiate poems.⁶³ The casual tone paired with the violent actions creates the impression of one sitting in a movie theatre watching a physical comedy with White. The victim’s demise can be laughed at; her death appearing as a clownish misfortune. The cinematic language ceases its comedic tone and takes on a more horror movie quality when White exchanges one type of violence for another: physical violence for sexual violence. We revisit the word ‘hit’ but this time, it is paired with ‘screwed,’ a chanted line that creates a trailing-off effect without the use of ellipsis. This heightens the impersonality behind dismissal of the victim by the singled out word ‘buried.’⁶⁴ The language treats the victim as a camera might: a prop for the perpetrator.

Halpern suggests that the cinematic might also be regarded as the ‘everyday’⁶⁵ and seems to agree with Robert Pinsky’s assertion that Bidart is a prime example of a poet whose poetry ‘bases itself so genuinely on the writer’s way of speaking.’⁶⁶ But in ‘Herbert White,’ Bidart adopts another way of speaking. Everyday speech is evident in a voice that is largely not Bidart’s. White’s idea of the normal and everyday include the profane and abnormally violent, types of language not found in the bulk of Bidart’s other poetry. It is the type of voice that Halpern describes as speech that says, ‘Blouaugh!’ and ‘groping to bed after a piss.’⁶⁷ Bidart’s use of the vulgarity of the everyday is indicative of periods when White’s façade gives way. The first use of ‘shit’ is used to dismiss and devalue one of White’s victims where he is:

⁶² *Everyday and Prophetic*, p. 5.

⁶³ *One Kind of Everything*, p. 79.

⁶⁴ ‘Herbert White,’ p. 4, ll. 36-39.

⁶⁵ *Everyday and Prophetic*, p. 19.

⁶⁶ Halpern, p. 36.

⁶⁷ Halpern, p. 19.

standing above her there,
in those ordinary, shitty leaves....⁶⁸

White is heavily focused on the leaves, something shared between perpetrator and victim. ‘Shitty’ heightens the connection, the sense of ‘leaves’ - a notably unexciting word. Bidart does here what many of his predecessors did with their work: ‘make readers feel that lowered voices are more exciting than elevated voices’ and use ‘subversive humor.’⁶⁹ Such humour becomes evident when White references his mother and half-siblings:

all he hadn’t done ---; but, What the shit?
Who would have wanted to stay with Mom? with bastards
not even his own kids?⁷⁰

‘What the shit’ serves as a comical exclamation and interruption of the description of his parents’ divorce. In this scene, White’s father is the broken one and White attempts to soothe him. Bidart, then, uses this interruption to call attention to an unnatural scene: the parents needing emotional support from the child instead of the other way around. Thus, Bidart uses a fictional family drama to represent how a person with White’s ascribed diagnosis might originate: in the conflicting drives and needs between a parent and child.

The pressure of this scene causes a psychotic break in White, who picks up a girl and after he kills her, he ‘screwed, and screwed, and screwed, and screwed...’⁷¹ This pushes the vividness of the cinematic and everyday language to an excess. White’s speech is the cinematic and everyday with edginess, a joining of high and low speeches. If White’s casualness can be somewhat likened to speech rhythms employed by poets like Frost, then ‘the very limitations of a small vocabulary and of expressiveness in folk speech force the speaker,’ in this case White, ‘into direct statements shaded by those tones of voice which

⁶⁸ ‘Herbert White,’ p. 3, ll. 24-25.

⁶⁹ Halpern, p. 19.

⁷⁰ ‘Herbert White,’ p. 4, ll. 31-33.

⁷¹ ‘Herbert White,’ p. 4, ll. 37.

convey peculiar intensity of emotion and thought.’⁷² However, while Frost’s language remains ‘deliberately restrained and relaxed,’ Bidart engages ‘White’ with the crude.⁷³ The language used:

has got to be a little shocking in this context and that’s central. A more decorous word would not suggest the joining of high and low, that we’re creatures who are interested both in crotches and harmonies. Language has to embody the fact that a smooth and harmonious set of orders does not lead from one to the other. I think probably the only longish poem I have written that is almost wholly in the demotic is ‘Hebert White.’ I carried that as far as I could go.⁷⁴

The product, then, is the type of person who can behave in society as a man with an ‘old lady and kids,’ but by himself, think and behave like the kind of man that deserves to ‘fry.’⁷⁵

Bidart’s use of pulling together demotic language into a single poem might also be seen in the development of the Confessionals; namely, the movement of language from the imagination to the personal. If one samples and combined the early and late poems of a poet like Lowell, the result might be equally as shocking and intriguing as what Bidart accomplishes in ‘Herbert White.’

⁷² Thompson, p. 47.

⁷³ Thompson, p. 48.

⁷⁴ Rathmann & Allen, pp. 73-74.

⁷⁵ ‘Herbert White,’ pp. 3 & 7, ll. 7 & 124.

III. White as Freudian Praxis

The recognition of reality results in Herbert White fusing the partitioned sections of his mind: killer with son and husband, comforter with the uncomforted and inconsolable. Before the climax of the poem, White is only somewhat aware of the other aspect of his psyche. This differs entirely from the Confessional movement, where the poet, in the telling of their subjective experiences, is entirely conscious of what his or her speakers are laying out for the reader.⁷⁶ Poets like Lowell and Plath were aficionados of Freudian theory. Plath's poems consistently drew on concepts like the family romance, the 'dreamed life,' and the pleasure-unpleasure principle.⁷⁷ Of Lowell, Alan Williamson writes that Lowell was the 'first poet to take an explicitly psychoanalytic view of his own history.'⁷⁸

Of Bidart's use of Freud, Helen Vendler says that 'Freud was Bidart's original mentor in this anatomy of "reality," with reality, like charity, beginning at home.'⁷⁹ This is one of the reasons why Freudian theory has been chosen as a method to read 'Herbert White' over other arenas of psychiatric and philosophical thought. Bidart not only had exposure to the use of Freud in poetry through his studies with Lowell, but by the time Bidart wrote 'Herbert White,' he had already read Binswanger's 'The Case of Ellen West: An Anthropological-Clinical Study.'⁸⁰ Binswanger and Freud mutually admired each other work and exchanged

⁷⁶ Laurence Lerner, 'What is Confessional Poetry,' in *Critical Quarterly*, 29:2 (1987), 44-66 (p. 64).

⁷⁷ Christina Britzolakis, 'Dreamwork: Sylvia Plath's Cold War Modernism,' in *Women: A Cultural Review*, 24:4 (2013), 263-273;

Anthony Manoussos, "'Falling Asleep over the Aeneid": Lowell, Freud, and the Classics,' *Comparative Literature Studies*, 21:1 (1894), pp.17-18 ;

Alan Williamson, *Introspection and Contemporary Poetry*, (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1984), pp. 3 & 45-46

⁷⁸ 'Frank Bidart,' Poets.org, < <http://www.poets.org/poet.php/prmPID/162> > [accessed November 13, 2015].

⁷⁹ Helen Vendler, 'From "Imagination Pressing Back,"' in *On Frank Bidart: Fastening the Voice to the Page*, eds. Liam Rector and Tree Swenson, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007), pp. 135-140 (p. 138).

⁸⁰ Frank Bidart, 'Writing "Ellen West,"' in *Metaphysical Dog*, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013), pp. 4-10 (p. 4, ll. 5).

letters for thirty years.⁸¹ It is entirely plausible, as Vendler argues, that Freud's work had an impact on Bidart which then surfaced in his work.

One motif in 'Herbert White' involves the withholding of memory from the created self which then contorts the speaker's identity. The concepts of the conscious versus unconscious, memory as defence are very much involved in Freud's works. The Confessionals applied these themes to their personal narratives but Bidart is different because he applies them to an 'other.' 'White' contains elements of Freud's ideas even though the poem is not a practice in psychoanalysis. Shoshana Felman writes that, 'To account for poetry in psychoanalytical terms has traditionally meant to analyse poetry as a symptom of a particular poet.'⁸² But there is a 'danger,' T.S. Eliot writes, in 'excessive reliance upon causal explanation [...] especially when the biographer supplements his knowledge of external facts with psychological conjectures about inner experience.'⁸³ This dissertation forgoes such speculation in regards to the author but does argue that the text exhibits Freudian themes that play out in the development of the speaker. Freudian themes provide Bidart with a platform on which he can play out the drama between the compartments of a disturbed mind.

Some literary critics like Harold Bloom argue that these compartments would be a representative of a poet's 'defense.'⁸⁴ But in 'Herbert White,' the speaker has been provided with a defence system that functions as a method of revelation rather than symptom and explication of Bidart's 'poetic will.'⁸⁵ When White separates a portion of his consciousness from the totality of his mind, he is allowed an escape from feelings and actions that he would rather not face. Bidart allows for his speaker to live in a created reality rather than subject the

⁸¹ *The Sigmund Freud – Ludwig Binswanger Correspondence 1908-1938*, ed. Gerhard Fichtner, trans. Arnold J. Pomerans, (London: Open Gate Press, 2003).

⁸² 'On Reading Poetry: Reflections on the Limits and Possibilities of Psychoanalytical Approaches,' *The Literary Freud: Mechanisms of Defense and the Poetic Will*, ed. Joseph H. Smith, M.D., (London: Yale University Press, 1980), pp. 119

⁸³ *On Poets and Poetry*, (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1956), p. 111.

⁸⁴ 'Freud's Concepts of Defense and the Poetic Will,' in *The Literary Freud: Mechanisms of Defense and the Poetic Will*, ed. Joseph H. Smith, M.D., (London: Yale University Press, 1980), pp. 1-28 (p. 1-8).

⁸⁵ Bloom, *The Literary Freud*, p. 2.

speaker to a reality that he cannot control. This provides for a different kind of dramatic situation than that found within a confessional poem where the setting is largely based on the real.

What Bidart has done is construct a character that draws on elements of Freud's theories concerning the manner in which a mind in crisis behaves: most notably, that of repression.⁸⁶ But Bidart does not only have White repress these memories, he creates another personality within White entirely; a personality that is governed by the Freudian idea of the id. It is White's id that drives the character to seek out and commit murder and necrophilia and it is White's ego that enables White to forget his actions or delude himself into thinking 'someone else did it.'⁸⁷ White's main consciousness which narrates the poem and his voice, as should any voice of 'poetic manifestation,' should be the 'invisible but truth-bearing portrait of a person' says Grossman.⁸⁸ But Bidart includes an aspect of White that seeks to avoid mental distress and reason away culpability.⁸⁹ White's ego is untruthful with itself until the culmination of the poem. The poem's truth often resides in the white space where Bidart relies on the 'withheld image.'⁹⁰

To arrive at the ending's truth, Bidart employs the Freudian pleasure-unpleasure principle, which dictates that the ego attempts to force the id to function in reality rather than in pleasure.⁹¹ There exists a Herbert White that has a family and is able to serve as emotional support when needed (at least for a brief amount of time). Bidart creates a character in White

⁸⁶ *The Freud Reader*, pp. 17-18, Study Freud conducted on 'nervous disorders' using hypnotism; helped him develop his 'theory of repression.'

⁸⁷ 'Herbert White,' p. 5, ll. 61.

⁸⁸ *The Sighted Singer*, p. 79.

⁸⁹ *The Freud Reader*, p. 630, The ego is 'the idea that in each individual there is a coherent organization of mental processes; and we call this his *ego*. It is to this ego that consciousness is attached; the ego controls the approaches to motility – that is, to the discharge of excitations into the external world; it is the mental agency which supervises all its own constituent processes [...] From this ego proceeds the repressions, too, by means of which it is sought to exclude certain trends in the mind not merely from consciousness but also from other forms of effectiveness and activity.'

⁹⁰ Nims, p. 83.

⁹¹ *The Freud Reader*, p. 636, 'For the ego, perceptions plays the part which in the id fails to instinct. The ego represents what may be called reason and common sense, in contrast to the id, which contains the passions.'

that seeks to function contrary to this principle until the culmination of the poem. White spends the duration of the poem endeavouring to escape the anxiety and the moral judgment against the ‘someone else’ that has committed these crimes, all the while, satisfying the id’s unconscious desires.⁹² That is to say, Bidart creates fragmented memories that depict White escaping the influence of the super-ego in order to preserve a peace of mind and self-definition as a person moral enough not to behave as a ‘bastard.’⁹³ White’s need to ‘*feel things make sense,*’ causing an entirely different identity to emerge as White’s formerly dominant personality lacks the ability to fill that desire.⁹⁴

The new identity, however, arises not only from White’s perversities but from a need to escape anxieties developed during childhood. Charles Brenner explains that Freudian, ‘repression and other defences appear in childhood as a result of conflict.’ The crucial conflict occurs not in the poem’s most detailed childhood memory concerning the goat but in the memories of White’s parents and what they ‘wouldn’t give me.’⁹⁵ Bidart, then, suggests that the dual natures of White form from multiple stressors. These anxiety-ridden childhood relationships contribute to the development of abnormal defences perhaps just as much as the mind’s need to appease the super-ego and id synchronously. White’s entropic emotional state requires two egos to make sense of his emotional perceptions and establish a working equilibrium.

Bidart initially introduces the reader to the warped aspect of White and his super-ego in the first line through the quotation of Genesis.⁹⁶ White’s act of violence is referred to as

⁹² *The Freud Reader*, pp. 37, 775-777; 1) Freud deduced that ‘the domination of the *pleasure-unpleasure principle* in mental life and to its displacement by what is called the *reality principle*.’ 2) ‘The super-ego is the heir of the Oedipus complex and represents the ethical standards of mankind.’ 3) On a study concerning anxiety: ‘the generation of anxiety is the earlier and the formation of the symptoms the later of the two, as though the symptoms are created in order to avoid the outbreak of the anxiety state.’ 4) ‘The ego is the sole seat of anxiety – that the ego alone can produce and feel anxiety.’ 5) The ego has ‘three dependent relations – to the external world, to the id, and to the super-ego.’

⁹³ ‘Herbert White,’ p. 5, ll. 61.

⁹⁴ ‘Herbert White,’ p. 4, ll. 41.

⁹⁵ ‘Herbert White,’ p. 6, ll. 91.

⁹⁶ Genesis 1: 4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31

‘good’ as the Judeo-Christian god refers to ‘light,’ ‘dark,’ ‘land,’ ‘water,’ plant life, and animals – the entirety of the world it created – as ‘good.’⁹⁷ Von Hallberg writes that the use of the Bible ends up ‘provid[ing] rich answers to two questions. What can a homicidal necrophiliac know of morality? What can a poet make of the most debased imaginative material in America in 1973?’⁹⁸ Bidart’s answer to the former question is found in the speaker’s judgment of himself. White’s perception that his creation is ‘good’ and therefore he himself is good.⁹⁹

To maintain a sense of mental balance, White’s reality sheds large portions of his memories that would confront and challenge the validity of the moral character White seems to think he possesses. A two-fold reality then emerges: one the reader can see and one White experiences. The latter reality is devoid of any thoughts or memories that White cannot mentally manage. Therefore, Bidart’s homicidal necrophiliac can know much about morality; however, his ego must exclude the actions and thoughts of the id from the critique.

In line ninety eight, Bidart shifts the casual tone to an anxious one as White tries to warn himself away from a future victim.

I kept thinking about getting a girl,
and the more I thought I shouldn’t do it,
the more I had to ---¹⁰⁰

White repeats the warning as a mantra and Bidart pens in a dash, which is a signal that Bidart is transferring White to another scene. In the truck, White knows what will inevitably occur because the super-ego is starting to push on the id. The transfer in time and position indicates two possible outcomes. On one hand, the progression from the truck to the woods in line one hundred five indicates White has dissociated, his id becoming dominant and one with the ego and realizing a type of pleasure disdainful to the super-ego. Another possibility, or perhaps an

⁹⁷ ‘Herbert White,’ p. 3, ll. 1.

⁹⁸ *American Poetry and Culture, 1945-1980*, p. 192.

⁹⁹ ‘Herbert White,’ p. 3, ll. 1.

¹⁰⁰ ‘Herbert White,’ p. 6, ll. 97-100.

interpretation that creates a dual occurrence, is that White's ego is aware, but the act of remembering what he is fully aware of is too much to bear. Bidart has White flee from the memory as a coping mechanism. Bidart returns to the theory of the pleasure-unpleasure principle as a catalyst for ungrounding the reader from time.

The failing of the super-ego to the influence of the id means that morality's boundaries are permeable. Bidart wages a debate on the ethical and psychological in first and second lines of 'White.' Read as a whole, the first line is a perversion of religious, and thus, in many cases, moral text. But if the first line is divided ('When I hit her on the head' versus 'it was good'), the line is evidence of a clear partition in the psyche of the speaker, one that is tormented and at odds with himself (or selves). Bidart's section line is a repetition of the violence in the first half of the first line; or rather, it is show of the id's uncontrollable influence. The experiences the id puts in to motion are the answer to Von Hallberg's question on morality if interpreted from a relative standpoint.

The Freudian concept of the super-ego surfaces as an influence on White when he refers to the other that 'hurts a little girl' as a 'bastard.'¹⁰¹ Roman Lesmeister explains that Freud hypothesised that our morals emanate from a 'brute act of violence' and an 'extraordinarily destructive act [...] over the carcass of the dead father.'¹⁰² Bidart turns slightly away from the Freudian archetype established in previous parts of the poem. The super-ego is 'dependent' on 'aggression' and contributes to 'an endless cycle of murder.'¹⁰³ Bidart irrevocably breaks this cycle as once the poem ends, the limits of experience cease. When the poem ends, the speaker's actions and thoughts cease.

¹⁰¹ 'Herbert White,' p. 5, ll. 60-61.

¹⁰² 'The Super-ego, the Voice of the Self and the Depressive Position,' in *Journal of Analytical Psychology*, 43:2 (1998), 287-303 (p. 290).

¹⁰³ Lesmeister, pp. 290-291.

Freud's idea of the conscious awakening occurs in this way. He says that the, 'consciousness and self appear first in the form of a nonverbal narrative of feelings and images. Only later will consciousness and self also appear in the form of thoughts connected to memories and words.'¹¹¹ At the point that words would become capable of capturing the extent of White's acts, the poem has reached its limits. For the poem to succeed, Bidart compels his speaker to realise that he is the epitome of what that very character condemns.

The establishment of White's dual-personality coincides with the Freudian idea that, 'Neurotics turn away from reality because they find it unbearable – either whole or parts of it.'¹¹² The poem veers away from Freudian themes in the construction of a new identity. Bidart's apex is violent and sudden, where Freud argues that, 'the supercession of the pleasure principle by the reality principle [...] is not in fact accomplished all at once; nor does it take place simultaneously all along the line.'¹¹³ The personal poetry of the Confessionals adhered to this concept; the idea of that the "deep" self was, after all, expressed in a series of grand and haunted archetypal images. [...] It became possible to trace a moment of inner experience back through all the layers of the remembered, the imagined, and even the forgotten past.'¹¹⁴ The self in personal poetry was something to be built up over time, rather than erected and suddenly deconstructed.

'Herbert White' begins as a poem whose language is revealing a horrific id, and ends when id and consciousness collide. White then understands and 'couldn't stand what I see ...'¹¹⁵ The revelation becomes one of morality, instead of a display of psychology. Alan Grossman describes this revelation:

This discovery is a *moral* component because it is in effect an ethical function which carries the literary function – the immortality function – inside of it.

¹¹¹ 'The Ego and the Id Revisited Freud and Damasio on the Body Ego/Self,' *The International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 94:5 (2013), 1019-1032 (p. 1027).

¹¹² Freud, p. 301.

¹¹³ Freud, p. 303.

¹¹⁴ Williamson, *Introspection*, pp. 2-3

¹¹⁵ ll. 125-126

[...] It is the business of the moral person --- the business of consciousness within itself, [...] --- to discover the ethical implications of this moment of consciousness in relationship to the whole career of consciousness; or, stated another way, it is the business of the moral person [...] to discover the relationship between this moment of the story of *this* person and the whole of the story.¹¹⁶

In this closing moment of the poem, then, White is not only faced with the horror in front of him, but also the horror of all of the memories in the poem that he never completed explicating to the reader. The reader remains unaware concerning the ‘closure’ of each memory, but White is now forced to address these events that reside in the white space voids that are formed out of Bidart’s unusual use of the dramatic monologue. This takes us beyond the confessional use of ‘coded references’ to the arena of mental illness.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁶ *The Sighted Singer*, p. 218.

¹¹⁷ Michael Thurston, ‘Psychotherapy and Confessional Poetry,’ *The Cambridge Companion to Modern American Poetry*, ed. Walter Kalaidjian, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 143-154 (p. 144).

IV. Shared Histories

An arresting feature of ‘Herbert White’ resides in the actions and language which creates a character living in the present world, attempting to ‘*feel* things make sense.’¹¹⁸ In this case, the poem addresses William Carlos Williams’ idea of idea creation through observation. Bidart says:

His [Williams’] work is full of ideas full of ‘arguments with himself.’ [...] The drive to conceptualize, to understand our lives, is as fundamental and inevitable as any other need. So a poem must include it, make it part of its ‘action.’ The ideas that are articulated in the course of the action done ‘solve’ or eradicate or end it, if the drama is true enough or important enough, any more than they do in the action of our lives.¹¹⁹

One way of reading ‘Herbert White’ involves reading it as part of the overall conversation that takes place in *Golden Gate*.

The contexture of *Golden Gate* is highly purposeful, deviating from the type of book of poetry which contains poems organised chronologically and therefore very little in the way of ‘outside meaning’ That is to say, the poems in many modern books do not contribute to the unity of the collection or infer a sharing of common ground.¹²⁰ *Golden Gate* is divided into three sections, each containing strong thematic and linguistic similarities that link them. Such unity has been labelled as ‘retrospective patterning’ by Barbara Herrnstein Smith and the reader then, ‘perceives that seemingly gratuitous or random events, details and juxtapositions have been selected in accord with certain principles.’¹²¹ At first glance, *Golden State* appears to be the type of book with only a loose cohesion linking the poems; the character of Herbert White could not be further away from the earnest authenticity and passive anger of Bidart’s personal poems. But Jeffrey Gray accurately notes Bidart’s and White’s, ‘conflicts, their

¹¹⁸ ‘Herbert White,’ p. 7, ll. 41.

¹¹⁹ ‘An Interview --- With Mark Halliday (1983),’ p. 239.

¹²⁰ qtd. in *The Poem and the Book: Interpreting Collections of Romantic Poetry*, (London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1985), pp. 4 & 10-11.

¹²¹ qtd. in *The Poem and the Book*, p. 14.

reflections on those conflicts, and their locutions have much in common.¹²² The layering of their concurrent opposing and conjoined myth is what drives the unity of *Golden Gate*.

Herbert White appears in the first and last poems of the book. This provides a strong book-end effect for the book as well as ‘meaningful juxtapositions, contrasts, and continuities among the poems.’ A reader could as easily read the poems backwards as forwards.¹²³ As Neil Fraistat describes it, the poetry ‘book-rolls’ of Callimachus were the first to have what amounted to a prologue and epilogue.¹²⁴ Herbert White, as a character, then has a more important function within the book than the, ‘chaos [that] everything else in the book struggles to get out of’ when he is juxtaposed with Bidart’s personal poems.¹²⁵

Fraistat has observed that the first poem establishes our ‘initial expectations’ of the book.¹²⁶ ‘Herbert White’ is a dramatic monologue and on a surface level, severing Bidart’s relationship with the Confessionals. The majority of poems that follow, however, are largely personal in nature. The impression that develops is that the poet appearing as himself within the text occurs in degrees. Repeated lines and strong themes from ‘Herbert White’ surface in the personal poetry and the instinct is to say that Bidart is wearing a mask in ‘White’ or that Bidart is lending his autobiography to the poem. This is true enough; Bidart’s presence gives a sense of universality to the character that allows us to ‘recognize psychological features’ that might otherwise be inaccessible.¹²⁷ But because ‘White’ precedes the personal poetry of *Golden Gate*, it is not unreasonable to argue that the myth of ‘White’ also lends itself to the personal poetry so that the book is unified through Bidart’s approach to the revealing of identity.

¹²² “‘Necessary Thought,’” p.722.

¹²³ *Poem and the Book*, p. 7

¹²⁴ *Ibid* 7

¹²⁵ ‘An Interview --- With Mark Halliday (1983),’ p. 238.

¹²⁶ *Poem and the Book*, p. 14.

¹²⁷ Faas, p. 149.

To more thoroughly perceive White's identity, it is critical to determine what the poet and character share. One such shared feature involves a similar father figure. Bidart says, 'I was someone who has grown up obsessed with his parents. The drama of their lives dominated what, at the deepest level, *I* thought about.'¹²⁸ And while White represents a killer, he is still a character at the mercy of the traumas that can arise from kinship. The relationship, or lack of, that White shares with his mother and father proves to be a trigger of his psychosis. Confronting parental abandonment and relationship role-reversal becomes something too overwhelming for the character of White to withstand and maintain his mental health.

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

--- One time I went to see Dad in a motel where he was
staying with a woman, but she was gone;
you could smell the wine in the air, and he started,
really embarrassing, to cry ...

He was still a little drunk,
and asked me to forgive him for
all he hadn't done ---; but, What the shit?¹²⁹

White acts as the emotional support for a father abandoned by a female figure, placing unendurable emotional weight on White. Following the encounter, he has a psychotic break and the perverse, second personality emerges. It is common for those with dissociative disorder to encounter psychotic episodes after having come in contact with a 'trigger' (in this case, taking on the responsibility of parent when visiting his father).¹³⁰

¹²⁸ 'An Interview --- With Mark Halliday (1983),' p. 236.

¹²⁹ 'Herbert White,' p. 4, ll. 26-31.

¹³⁰ Mayo Clinic Staff, 'Dissociative Disorders,' *Mayo Clinic* < <http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/dissociative-disorders/DS00574> > [accessed on January 9, 2013].

It follows, then, that the manner or preceding history concerning *how* the emotional weight of White's father (and perhaps mother) became increasingly traumatic enough to cause episodes of psychosis remain absent from the poem. The 'family history related to my own,' said Bidart remained relatively absent from the text; instead, it exists in the white space Bidart employs to speak without speaking.¹³¹ The totality of *Golden State* becomes more than just about the *why* a person ends up as they do. Bidart explains that these poems were composed when he was twenty six and trying to uncover 'what patterns and powers kept me at its [his past's] mercy (so I could change, and escape. [...] I had to dramatize the moments when I felt like I had *learned* the terrible wisdom of the past (so I could unlearn it).'¹³² *Golden State*, though, is not just about 'uncovering' patterns; it is also about the validation and construction of families employed by earlier poets. *Golden State's* Part Two begins with 'California Plush' and immediately descends into the foray of familial drama, connecting it to the physical landscape in which it all unfolds: a shiny veneer covering the ugliness of Los Angeles. The 'I,' unlike in 'Herbert White,' sinks into the background of the poem, making way for the gravity of the father figure and his shortcomings. The poem is meant to create balance, achieve 'reconciliation' and be less about documenting the traumas of childhood.¹³³

Poets like Lowell, Snodgrass, Plath and Sexton tended to write personal poems that depicted dysfunctional families and their resulting, mentally unstable children.¹³⁴ *Golden Gate* certainly contains poems that exhibit the same type familial constructs, such as 'California Plush,' 'The Book of Life,' 'To My Father,' and 'Golden Gate.' Bidart also approaches personal poetry through the use of fictions like 'Herbert White,' whose voice and narrative are discordant with poems that more directly convey information about the poet.

¹³¹ 'An Interview --- With Mark Halliday (1983),' p. 238.

¹³² 'An Interview --- With Mark Halliday (1983),' p. 237.

¹³³ 'Herbert White,' p. 3, ll. 20.

¹³⁴ Grossman, *The Sighted Singer*, p. 39;

Robert Phillips, *The Confessional Poets*, (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1973), pp. 7-8.

The use of dramatic monologue for 'Herbert White' places a kind of distance between himself from his Confessional predecessors. Even Plath, with her 'dark halo of myth,' never quite convinces the reader that her mentally unstable, first-person speakers are not directly related to the poet.¹³⁵ Even when events in poems run in opposition to her autobiography, the 'force' of the father figure is interpreted as a fact of her volatile yet dominated emotional state.¹³⁶

The voice in 'Herbert White' that can be connected to Bidart is subtle and one that displays an attachment between poet and creation. White represents a full fictional version of the maddened children present in poems of Bidart's predecessors: paralyzed and at the mercy of the memories of familial fragmentation and the existence of extreme emotional weight derived the individual entities and traumas that were his parents.

'Herbert White' also served as a connector of Bidart's autobiography to the motif of character regression. A corresponding inability to achieve personal movement forward is evident in 'Herbert White' when we consider that White feels most balanced and content when digging in the garden of the Twenty-nine Palms Motel or revisiting the dead (that which cannot move forward, only break down and regress); in other words, he is moving downward and forming the resting place of his victim. As part of an emotional need, White says 'I had spent years| trying, and at last, finally finished drawing this | huge circle...' ¹³⁷ Perhaps, to White, it seems like he is moving forward, finally able to 'feel things make sense,' but journeying in a circle causes one to end up right where they started.¹³⁸

In the ostensibly autobiographical 'California Plush,' Bidart approaches character regression in a like manner; for all of the speaker's discussions with his father, no ground is

¹³⁵ Williamson, p. 28.

¹³⁶ John Rietz, 'The Father as Muse in Sylvia Plath's Poetry,' *Women's Studies*, 36:6 (2007), 416-418 (p. 429).

¹³⁷ 'Herbert White,' p. 5, ll. 57-59.

¹³⁸ 'Herbert White,' p. 4, ll. 41.

gained towards ‘reconciliation.’¹³⁹ Instead, the father of ‘California Plush,’ ‘will not change; he does not *want* to change.’¹⁴⁰ What drives the speaker, the poet’s voice, is ‘the need for past.’¹⁴¹ He means to make use of it while the father regards the past as, ‘useless, irretrievable.’¹⁴² But Bidart claimed *Golden State* was a means of achieving catharsis¹⁴³ even if the characters, such as the father and mother figures, do not. If the first key concept of *Golden State* is memory, then the second must be reconciliation. Herbert White lacks the desire for forgiveness even when begged.¹⁴⁴ It is the kind of unwillingness to forgive that Bidart articulates in ‘Confessional.’¹⁴⁵

White’s regression is what the rest of *Golden State* works towards resolving: the problems concerning the joint ‘familial history’ between White and Bidart while maintaining a certain distance from Confessionalism.¹⁴⁶ At points in ‘Herbert White,’ though, Bidart more fully enters into the realm of Confessionalism than parallel themes, forgoing his attempt to entirely deviate from the poetic climate around him. Bidart associates his own familial history with ‘White’ more extensively than just the thematic; his fictional poems and confessional poems share lines, phrases, and at times, plot points. The mother and father characters of ‘Herbert White’ eerily resemble the mother and father characters portrayed in the confessional poem, ‘Golden State.’ In ‘Herbert White’ Bidart notes that White observes his father and new family through their window:

--- There he was, a kid
 six months old on his lap, laughing
 and bouncing the kid, happy in his old age
 to play papa after years of sleeping around,¹⁴⁷

¹³⁹ ‘Herbert White,’ p. 3, ll. 20.

¹⁴⁰ ‘Herbert White,’ p. 7, ll. 214.

¹⁴¹ ‘Herbert White,’ p. 3, ll. 17.

¹⁴² ‘Herbert White,’ p. 7, ll. 216.

¹⁴³ ‘An Interview --- With Mark Halliday,’ p. 237.

¹⁴⁴ ‘Herbert White,’ p. 4, ll. 30-31.

¹⁴⁵ *The Sacrifice*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1983), pp. 34-55.

¹⁴⁶ ‘An Interview with Mark Halliday,’ p. 238.

¹⁴⁷ ‘Herbert White,’ p. 6, ll. 86-89.

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

--- You believed in neither

be said, “My life is over,”
 after you had married Shirley,
 twenty-five years younger, with three
 small children, the youngest
 six months old;¹⁴⁸

White’s response to what he observes is to kidnap and murder a victim; the negative effects of what he witnessed are understood by the extreme nature of his reactions. The speaker in ‘Golden Gate’ then switches the scene to one that discusses how the father figure did not take care of himself.¹⁴⁹ The two poems largely run parallel in terms of what the speakers experience and that both encounter ensuing emotions that they regarded as negative. Both speakers are even capable of intimating and acknowledging these negative feelings. Herbert says of his father:

it twisted me up . . .
 To think that what he would give me,
 he *wanted* to give them . . .
 I could have killed the bastard.¹⁵⁰

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

When I was a child,
 you didn’t seem to care if I existed.¹⁵¹

When Bidart labels White as ‘all that I am not,’ he is saying they share history and, to some extent, emotion; but not in reaction. In turn, the reader recognises and empathises with a

¹⁴⁸Frank Bidart, ‘Golden State,’ in *Golden State*, (New York: George Braziller Inc., 1973), pp. 25-39 (p. 34, VIII, ll. 4-8.

¹⁴⁹ ‘Golden State,’ p. 34, VIII, ll. 11-14.

¹⁵⁰ ‘Herbert White,’ p. 6, ll. 90-91.

¹⁵¹ p. 31, ll. 17-18.

despicable character. The reader does not excuse White's actions due to mental illness, but comes to understand the state of identity in response to exterior and interior factors.

'Herbert White' is a lesson in the unravelling of a self. In 'For Bill Nestruck (1940-1996),' Bidart writes:

*For Herbert, the aesthetic desideratum is
unpremeditated art, not as "natural" or "spontaneous"
but as speaking of the Spirit as it becomes conscious, a fidelity to
the moment itself [...]*¹⁵²

Bidart, however, is filled with memories that he's always had access to and has spent time trying to 'unlearn' that which has enslaved him.¹⁵³ By the time *Golden State* gets to 'Golden State,' Bidart has written "all the parts of the problem" out there' in a violent, grandiose fashion. What is left are figures 'drained [of their] obsessive power.'¹⁵⁴ The speaker in 'Golden State' has identified that the failed father was 'merely a man'¹⁵⁵ and created all if these characters to analyse their kinship to one another so that they could 'begin to release us from each other.'¹⁵⁶ Herbert White seeks no such release from his father. Serving as an emotional crutch sends White into a tailspin, but so does witnessing what White regards as abandonment. White remains fixed in these moments, moments that White still feels a need for. Bidart shapes *Golden Gate* with narratives that unify the book even while striking off in different directions. This in and of itself is a dramatic act as the confessional poem is altered and advanced to relate to useful fiction.

The connection between empirical truth and fiction exists in the frictions found in kinship. In 'Confessional,' Bidart refers to familial cohesion as an 'ally;' that is to say, the character of White, and in the case of 'Confessional,' Bidart himself, view kinship as a type

¹⁵² *Stardust*, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005), p. 7, ll. 9-13.

¹⁵³ 'Golden State,' p. 34, VIII, ll. 26.

¹⁵⁴ 'An Interview --- With Mark Halliday (1983),' p. 238.

¹⁵⁵ 'Golden State,' VIII, ll. 27

¹⁵⁶ 'Golden State,' p. 38, X, ll. 14.

of alliance.¹⁵⁷ To both men, breaking the alliance is a brutal betrayal. The father remarries and takes on the responsibility of a new woman's children. In the hotel, White implies that he has forgiven his father for abandoning White and the family at an earlier time.¹⁵⁸ However, when White sees his father and his new family through a window, it becomes apparent that White did not truly forgive.¹⁵⁹ Instead, White has benefitted from being for his father what the father could not be for him. *Golden State* revisits discussions between son and father often. 'California Plush' has no less than four scenes where the son and father have conversations about how the father has been a failure. 'Golden State' revisits the theme of emotionally supporting the father.

In spite of the son serving as a buttress for the father's emotional wellbeing in most of *Golden State*, the concept of acceptance and how a speaker responds to the lack thereof when they are cast out is of relevance. In 'Herbert White,' the father's ability to become a real father to children that were not his own undoes White's sense of acceptance; his father no longer needs him. White has been replaced, become a 'bastard,' and then reaches for the coping mechanism that his mind has developed: disassociation and the act of violence by the 'other.' For the speaker of 'Golden State,' the ultimate rejection in death is, 'in many ways | a relief.'¹⁶⁰ The speaker is no longer the object and prop of the father's 'helplessness.'¹⁶¹ The poet's voice does not turn away from 'the conditions of my life' and its limitations.¹⁶² The act of confrontation allows for the poet's stated troubles to 'fall, and melt'¹⁶³ while White ultimately 'cannot stand | what I see.'¹⁶⁴

¹⁵⁷ 'Confessional,' p. 41, II, ll. 46& 48.

¹⁵⁸ 'Herbert White,' p. 4, ll. 26-33.

¹⁵⁹ 'Herbert White,' p. 6, ll. 85-93.

¹⁶⁰ 'Golden State,' p. 26, II, ll.1-2.

¹⁶¹ 'Golden State,' p. 28, IV, ll. 9.

¹⁶² 'Golden State,' p. 29, V, ll. 3.

¹⁶³ 'Golden State,' p. 29, V, ll. 16.

¹⁶⁴ 'Herbert White,' p. 7, ll. 125-126.

While *Golden State* largely addresses, via its post-Confessional framing of relationships, the complications of patriarchal relationships, the complication of the mother figure is still present, although on a smaller scale. Evidence of matriarchal figures also addresses the theme of rejection; in this case the mother figure of ‘Herbert White’ giving birth to other children. In turn, White asserts a semi-rejection of his mother. White complains, ‘Who would have wanted to stay with Mom?’¹⁶⁵ and experiences anxiety being amongst the other progeny of his mother, her kids are ‘bastards.’¹⁶⁶ Her echoes within the text are evidence that White does not completely disregard her. The feelings of betrayal ultimately stem from an intense jealousy and desire to have the focus of said parents on oneself.¹⁶⁷

In ‘Confessional,’ the speaker appears glad that the mother experiences a miscarriage and regards, again, the possibility of other progeny as betrayal.¹⁶⁸ White retaliates against the strain of kinship through the act of killing and defiling females who serve as replacements for the objects of his anger. The prophetic phrase ‘Spunk of the earth...’¹⁶⁹ trails precedes a scene of a successful killing and how it made White feel this kind of ‘alright.’¹⁷⁰ The shift in setting indicates that White supplants the echoes of his mother with that of the killings. Bidart can then conduct White as a character that connects the dismissal of his mother through the dismissal of his victims.

The words of the mother carry the same tone that the mother figure in ‘California Plush’ possesses. The base idea of the mother figure is the past and like ‘Herbert White,’ ‘California Plush’ returns to the mother figure’s words on the past more than once. There is a ‘returning, as always, to the past,’¹⁷¹ and when she utters the phrase again, it is with the

¹⁶⁵ ‘Herbert White,’ p. 4, ll. 32.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid 157

¹⁶⁷ ‘Confessional,’ II, ll. 30, 44-45

¹⁶⁸ ‘Confessional,’ II, ll. 70-86

¹⁶⁹ p. 4, ll. 52.

¹⁷⁰ p. 5, ll. 55.

¹⁷¹ ‘California Plush,’ p. 17, ll. 173.

revelation that the past is, ‘maiming us, | makes us | fruition | is also | destruction.’¹⁷² This figure functions as a guiding force, something that is not dismissed. The retaliation against the mother figures in Bidart’s personal poems is handled differently than in ‘White.’

The mother of the rest of *Golden Gate* is disruptive but only insofar as she is a foil of the father figure. She returns periodically, as the prophetic voice in ‘California Plush’ that seeks to destroy the father figure’s consuming inadequacies. In ‘Book of Life,’ the recollection of the mother’s role in her second marriage is deemed a ‘poverty of history, of awareness.’¹⁷³ She loses her authoritative gravity and eventually becomes reduced to the speaker viewing her with the same bitter pity that the father figure is given.¹⁷⁴ ‘Illness’ makes her, metaphorically speaking, ‘try to turn brass and tin to gold.’¹⁷⁵ The mother figure of *Golden Gate*, of White and Bidart’s voice, can no more act as a nurturing force than the father figure can.

The reaction to a lack of nurturing force within the text shows itself in how White’s approaches his oppression and repression psychotically; never solving his issues or becoming ‘cured.’ White is stranded in a cycle created by his history and largely exacerbated by his mental disorders. In spite of his realisation at the end, White will never be able to extricate himself from his madness. Bidart says of White, ‘I imagined him as a voice coming from a circle in Hell [...] in the mind of someone for whom the issues in the book were in the deepest disorder.’ The idea of Hell designed by Dante is one where the Judeo-Christian god cannot hear those who suffer within it. The abandonment that Herbert White imagines leads to the choices that condemn him to suffering.

Golden State ends with a confrontation between White and Bidart, the two voices confronting each other’s vulnerabilities. ‘Another Life’ is the culminating poem in *Golden*

¹⁷² ‘California Plush,’ p. 18, ll. 183-187.

¹⁷³ p. 22, ll. 47.

¹⁷⁴ p. 21, ll. 43.

¹⁷⁵ p. 13, ll. 80.

State, and one that, according to Smith, reveals ‘the total pattern – the structural principles which we have been testing.’¹⁷⁶ The poem gathers the objective history of the late 1960s and the book’s representation of violence as a response to trauma that has its origins in personal, subjective history. Bidart returns us to where we left off in ‘Herbert White’ and the speaker of ‘Another Life’ encounters:

a young man, almost
my twin, who had written
‘MONSTER’
in awkward lettering with a crayon across
the front of his sweat shirt.¹⁷⁷

The 1983 interview with Mark Halliday references White in a near identical manner: as a ‘MONSTER’ and ‘all I was not.’¹⁷⁸ White becomes a ‘dream the monster figure,’ the last obstacle that the poet must conquer that he may liberate himself from the obsessions that preoccupied the book.¹⁷⁹

‘Another Life’ becomes a battle between the two figures, the poet declaring that he is not White and White insisting he is.¹⁸⁰ Or rather, White is calling out Bidart on the use of the feint, inextricably linking the characters. Bidart revisits the topic of White where he was left horrified at the end of his respective poem. Their relationship does not remain stagnant, as they form an uneasy alliance to watch a parade of the sins. That the poet-as-speaker insists that, ‘*no part of us the same*’ so vehemently provides the sense that the opposite is true giving the impression that they have developed a perversion of the kind of relationship between Virgil and Dante.¹⁸¹ This idea is reinforced by their shared perspective regarding what the parade represents: the traumas instilled by his parents and the ‘disasters they embodied.’¹⁸² Whichever role they play at, it is White who is left behind in this nightmare landscape and

¹⁷⁶ Fraistat, pp. 14

¹⁷⁷ ll. 37-41

¹⁷⁸ pp. 238

¹⁷⁹ Hix, pp. 196

¹⁸⁰ ll. 64-80

¹⁸¹ ‘Herbert White,’ p. 6, ll. 84.

¹⁸² ‘Herbert White,’ pp. 5-6, ll. 71 & 85-96.

Bidart who emerges from Hell. Bidart transforms the landscape into a painting, forever suspending White in his violent 'pattern[s], this cycle.'¹⁸³

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

¹⁸³ 'Herbert White,' pp. 5-6, ll. 59 & 103-106.

Chapter 2: “Ellen West” – Bidart’s ‘Unlogical, Nervous, Individual “I”’

Frank Bidart’s introduction to a character who exhibited hyperbolic thoughts and behaviours that he recognised, to a degree, in himself came in the form of Ludwig Binswanger’s psychoanalytic essay on Ellen West.¹ In West, Bidart identified a soul and will ‘unbroken but in stasis’² who chose annihilation rather than surrender her autonomy to another.³ Of herself, the historical Ellen West wrote, ‘My inner self is so closely connected with my body that they two form a unity and together constitute an, “unlogical, nervous, individual “I””’.⁴ The concept that a ‘will’ rejects what it regards as inferior from the outside world and then there is nothing left but refusal and an absence of personal development, is one that Bidart said ‘haunted him’ and was appropriated into the poem as a core part of his version of West.⁵ The Ellen West that appeared in the poem was not a true representation of the historical West; the image and experiences of West were refracted through the eyes of Binswanger and then Bidart before emerging as the doomed speaker of this dramatic monologue. The theme of the disordered psyche being connected to West’s atrophying body pervades the poem as much as the case study, but Bidart also places an emphasis on how poetry can communicate an identity in a multi-layered crisis beyond being ‘not simply a “case”’⁶ as might be found in the ‘psychoanalytic poetics’ of the Confessionals.⁷

¹ H.L. Hix, ‘In Conversation with Frank Bidart,’ *Literary Review: An International Journal of Contemporary Writing*, 53:1 (Fall 2009), 191-198 (p. 193).

² ‘An Interview – With Mark Halliday (1983),’ in *In the Western Night*, (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1990), pp. 223-241 (p. 227).

³ Frank Bidart, ‘Ellen West,’ in *The Book of the Body*, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977), pp. 30-44 (p. 30, ll. 9-12).

⁴ qtd. in, ‘The Case of Ellen West: An Anthropological-Clinical Study,’ trans. Werner M. Mendel & Joseph Lyons, in *Existence: A New Dimension in Psychiatry and Psychology*, ed. Rollo May, Ernest Angel, Henri F. Ellenberger, pp.237-364 (p. 242).

⁵ ‘Interview – With Mark Halliday,’ p. 227

⁶ ‘Ellen West,’ p. 30, ll. 13.

⁷ Miranda Sherwin, qtd. in ‘Psychotherapy and Confessional Poetry,’ *The Cambridge Companion to Modern American Poetry*, ed. Walter Kalaidjian, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 143-154 (p. 145).

Bidart's use of speech and form apply to the notion of this character being in the centre of a complex crisis as the form and speech themselves appear to be in crisis. His poems favour plots, characters, and events that 'conclude without concluding - how they could reach a sense of 'resolution,' or completion, without 'resolving' things that are inherently unresolvable.'⁸ He structures the 'unresolvable' narrative in 'Ellen West' as a modulated form of dramatic monologue. Rather than write 'Ellen West' from a single perspective, Bidart counterpoints the voice of West against that of Binswanger. The voice of West aims to justify her world-view and maintain absolute authority over a reader's perception of her experience. While this latter plot point is a characteristic of many definitions of dramatic monologues, the use of two voices is unusual in the genre.⁹

Just as rare is the use of a letter so that the poem addresses different auditors. According to S.S. Curry and Claud Howard, while a confessional, first-person letter-poem by a character that is not the poet is the closest poetic form to the dramatic monologue without actually being one.¹⁰ The letter, Howard adds, carries with it the 'dramatic monologue attitude of mind.'¹¹ The letter in 'Ellen West,' then, can be said to be written in the spirit of dramatic monologue, though not a portion of the poem that is a monologue in and of itself.

The inclusion of the letter is also an indicator that the speaker may be addressing two auditors. W. David Shaw and Alan Sinfield both describe monologues as addressing a single auditor, but W.L. Phelps indicated that a dramatic monologue may be directed at a single or group of listeners.'¹² Antony Easthope also argues that directing speech towards multiple

⁸ Ibid 127

⁹ Robert Langbaum, *The Poetry of Experience: The Dramatic Monologue in Modern Literary Tradition*, (London: Chatto & Windus, 1957; repr. 1972), preface;

W. David Shaw, *Origins of the Monologue: The Hidden God*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999), p. 13;

A. Dwight Culler, 'Monodrama and the Dramatic Monologue,' *PMLA*, 90:3 (May 1975), 366-385 (p. 366).

¹⁰ Ina Beth Sessions, 'The Dramatic Monologue,' *PMLA*, 62:2 (June 1947), 503-516 (pp. 505-506).

¹¹ Sessions, p. 505.

¹² Shaw, *Origins of the Monologue*, p. 12;

Alan Sinfield, *Dramatic Monologue*, (New York: Barnes and Noble Books, 1977). p. 3; Sessions, p. 505.

auditors is not ‘incompatible’ with the dramatic monologue form.¹³ He notes that, both Browning’s ‘Andrea Del Sarto’ and Eliot’s ‘The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock’ and ‘The Wasteland’ address multiple listeners, thus creating multiple scenes. ‘The Wasteland,’ Easthope adds, is not what one would define as a ‘sustained monologue.’¹⁴ Langbaum adds that after Browning, Eliot ‘contributed most to the development of the form’ which seems to agree with Shaw’s position that the monologue does not have a formal definition.¹⁵ Eliot’s use of ‘a *collage* of voices’ advanced the form so that it could now represent ‘a modern consciousness.’¹⁶ If ‘Ellen West’ is afforded the same consideration as ‘Wasteland,’ then this certainly enables the poem to qualify as a dramatic monologue, though it does so with as one with a degree of ‘decay of genre.’¹⁷

Sinfield writes that ‘genre implies a hierarchy and fixidity.’ A decay of genre reflects a ‘loss of the system,’ which surely applies to ‘Ellen West.’¹⁸ Bidart breaks with more traditions of the dramatic monologue than just the number of voices and auditors. But Shaw argues that the genre is ‘frisky and elusive,’ not always adhering to the rules that critics set for it.¹⁹ Shaw and Sessions, to name two critics out of many, claim that the definition of the dramatic monologue is rather fluid.²⁰ Sessions argues that the use of sub-classifications is a more accurate system of analysing dramatic monologues.²¹ The genre’s beginnings are based on a sense of ‘subversive tradition’ and as such, it was an influential component of the

¹³ Antony Easthope, ‘The Waste Land’ as Dramatic Monologue,’ *English Studies*, 64:4 (1983), 330-344 (pp. 332-333).

¹⁴ Easthope, p. 332.

¹⁵ *Poetry of Experience*, p. 77;

Origins of the Monologue, p. 14.

¹⁶ Langbaum, *Poetry of Experience*, p. 77.

¹⁷ Sinfield, p. 56.

¹⁸ Sinfield, p. 56.

¹⁹ *Origins of the Monologue*, p. 14.

²⁰ *Origins of the Monologue*, p. 14;
Sessions, p. 508.

²¹ *Origins of the Monologue*, p. 12;
Sessions, pp. 505 & 508.

change and loss that other genres underwent.²² Decay of genre, however, does not equal loss of pre-eminence in terms of what a poem can offer back to the form. In terms of 'Ellen West,' Bidart taps in to the innovative and evolutionary properties available to the dramatic monologue. Bidart's version of the dramatic monologue offers a more precise voice through which the severely mentally ill reveal a multitude of inescapable torments over time; which causes their failures to seem more tragic and understood than monologues that occur in a single event.

Another benefit to using the dramatic monologue is that the poet can encourage a multi-textual readings and interpretations of a single poem. By relying on a one of the more traditional characteristics of the dramatic monologue, a feint, Bidart establishes ground as a post-Confessional poet, redefining what it means for the poet to use themselves in their writing.²³ Additionally, Bidart explores what it means to wear a mask and project his presence into a poem where the masculine and feminine voices work in opposition to each other. The resulting West is an amalgam of poet and the character appropriated from Binswanger's case study that eclipses diagnostic study.

A number of critics, largely within the confines of many of the essays found within the anthology *On Frank Bidart: Fastening the Voice to the Page*, do not address this element and the poem and opt to label the historical and created West with the diagnosis of 'anorexia.' This label is used in spite of the historical West being diagnosed with a form of schizophrenia²⁴ and in spite of the fact that the limitations on food intake, bingeing, and purging²⁵ more aptly fit the criteria of bulimia.²⁶ Bidart's West escapes psychiatric classification through an emphasis on experience over definition; the events of the poem and

²² Shaw, *Origins of the Monologue*, p. 5.

²³ Alan Sinfield, *Dramatic Monologue*, (London: Methuen & Co Ltd, 1977), p. 25,

²⁴ Binswanger, 'The Case of Ellen West,' p. 361.

²⁵ Frank Bidart, 'Ellen West,' *The Book of the Body*, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977), ll. 24-27, 36-38, 99-101.

²⁶ 'Bulimia,' *NHS Choices* <<http://www.nhs.uk/Conditions/Bulimia/Pages/Introduction.aspx>> [accessed July 7, 2014].

West's voice that speaks from a secluded position appear weary of the concept of identity. When West says, 'Only to my husband I'm not simply a "case"', she is indicating a bitterness towards the very act of external authoritative forces defining her person.²⁷ Nevertheless, with so many references to food aversion, it becomes relatively easy to use the most simplistic of labels as a one-word descriptor in front of West's name; often tacked-on in passing when discussing some other aspect of Bidart's body of work. Oddly, Bidart perpetuated this habit developed by others during later interviews and when he wrote about his experience with 'Ellen West' in *Metaphysical Dog*.²⁸ He writes that, 'he was never anorexic but like Ellen he was obsessed with eating.'²⁹

He, like many others, often stated his positions on 'Ellen West' in a way that did not limit the speaker's condition to that of anorexia despite labelling her as such. The poem also focuses on other issues unrelated to that of mental disorder, such as 'the arbitrariness of gender'³⁰ and a subtle treatment of Bidart's mother and the suicidal feelings that followed her death.³¹

Critics have concerned themselves with West's struggle with weight and the corporeality of the physical body but stop short of including analysis on the character's other obsessions such as people she envied or related to, her difficulty with relationships, gender identity, and aging. The 'push-and-pull' torment of the idea of food and body are but two symptoms of a larger issue that plagued the historical and poetic figures. Jeffrey Gray writes that, 'her disease is not her torment but her solution to that torment.'³² The use of 'anorexia' as an umbrella term for the character's mental disorder is simply not accurate enough to

²⁷ 'Ellen West,' p. 30, ll. 13.

²⁸ Hix, p. 192.

²⁹ 'Writing "Ellen West,"' *Metaphysical Dog*, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013), pp.4-10 (p.4, ll. 8-9).

³⁰ 'Writing "Ellen West,"' p. 4, ll. 9.

³¹ 'Writing "Ellen West,"' pp. 5-6, ll. 22-29.

³² Jeffrey Gray, "'Necessary Thought": Frank Bidart and the Postconfessional,' *Contemporary Literature*, 34: 4 (Winter, 1993), 714-739 (p. 728).

capture the extensive intricacies of the character. Anorexia, instead, serves as a symptom of a much larger psychiatric crisis.

‘Ellen West’ functions with a higher degree of complexity than as the minor rendering of representative ‘torment,’ ‘crisis in behavior,’³³ and ‘the spirit turning away from the flesh’ presented in Binswanger’s writing.³⁴ West reacts to encounters with these concepts in a ‘push-pull’ manner, reflecting not only her rational acknowledgement of the many symptoms of her neurosis (not just food) and relationships, but the poet’s simultaneous acceptance and redirection of Confessionalism. Bidart altered how Confessional poetry addressed form, anthropological histories and phenomena, and the representation of a unique identity unequipped to cope with the conflicting ideologies set by the self and society. In spite of West’s claims that she is thought of as ‘a case,’³⁵ she resists the ‘psychoanalytic tropes [that] influenced the confessional poets’³⁶ and Victorian monologists and instead, serves as a representation of a mentality in crisis via a reliance on unique form and speech.³⁷

The result is a survey of West’s search for an identity, as compelling as any Confessional treatment of the self that is a departure from the ordinary. The conclusive entity that emerges from Bidart’s poem, with its broad conception of the fluidity of the dramatic monologue, is that the identity produced from the after the act of self-annihilation trumps any corporeal identity West or those who know her can formulate.

³³ Dan Chiasson, ‘Presence: Frank Bidart’, in *On Frank Bidart: Fastening the Voice to the Page*, eds. Liam Rector and Tree Swenson, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007), pp. 48-67 (p. 50).

³⁴ Sven Birkerts, ‘Burnt Offerings’, in *On Frank Bidart: Fastening the Voice to the Page*, eds. Liam Rector and Tree Swenson, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007), pp. 116-123 (p. 119).

³⁵ ‘Ellen West,’ p. 30, ll. 13.

³⁶ Michael Thurston, ‘Psychotherapy and Confessional Poetry,’ *The Cambridge Companion to Modern American Poetry*, ed. Walter Kalaidjian, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 143-154 (p. 145).

³⁷ Faas, p. 14.

I. The Construction of the 'I': Language of the Unstable Self

In a 2008 interview Bidart said, 'Ellen West as a person did exist—but the crucial thing is not whether she literally existed, but that she corresponds to my sense of human experience, and the nature of human experience and the possibility of human experience.'³⁸ He is more interested in Binswanger's interpretation of West than in capturing the voice of the actual person; one of Bidart's aims was to improve upon and intensify what he referred to as 'Binswanger's recital.'³⁹ His aim in creating a lyric West was to inhabit the voices that already existed in the case study and highlight 'each scene of her life,' in order to present a sense of 'necessity' that he felt was missing from the original text.⁴⁰ Each scene of 'Ellen West' was designed to display the journey West embarked on to arrive at death and answer the question 'Without a body, who can know themselves at all?'⁴¹ And yet, we have to ask who it is we are trying to know. West? Bidart? A universal aspect of humanity?

Dan Chiasson writes that we observe West through 'pre-existing verbal forms' and the lyric that inhabits a 'bounded consciousness' through the adaptation of Binswanger's 'narrative.'⁴² This argument, while true, lacks specificity in concerns to the poem's multiple speakers. The prosody of the poem rests in 'verbal forms' not solely associated with Ellen West, but also in Bidart and Binswanger. A sense of Binswanger's case study is maintained through the appropriation of it as a second speaker. Here, Bidart quotes the actual West in the poem, citing her disdain for pancakes.⁴³ Present tense is used in this line, even at the cost of creating grammatical incongruity. The case study text, then, stands out in blatant contrast to Bidart's crafting of West's speech. Bidart claims that to make Ellen West his own, he

³⁸ Hix, p. 192.

³⁹ 'Writing "Ellen West,"' p. 7, ll. 48-49.

⁴⁰ Ibid 7, ll. 48-49.

⁴¹ 'Writing "Ellen West,"' pp. 8-9, ll. 56-57 & 66-67.

⁴² *One Kind of Everything: Poems and Person in Contemporary America*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), p. 90.

⁴³ Binswanger, 'The Case of Ellen West,' p. 251; 'Ellen West,' ll. 92-93.

internalised her ‘dramas’ and produced a voice that allowed him to manipulate his own.⁴⁴ The two voices act as counterpoints, as did the voices of the everyday and high rhetoric found in ‘Herbert White.’

Jeffrey Gray writes that, ‘Bidart does not come this close to the precise wording of his source; rather, he captures Ellen’s tone and the gist of her constant concern.’⁴⁵ This is incorrect. Bidart rarely inserts his own language into the case study sections and instead, changes a few dates and omits sections of Binswanger’s entry that do not add anything to the poem.⁴⁶ By quoting Binswanger directly, these sections prove to be a ‘voice of reason’ or foil to West’s ‘refuser.’ Binswanger’s voice is what Robin Lakoff refers to as a ‘masculine [...] idealization.’ She clarifies by writing:

When such a man speaks, his contribution is incisive, precise, and to the point—utterly straightforward—and tells us as little as possible about the speaker’s state of mind and his attitude toward the addressee. We expect here, too, an even and low pitch, flat intonation, declarative rather than interrogative sentence structure, no hedging or imprecision, and lexical items chosen for their pure cognitive content, not their emotional coloration.⁴⁷

The prose sections are the clinical, assertions made by a male figure that provide a more objective description of the ‘unconscious liar’ that is West.⁴⁸ It also assigns her an identity that is not of her own choosing. West’s voice, then, is the feminine voice demanding that her definition of self be the true one even for all of its irrational fallacies. Bidart’s exploration of new methods in approaching the ‘I’ is also a study in how difficult and multitudinal such a process can be.

Bidart continues to use a similar punctuational style to that employed in ‘Herbert White.’ Still present are the use of dashes that cause sudden, jarring halts in speech and

⁴⁴ ‘An Interview – With Mark Halliday (1983),’ p. 239; ‘Writing ‘Ellen West,’’ p. 7, ll. 50.

⁴⁵ ‘Necessary Thought,’ p. 726.

⁴⁶ ll. 103-107 are Bidart’s words, not Binswanger’s. Bidart employs the use of much more ‘poetic’ language in these lines than Binswanger does in his dryer, more clinical language.

⁴⁷ Robin Lakoff, ‘Stylistic Strategies Within a Grammar of Style,’ *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences*, 327:1(June 1979), 53-78 (p. 66).

⁴⁸ Shaw, *Origins of the Monologue*, p. 168.

ellipsis marks that indicate a trailing off of thought. The uneven line margins are used to manipulate the reading experience, the edges appearing much more ragged than those in ‘Herbert White.’ For example, at the point where the husband is on the verge of taking control of the orange slice, and thus West herself, on the train, Bidart writes,

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

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

shove it in my mouth---;⁴⁹

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

As many critics have noted, Bidart borrows from the case study directly in many instances to construct the ‘I.’ In the case study, Binswanger quotes West as writing:

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

When I awake in the morning I feel dread of the hunger that I know will soon appear. Hunger drives me out of bed. [...] It drives all thoughts out of my head. Even when I am full, I am afraid of the coming hour in which hunger will start again. When I am hungry I can no longer see anything clearly, cannot analyze.⁵⁰

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

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

a childish

dread of eating; hunger which can have no cause,--
half my mind says that all this
is *demeaning* . . .

Bread

for days on end

⁴⁹ ‘Ellen West,’ p. 41, ll. 276-279.

⁵⁰ Binswanger, ‘The Case of Ellen West,’ p. 253

drives all real thought from my brain . . .⁵¹

Bidart chose to employ punctuation and phrasing that had, by that point, become a mainstay of his poetry in order to separate his prosody from Binswanger's West. The punctuative signature of Bidart and the retention of a West-centric, obsessive vocabulary constitute a conscious dual sense of self that wants to, as Chiasson phrases it, 'scar' the page itself.⁵² The voice produced is nothing so clean as a 'sculptor seeking to release a beautiful figure trapped within a block of uncut marble'⁵³ or a 'hopelessly sexualized' account of the 'normalization' of 'the grotesque' as others claim.⁵⁴ She is at all times a discordant chord at odds with everything in the physical world around her. Gender and how one identifies with the societal role that is assigned with one's biological sex serves as a natural part of the poem's 'being-in-the-world' crisis.⁵⁵ West is ill at ease with both. This portrayal of West is supported by Lakoff's assertion that 'Women have always been classified as the other, the not-quite-human, whether by medieval theologians who claimed women had no souls.'⁵⁶ For Bidart to successfully pen West as dually-sexed and yet belonging to neither sex, he needed to capture a more authentic voice for the actual West than did Binswanger.⁵⁷ That is to say, his approach needed to produce a character that could plausibly exist outside of the clinical language and analysis that served as the only available connection to the real person. For if Bidart's preservation of West's speech mimicked Binswanger's text, the character would exude a definitive artificiality that Bidart's mechanics would not be able to gloss over.

⁵¹ 'Ellen West,' pp. 38-39, ll. 206-215.

⁵² Ibid 70

⁵³ Edmund White, 'On Ellen West,' in *On Frank Bidart: Fastening the Voice to the Page*, eds. Liam Rector and Tree Swenson, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007), pp. 110-111.

⁵⁴ Helen Vendler, 'From 'Recent Poetry: Ten Poets,' in *On Frank Bidart: Fastening the Voice to the Page*, eds. Liam Rector and Tree Swenson, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007), pp. 112-114 (pp. 112-113).

⁵⁵ Binswanger, 'The Case of Ellen West,' p. 193.

⁵⁶ 'Stylistic Strategies,' p. 67.

⁵⁷ 'Writing "Ellen West,"' p.7, ll. 48-49.

Placing West in a social space that sought to define her as ‘meat’ and an inhuman ‘case’ achieved the desired authenticity as it placed West in a real-life social issue.⁵⁸

Bidart’s aim was to capture an authentic feminine voice that challenged the concept of femininity despite being male. Where this was enacted, in addition to ‘verbal forms,’ was in the use of adjectives. Lakoff supports this assessment of adjectival use in relation to the feminine voice of the American middle class.⁵⁹ She writes that it implies that women are given to ‘expressing emotional not intellectual evaluation.’ The feminine voice includes ‘intonation patterns that resemble questions, indicating uncertainty or need for approval.’ In total, this sense of weakness isn’t about the character’s ‘lack of power’ so much as it is about how the character *feels* about ‘the possession of power. Women’s language becomes a symbolic expression of distance from power, or lack of interest in power.’⁶⁰

‘Ellen West’ employs some of these devices; she appears uncertain when asking, ‘Why am I a girl?’ and somewhat accepts the answer provided by her doctors.⁶¹ These scant, few lines support Lakoff’s theories in connection to Bidart creating a plausible, female voice. However, West does not remain weak and uninterested in power throughout. By the end of the poem, she has wrested control of her existence back from her doctors and defined herself outside of the confines of psychological jargon.⁶² Here, West is at her most forceful and dominant, not seeking the approval of any other source. We might, however, consider the train scene a ‘relapse’ into the trappings of the female stereotype. Power is granted by West’s character to the husband, who throws the orange slice out of the window.⁶³ West seems

⁵⁸ ‘Ellen West,’ p. 30, ll. 13 & 15.

⁵⁹ Robin Lakoff, ‘Stylistic Strategies Within a Grammar of Style,’ *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences*, 327:1(June 1979), 53-78 (p. 53). Lakoff’s position on women’s language as a stereotype: ‘But even more to the point, women’s language is accessible to every member of this culture as a stereotype. Whether the stereotype is equally valid for all women is certainly debatable; but the fact of its existence, overt or subliminal, affects every one of us and its assumptions are generally agreed on.’ (p. 53);

qtd. in Stephen Burt, *Randall Jarrell and His Age*, (Chichester: Columbia University Press, 2002), p. 40.

⁶⁰ qtd. in Burt, *Randall Jarrell and His Age*, p. 40.

⁶¹ ‘Ellen West,’ pp. 30-31, ll. 16-22.

⁶² ‘Ellen West,’ pp. 39-45, ll. 228-230 & 239-245.

⁶³ ‘Ellen West,’ p. 42, ll. 287-297.

emotional and perhaps even guilty over the perceived ‘disappointment’ and lack of approval directed at her by her husband, this scene’s masculine loci of dominance. And yet, it is West’s character who has chosen to allow her husband that level of authority, whether consciously or as a way of giving in to the gender ideals assigned to her. The idea of shame and disappointment is repeated in West’s letter to a female companion. Bidart utilises adjectives like ‘sterile,’ ‘unreal,’ ‘crippled,’ ‘anger,’ and ‘happiness’ to construct a sense of West’s irrational emotions.⁶⁴

West’s desire to appear as ‘dainty’ might be considered as the Victorian idea of what a woman should strive to adhere to physically, which Janet Dunbar relates in *The Early Victorian Woman*: ‘softness and weakness, delicacy and modesty, a small waist, [and] curving shoulders.’⁶⁵ Bidart’s West is interested in being an ‘effortless’ and ‘elegant’ sort of ‘thin,’ with ‘sharp, clear features, a good | bone structure.’ She looks down upon those with ‘ordinary bodies, pleasant faces,’ those that are ‘short’ and would be tall; those attempting to be what they are not.⁶⁶ This is in spite of the fact that she rejects the natural and forces herself into a physical frame that is regarded by the medical community as ‘unnatural’ and a ‘disorder.’ The poem’s concept of disorder is revealed through West’s drive to push beyond the Victorian ideal of femininity. Instead, she becomes one of the very ‘creatures’⁶⁷ she abhors: ‘pathetic, desperate’ and filled with the ‘desire to be *not* what they were;---’⁶⁸ West is unconscious of her association with the artificial, which draws attention to Bidart’s interest in the difficulty of knowing the true self.

At times, Bidart relies heavily on striking a balance between verb and adjective usage. Bidart applies dramatic imagery like ‘mercurial, fragile, masterly,’ ‘shrill,’ ‘unreliable,

⁶⁴ ‘Ellen West,’ p. 39, ll. 327-331.

⁶⁵ Kathleen Hikok, *Representations of Women: Nineteenth-Century British Women’s Poetry*, (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1984), p. 50.

⁶⁶ ‘Ellen West,’ pp. 30, 32, 34,40, ll. 5-7, 47-48, 94 & 249-258

⁶⁷ ‘Ellen West,’ p. 40, ll. 253.

⁶⁸ ‘Ellen West,’ p. 40, ll. 254-255.

‘ravenous,’ and left with ‘shreds of a voice’ to his descriptions of Callas, who serves as another figure under extreme scrutiny.⁶⁹ West uses what can be interpreted as adjectives with negative connotations when she evaluates her own self after her assessment of Callas: ‘childish,’ ‘demeaning,’ and ‘dark-complexioned; big-boned.’⁷⁰ However, powerful verbs present themselves in a way that shows an empowered femininity. Words like ‘obliterated,’ ‘loathed,’ ‘embody,’ ‘manifest,’ ‘annihilate,’ ‘drives,’ and ‘acting; choosing; rejecting’ are aimed at restoring power to the female figure.⁷¹

The result is the creation of a character who demonstrates both feminine and masculine traits through speech and spends the duration of her existence struggling to come to terms with her gender identity. West’s sections vary in the dominance of the ‘verbal forms’⁷² and copious use of adjectives as indication of the feminine. Her created voice has a division of its own. The formal choices Bidart makes, adjectives and verbs vying for dominance, are as much of an indicator of personal crisis as the narrative. The figure that emerges is at once a victim of masculine interference and an aggressive feminine spirit of rebellion.

Other male writers have also tried to step into the role of female characters using the dramatic monologue. Not only is Randall Jarrell one such poet but Stephen Burt argues that Bidart was ‘influenced by the psychoanalytic goals of Jarrell's poems.’ Both poets pursued ‘a poetics of psychoanalytic process --- one appropriate to the step-by-step disclosure of self with help from an imagined listener.’⁷³

However, the feminine voice in ‘Ellen West’ maintains a brutal candour and level of specificity not found in Jarrell’s feminine voice. ‘Ellen West’ exhibits aggression that is apparent in the character’s refusal to discard her ideals and the eating demonstration she

⁶⁹ ‘Ellen West,’ p. 36, ll. 144, 150, 153 & 154.

⁷⁰ ‘Ellen West,’ pp. 38-39, ll. 209 & 222-223.

⁷¹ ‘Ellen West,’ pp. 35-36 & 39, ll. 131, 159 -162, 215 & 229.

⁷² Chiasson, *One Kind of Everything*, p. 90.

⁷³ qtd in *Randall Jarrell and His Age*, p. 114.

displays for her doctors.⁷⁴ These acts of ferocity serve to question gender identity, the language associated with being female, and social roles that women are forced to contend with.

West suffers from a mind that works against its interests and Bidart makes use of short, irregularly indented lines as sharp little weapons, a shape of a poem that Lakoff argues is undeniably masculine.⁷⁵ The poem offers a deviation from the classical use of longer, unindented lines which make use of the narrative and word choice to augment the emotional weight of the dramatic monologue. In this case, 'Ellen West' is reminiscent of the lineation used in 'Herbert White' and results in poems that approach topics concerning highly emotional states without falling prey to melodrama and prosaicness. Harsh, grinding short lines like '*tapeworm,*' '*I loathed 'Nature,*' 'childish,' and even 'bread' serve as criticisms that seem to haunt West to the point where discarding her body seems to be the only escape.⁷⁶ West functions as the being which Herbert White becomes at the end of 'Herbert White': a character that feels trapped and confronted by the reality of his mind's own disordered making.

Bidart's appropriation of the case study reinforces the notion that West is at odds with her gender in other instances.⁷⁷ Binswanger writes that as early as seventeen, West felt a compulsion towards male identification. Her poems, 'expressed the ardent desire to be a boy, for then she would be a soldier, fear no foe, and die joyously sword in hand.'⁷⁸ Bidart relays this feature of West's personality with word choices like 'eating the flesh,' 'suffocating

⁷⁴ 'Ellen West,' p. 34, ll. 99-101;

Binswanger, 'The Case of Ellen West,' p. 263.

⁷⁵ qtd in *Randall Jarrell and His Age*, pp. 40-41.

⁷⁶ 'Ellen West,' pp. 34, 36, 38, 39, ll. 91, 138, 198-201, 209, 213.

⁷⁷ Binswanger, 'The Case of Ellen West,' p. 239.

⁷⁸ *Ibid* 239

customs | seemed expressly designed to annihilate spirit,' and 'kill this *refuser*.'⁷⁹ The force of this jargon is more adept at conveying contradiction than the historical West's own words:

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

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

As with the treatment of West's gender identity, Bidart also accomplished a sense of multiplicity when it came to the handling of West's mental disorder. As stated earlier, many critics insert the diagnosis of 'anorexia' in front of West's name when discussing the poem, whether their subsequent analysis results in a different conclusion or not. Some, however, do seek to justify such a diagnosis. Dan Chiasson argues that the diagnosis of anorexia is what 'seeks an accurate 'representation' of spirit.'⁸² While the 'representation of spirit' is a viable theme present in the poem, the character of West does not use only her fear and obsession with food to explore the concept of body versus lack of body. In addition to her fixation on food, West is caught up in identifying her spirit through additional mental dilemmas that root the poem in the power a person wields to influence their circumstances versus forces they must submit themselves to. While it is undeniable that West suffers from mental illness, Bidart bombards West with symptoms from a number of different psychoses which compounds her lack of true understanding in regards to her own identity. The poem is less

⁷⁹ 'Ellen West,' pp. 36, 37, & 43, ll. 142, 161-162, & 324.

⁸⁰ qtd. in 'The Case of Ellen West,' p. 243.

⁸¹ 'Ellen West,' p. 36, ll. 142-144.

⁸² *One Kind of Everything*, p. 90.

focused on what disorder is represented and instead emphasises how mental disorder can bend and warp one's will, desire, and the very act of living. Additionally, the poem considers what mental elements that provide stability can be stripped away before empiricism is overshadowed by disease so that, for West, there is no other option but to 'not have a body.'⁸³

Bidart elects to have West experience all of these 'symptoms' through a lens of extreme, uncontrollable emotion propagated through paranoia and irrationality (even when explaining herself through what she might perceive as perfectly rational rhetoric). She exhibits symptoms of gerascophobia, obsession with the relationships between other people; even the intense desire to 'represent her spirit' by appropriating the spirit of another, whom she regards as perfection within the confines of her ideals.⁸⁴ These stressors limit experience and her attempts to exist within the confines of her obsessions meets with failure. The most noted and written about limiter is West's obsession with food; she is both unappeasable in her hunger and repulsed by food. She decides that denying the former symptom power over her experience in favour trying to satisfy the criteria of the latter. Being thin, however, fails to help West achieve a sense of mental equanimity. Failure augments the severity of how the psychosis is expressed.

Like many confessional poems, 'Ellen West' and 'Herbert White' have speakers whose interpretation of 'the self is often fragile, friable, close to disintegration' and are 'driven by an unappeasable sense of lack or loss.'⁸⁵ But confessional poems, like that of Lowell, can operate with speakers aiming to 'absorb and assimilate everything they behold, to relate and subjugate it to the monstrous self.'⁸⁶ 'Ellen West' addresses the fragile speaker as someone for whom any type of assimilation is impossible. It is part of what Binswanger

⁸³ 'Ellen West,' p. 38, ll. 201.

⁸⁴ pp. 30-34, 37-40, 43, ll. 13-16, 42, 59-60, 76, 81-84, 86-91, 171-172, 197, 233-235, 249-255, 313-322

⁸⁵ Stephen James, 'Robert Lowell's Afflicted Vision,' *Essays in Criticism*, 63:2 (2013), 177-202 (p. 180-181).

⁸⁶ James, p. 180.

referenced as a 'being-in-the-world' crisis.⁸⁷ Rather than adapt, West narrows the scope of her experiences until action, as experienced on the train, becomes insurmountable.⁸⁸ As Bidart frames it, the adoption of compulsion as a part of West disappears if the focus of said compulsion is cast off (i.e. the body). 'Ellen West' is a lesson in all forces of the poem, including her compulsions, attempting to subjugate each other, vying to be the dominant influence over West's self perception. This includes any attempt to diagnose the poem's West with a definitive and specific psychological disease. The poem returns again and again to the idea of corporeality in an ill-fated attempt to understand what it really means to relinquish the body while retaining some sense of self instead of dominating it.

West's arrival at the notion of not having a body is paired with the idea that after her body is gone, she cannot know herself.⁸⁹ The choices she makes regarding her person are what make her.⁹⁰ After she has defeated nature and has completely rejected all forms of physical existence, we find that she has left behind part of herself. The letter serves as a projection of a future and permanent self, a form of consciousness that is immortal. Bidart suggests that West looks forward to death because of the immortality that writing grants her. West's relationship with art and the possibility of its therapeutic value provides her with another aspect to her identity: that of a Confessional poet. Her final descent towards death depicts a character already 'transformed' and already unfettered by the constraints of her irrational terrors.⁹¹ Bidart has once again drawn from the case study as a means of constructing West,⁹² and thus, Binswanger's assessment that it is 'choice' that West strove for; specifically, the choice to be a self of her choosing rather than a self-wrought by

⁸⁷ 'The Existential Analysis School of Thought,' trans. Werner M. Mendel & Joseph Lyons, in *Existence: A New Dimension in Psychiatry and Psychology*, ed. Rollo May, Ernest Angel, Henri F. Ellenberger, (New York: Touchstone Books, 1958), pp. 191-213 (pp. 191 & 195). Binswanger is drawing upon the philosophy of Martin Heidegger.

⁸⁸ 'Ellen West,' p. 41, ll. 276-277.

⁸⁹ 'Ellen West,' p. 39, ll. 226-227.

⁹⁰ 'Ellen West,' p. 39, ll. 226-231.

⁹¹ 'Ellen West,' p. 42, ll. 298-308;

Binswanger, 'The Case of Ellen West,' p. 267.

⁹² 'Ellen West,' p. 43, ll. 302-308.

influence.⁹³ Through choice, West discovers an identity. Death becomes a by-product of what has really defined and liberated the character. Binswanger writes:

This entrance is festive not only because death comes as a friend, and because freedom and liberation from the fetters of life come in its train, but also for the much deeper reason that is voluntary-necessary resolve for death that existence is no longer 'desperately itself' but has authentically and totally become itself! [...] The festival of death was the festival of birth of her existence.⁹⁴

Ergo, by becoming 'authentic' and casting off the false self, she can, according to Jungian theory, avoid 'punishment.' Additionally, West can kill a portion of the self that is a 'refuser,'⁹⁵ the being of opposition born 'of the unconsciousness [...] seeking wholeness' and balance that not only becomes conscious in a character like West, but plays a large part in conducting her insanity.⁹⁶

The dual sense of self within the poem seems rooted in 'dread;' West experiences both a 'dread of eating' and a 'hunger' which combine to form this extreme 'fear.'⁹⁷ When West speaks of not wanting to 'refuse,' of wanting to 'compromise,' she has lightly tied it in to 'hunger.'⁹⁸ What she unconsciously is at odds with is the inclusion of self with another's. Bidart's use of the unconscious truth is a component of dramatic monologue. M.H. Abrams sees the dramatic monologue as a genre where the speaker is 'unconscious of their deepest truths.'⁹⁹ Shaw compares this to the poetry of Yeats in that the speakers 'can embody or live their truths but never speak them.'¹⁰⁰ In her letter to Dearest, West opens as a timid character, wanting inclusion, afraid to be 'alone.' West recalls a memory:

⁹³'Ellen West,' pp. 30-31, 33-34, 38-39, ll. 12, 34-35, 84, 94-96, 201, 229, 322-324;

Binswanger, 'The Case of Ellen West,' pp. 298.

⁹⁴ Ibid 298

⁹⁵'Ellen West,' p.43, ll. 323-324.

⁹⁶ Alan Williamson, *Introspection and Contemporary Poetry*, (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1984), p. 41.

⁹⁷ 'Ellen West,' p. 38, ll. 206-210.

⁹⁸ 'Ellen West,' pp. 43-44, ll. 322-328.

⁹⁹ *Origins of the Monologue*, p. 167.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid 167

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

I circled
around them, afraid to hike ahead alone,

yet afraid to rest
when I was not yet truly thin.¹⁰¹

West revisits ‘weight’ out of habit, but in actuality, the poem’s weight is just as centred on a crippling fear of people and the loss of self by association. This realisation encompasses not only her doctors, but popular culture and those who function within it. West is ‘expressed’¹⁰² through a multitude of obsessions so that Bidart is able to deepen the sense of ‘lack and loss’ experienced as West shrinks the scope of her personal world.¹⁰³

The world and its expectations are what ‘have by degrees drawn me within the circle; forced me to sit down at last on the ground.’¹⁰⁴ The speaker overcomes these external influences in favour of the aspects of her psychosis and an aspect of culture that enables and promotes her line of thought: that of the Victorian woman. West’s inclination towards the delicate female image is a contradiction for while West may claim this type of female is her ideal, the masculine speech employed by Bidart indicates that West is lying to herself. She is entirely at odds with the entire concept of ‘being-in-the-world’¹⁰⁵ as it denies the ‘I’ the ability to have total power over the perception of their ‘true self.’¹⁰⁶

Bidart irrevocably removes West from ‘the world’ when the character has reached the limits of what she can experience and know. West has no more to impart to the reader about, ‘name, gender, action;| fashion;| MATTER ITSELF’ because she has removed herself from that landscape.¹⁰⁷ Bidart’s emphatic use of masculine verbs and adjectives as an ‘emotional, not intellectual evaluation’ has provided West with an identity that is under pressure to live

¹⁰¹ ‘Ellen West,’ p. 43, ll. 311-316.

¹⁰² Ibid 119

¹⁰³ James, p. 180.

¹⁰⁴ ‘Ellen West,’ p. 43, ll. 319-320.

¹⁰⁵ Binswanger, ‘The Existential Analysis School of Thought,’ p. 196.

¹⁰⁶ ‘Ellen West,’ p. 30, ll. 4.

¹⁰⁷ ‘Ellen West,’ p.39, ll. 333-235.

two, antithetical empirical truths simultaneously.¹⁰⁸ The parts are inverses, cancelling each other out and creating a void in which West does not survive. The 'I' collapses upon itself.

¹⁰⁸ Robin Lakoff, qtd. in *Randall Jarrell and His Age*, p. 40.

II. The Fracturing of the Dramatic Monologue

The structure of 'Ellen West' is most aptly described as an approximate form of dramatic monologue when examined against the more common criteria viewed in critical work on the form. The poem certainly complies with Robert Browning's definition of the dramatic monologue on a surface level: 'the story is told by some actor in [the poem], not by the poet.'¹⁰⁹ 'Ellen West' falls far short of the more stringent definitions that would require the poem to have an occasion, influence of an auditor, or take place entirely in the present.¹¹⁰ While elements like the speaker, audience, revelation, and dramatics are present, the occasion, auditor influence, and present time are notably absent. Sessions lists Browning's 'My Last Duchess' as an example of a perfect dramatic monologue; the occasion of the poem being 'the arrival of the envoy to discuss wedding plans.'¹¹¹ 'Ellen West' has no such occasion; the poem reads as a series of musings, recollections, medical entries, and a letter. This dissertation argues that while Bidart breaks with many traditions seen as core criteria of the genre, he still maintains enough resemblance of the form in 'Ellen West' for the poem to be considered what Sessions would deem an 'approximate dramatic monologue.'¹¹² By way of considering the degree to which the poem departs from and adheres to the various criteria available can its importance as a post-Confessional poem be recognised.

Sessions writes that the dramatic monologue 'must be electric and it must be unfolding with the speaker's words. The audience must be a participant in the original occasion, and the action must all be in the present time. Dramatic effectiveness is lost if all these characteristics relate only to past action.'¹¹³ 'Ellen West' uses both present and past tenses and what Sessions calls the 'original event' is absent.¹¹⁴ West's reflective

¹⁰⁹ Sinfield, p. 8.

¹¹⁰ Sessions, p. 508.

¹¹¹ Ibid 508

¹¹² Ibid 508

¹¹³ Ibid 510-511

¹¹⁴ Ibid 510

introspections are in the present tense while the medical notes, memories, and letter are in past tense. While changes in tense do take the poem farther away from Sessions' idea of a perfect monologue, the 'excitement' of 'Ellen West' is not diminished, nor is the interplay between speaker and audience in jeopardy of being less dramatic. W. David Shaw argues that one aspect of the dramatic monologue is the 'speaker's unpredictable apostrophe' and 'swerves of voice.'¹¹⁵ 'Ellen West' is rife with both.

As noted in the previous chapter, Bidart aims to tell stories that contain 'plots that feel as if no one willed them.'¹¹⁶ Bidart manages the plot, or rather, West's dramatic characterisation and voice, through manipulation of lyric and form. The plot of 'Ellen West,' however, occurs mostly in the past. Rare instances of present tense action occur in the opening section of the poem and in the prose sections. Early dramatic monologues were set in present tense situations and memories are 'implied.'¹¹⁷ According to Sessions, 'Dramatic effectiveness is lost if all these characteristics [action] relate only to past action' and classifies the dramatic monologues that lack occasion in the present time as imperfect.¹¹⁸ 'Ellen West' resorts to the shifting timeline as a means of increasing dramatic effectiveness, perhaps indicating that a display of a larger span of West's life is necessary to show the permeability of her identity.

The instability of the verb tenses also prevent a stable auditor from being known. That is to say, it is not usually clear to whom West speaks. An example of a clear auditor would be the envoy from Browning's 'My Last Duchess' or the watchmen in 'Fra Lippo Lippi.'¹¹⁹ With the exception of the letter, 'Ellen West' is similar to 'Herbert White' in that it does not seem to be spoken to anyone in particular. The 'Dearest' character in the letter is the closest we have, though its auditor is reading the letter not in time with the events of the poem but

¹¹⁵ *Origins of the Dramatic Monologue*, p. 9.

¹¹⁶ 'Writing 'Ellen West,'' p. 6. ll. 30.

¹¹⁷ Faas, p. 147.

¹¹⁸ 'Dramatic Monologue,' p. 511.

¹¹⁹ Sinfield, pp. 2 & 8.

after the poem has ended. There is not an active dialogue between the two characters. It is not unheard of for a dramatic monologue to have multiple auditors; Coleridge's 'This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison' and Tennyson's 'Ulysses' both lack a single auditor.¹²⁰ But, per S.S. Curry, it is customary for an auditor to be present and that, 'his character is understood entirely from the impression he produces upon the speaker.'¹²¹ Bidart's manner of not using an auditor has an effect of allowing West to indirectly escape judgment.¹²² With West's presence permanently preserved in the letter and any possible response 'Dearest' or the reader may have will not be heard by the 'I.' With no auditor present in the bulk of the poem, there is no one-sided conversation, no-one that responds to West out of our ear-shot and there is not a presence that influences her in a present tense setting. The auditor exists to apply 'an external pressure so that we see two side of [her], as it were, interacting.'¹²³ Bidart accounts for the poem missing this pressure by having West place pressure on herself. In other words, West is naturally a divided character.

For that reason, the inclusion of the past is acceptable within the dramatic monologue form. Both 'Herbert White' and 'Ellen West' are similar to Rossetti's 'Jenny' in that there is something that, 'remind[s] the speaker of his past [and] prompt him to speak about it or rechannel his train of thought in sudden, unexpected ways.'¹²⁴ Ekbert Faas notes that recalling memory is common but these poems usually relate memory from a specific occasion occurring in the present. However, we have no notice of what prompts West to start speaking of her memories while still retaining the type of speech that Faas describes as, 'the babblings of a twentieth century neurotic talking to his psychoanalyst.'¹²⁵ West's rambling recollection of the Callas history also exhibits the same type of tone and tense

¹²⁰ Shaw, *Origins of the Dramatic Monologue*, pp. 17 & 65.

¹²¹ qtd. in 'The Dramatic Monologue,' *PMLA*, 62:2 (June 1947), 503-516 (p. 504).

¹²² *The Poetry of Experience*, preface.

¹²³ Sinfield, p. 3.

¹²⁴ Faas, p. 150.

¹²⁵ *Retreat into the Mind*, pp. 156-157.

which then blends in with West's actual memories. These past tense sections are evidence of past failures that prove to West and the audience that the future also promises failure. In the present, West reasserts that nothing is left for her but '*not to have a body*.'¹²⁶ This becomes the basis of the struggle for identity that Bidart promotes.

Alan Sinfield writes that the 'dramatic monologue deliberately undermines the naturalistic conception of character. The speaker and his situation hang in an insubstantial void.'¹²⁷ The space that Bidart has created for West cannot be maintained; it is illusory. What follows then, is a, 'concentration upon moments of intense apprehension which transcend circumstances and perhaps personality.'¹²⁸ Bidart invents these types of moments for West as when he places her in the restaurant and train scenes. These moments spill over into the surrounding social landscapes causing the poem to exceed manageable levels of anxiety, moving beyond the control of the narrator. Bidart has thus created a speaker that operates in a far more hyperbolic world than the dry, analytic text of Binswanger. Where Binswanger inundates his subject in analysis, Bidart places West outside the scope of such judgment and where limitations imposed by external variables stress the inverse. That is to say, while personality and classification lay outside of the speaker's control, the end, the ultimate limitation, displays uncompromising choice.

Perhaps the most noticeable characteristic that 'Ellen West' lacks in order for it to be 'perfect' is that of the singular, first-person speaker. This is a requirement that all referenced critics agreed upon. When encountering the unnamed speaker, the reader must not forget or lose sight of the presence of the 'I,' which is over-shadowed if there is another speaker. West's characterisation, however, is potent enough to carry through the portions of the poem where her voice is absent. Langbaum states that 'we give [the main character] all our

¹²⁶ 'Ellen West,' p. 38, ll. 201.

¹²⁷ *Dramatic Monologue*, p. 65.

¹²⁸ *Ibid* 65

sympathy as a condition of reading the poem, since he is the only character there.’¹²⁹ The second speaker in ‘Ellen West’ impedes absolute participation in West’s cognitive projections. The reader’s participation is one method in the dramatic monologue that allows the reader to remove themselves from passing moral judgment and appreciate the character (in the form of sympathy).¹³⁰

The alternating sections of prose and lyric perform a duel of sorts, heightening the tension and torment of West. These disparate, duelling sections of lyric and prose also create a fragmentation that perhaps had its beginnings in ‘Herbert White’ five years prior which also breaks with the streamlined, straight-forward dramatic monologues of Bidart’s predecessors. Whereas ‘Herbert White’ consists of numerous small dramatic monologues interrupted by weighty section breaks and white space, Bidart employs prose, white space, and widely-spaced, bolded periods (the latter being used throughout *The Book of the Body*) that interrupt Ellen’s tangents. The poem, then, is a series of fragments. Langbaum insists that providing the reader with means to reflect removes us from the realm of dramatic monologue. The speaker is meant to be an ‘autonomous force,’ which the reader denies the speaker by responding to and impeding the speaker’s freedom of ‘self-expression.’¹³¹ He argues that maintaining the first person point-of-view is necessary to build tension and more readily access the speaker’s ‘extraordinary perspective.’¹³² It allows the reader to establish a sense of ‘disequilibrium’ between ‘sympathy’ and ‘judgment’ towards the speaker through maintained exposure to them.¹³³ Such ‘disequilibrium’ created by constant exposure ‘is the whole purpose of the dramatic monologue.’¹³⁴ But Bidart is able to achieve ‘disequilibrium’ without West’s unrelenting presence.

¹²⁹ *The Poetry of Experience*, preface.

¹³⁰ Langbaum, *The Poetry of Experience*, p. 83.

¹³¹ *The Poetry of Experience*, p. 177.

¹³² *The Poetry of Experience*, p. 137.

¹³³ *The Poetry of Experience*, pp. 139 – 140.

¹³⁴ *The Poetry of Experience*, p. 140.

Sessions says of a perfect dramatic monologue that, 'It is essential that interplay be active between the speaker and audience, constantly contributing to the flow of ideas. Finest interplay reveals character and centers on the climactic effect on the speaker; that is, the speaker must be the leading dramatic figure.'¹³⁵ While West is not a constant voice, given the fragmentary nature of the poem, she is undoubtedly the leading dramatic figure. A. Dwight Culler says that a fragmentary nature is part of the 'essence' of the dramatic monologue and that 'the reader participates in the creation of meaning by tacitly supplying the other side of the dialogue, the antecedent and concluding actions.'¹³⁶ Physical voids in a poem provide the reader with time to respond to the speaker, which then introduces judgment and suspends unconditional sympathy.

The fragmentary nature of 'Ellen West' offers the reader a reprieve where West is allowed none; we are meant to 'survive her.'¹³⁷ When West states that her doctors see her 'as just a "case,"' the prose sections step in to strongly advise the reader that West is not of sound mind; her truth is not to be trusted.¹³⁸ The prose sections note, without bias, a different West than the speaker portrays: she 'suffers tortured vomiting at night and violent diarrhoea during the day,' is 'a skeleton, and weighs only 92 pounds.'¹³⁹ She is neither 'elegant' nor 'big-boned'¹⁴⁰ and the contradictions prevent the reader from completely believing and sympathizing with West as the sole 'instrument of perception,' 'maker of meaning,' and 'maker of the poem's validity.'¹⁴¹ West, then, faces not only judgment from her doctors, but from the reader and what might be called the third-party, 'silent auditor' as well.¹⁴² Whereas a more traditional dramatic monologue forces the reader to understand the

¹³⁵ 'Dramatic Monologue,' p. 509.

¹³⁶ 'Monodrama and the Dramatic Monologue,' p. 368.

¹³⁷ 'Writing "Ellen West,"' p. 8, ll. 5.

¹³⁸ 'Ellen West,' p. 30 & 40, ll. 13 & 239-245

¹³⁹ 'Ellen West,' p. 30 & 31, ll. 4-7, 26-29.

¹⁴⁰ 'Ellen West,' p. 30 & 39, ll. 7 & 222.

¹⁴¹ Langbaum, *The Poetry of Experience*, p. 52.

¹⁴² Sinfield, p. 18.

world through the speaker's perspective, Bidart's poem repeatedly sets up West's contradictory perspective just to deconstruct it or oppose it.¹⁴³

Bidart's portrayal of body dysmorphia might be an example of what Shaw calls 'the post-Nietzschean model of interpretation' in more contemporary dramatic monologues. Shaw explains that this model argues that man exists unable to unravel or identify self-deceptions and poetry lacks sincerity. Essentially, such a model is set in opposition to the Romantic concept of 'I feel, am what I feel, know what I feel.'¹⁴⁴ Critics that use this model of interpretation 'are interested in charting the operation of bad faith or unconscious self-deception and of determining the limits of what can and cannot be known in a dramatic monologue.'¹⁴⁵ West's self-perceptions shift depending on what perspective is required so that she can continue to live intensely; however, Bidart allows West more awareness of her contradictions throughout the duration of the poem than that of Herbert White. Bidart's method of using speakers who, by various degrees, lie to themselves implements the speech of 'illusion' from which the mentally unsound speaker will voice their empirical truth.¹⁴⁶ The illusion becomes the universe and is subject to interpretation by entities external to it. Bidart presents West as an unsound character struggling with identity who fails to expose a legitimately honest nature.

What West appears steadfast and conscious of is her adopted ideal:

Only by
acting; choosing, rejecting, have I
made myself –
discovered who and what Ellen can be . . .¹⁴⁷

¹⁴³ Sinfield, pp. 5-6;

Shaw, *Origins of the Monologue*, p. 12.

¹⁴⁴ *Origins of the Monologue*, p. 188.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid 188

¹⁴⁶ Ibid. 188-189.

¹⁴⁷ 'Ellen West,' p. 39, ll. 228-231.

These sentiments most seem to apply to the Romantic notion of, ‘I feel, am what I feel, know what I feel’ that is in direct opposition.¹⁴⁸ West ‘feels’ that she is a ‘case,’ ‘meat,’ an ‘ideal,’ and a disappointment to others.¹⁴⁹ Her self-definition and reaction to opposition is much the same in the beginning of the poem as it is in the end, her end.

--- My doctors tell me I must give up
this ideal;

but I
WILL NOT . . . cannot.¹⁵⁰

In keeping with the concept of lack self-knowledge, Bidart presents a West that is either incapable or unwilling to accept the observations of outside parties because knowledge is limited to the ‘I.’ The meaning of what West is unable to say or know is known to the reader. Shaw writes that this is one aspect of a dramatic monologue and that the unconscious is ‘usually more important’ than the ‘conscious.’¹⁵¹ West straddles the line separating inability to know about one’s self and revealing to the reader their subjective truth. It is this manner of existing, what Shaw calls ‘double irony’ within most dramatic monologues, that heightens the crisis of Bidart’s West and promotes the idea of ‘the nervous, illogical I’ found in Binswanger's text.¹⁵²

West’s inability to turn away from her obsessions prevents her from deciphering the ‘illusions [she] lives by.’¹⁵³ Her self-assessment is stubbornly set towards self destruction in order to correct the ‘double-being,’ or what Langbaum refers to as a ‘paradox.’¹⁵⁴ He is referring to the portion of Nietzsche’s Apollonian-Dionysian dichotomy that argues that the,

¹⁴⁸ Shaw, *Origins of the Monologue*, p. 188;

Langbaum, *Poetry of Experience*, pp. 228-235.

¹⁴⁹ ‘Ellen West,’ pp. 30 & 42, ll. 10, 13, 15, 297.

¹⁵⁰ ‘Ellen West,’ p. 30, ll. 9 – 12.

¹⁵¹ *Origins of the Dramatic Monologue*, p. 12.

¹⁵² ‘Masks of the Unconscious,’ p. 439;

Binswanger, ‘The Case of Ellen West,’ pp. 242.

¹⁵³ Shaw, *Origins of the Monologue*, p. 188

¹⁵⁴ *Poetry of Experience*, p. 229

‘eternal life of the will is not affected by [the hero’s] annihilation.’¹⁵⁵ West’s letter at the end of the poem grants her eternal life ‘outside of the dramatic situation.’¹⁵⁶ This, again, falls outside of what strictly defined dramatic monologues aspire to because the tense of the situation has been transferred to a different date.¹⁵⁷ However, the letter also serves as her hero’s justification and defence and is the final evidence presented that proves that West is the same as she was at the start of the poem: a figure who ‘WILL NOT ... cannot’ ‘give up this ideal’ and is meant for ‘dying.’¹⁵⁸ She is reaffirming her self-deception and her main argument, which creates the type of patterns found in dramatic monologues like Eliot’s ‘J. Alfred Prufrock’ where the speaker sends the initial message forward to the speaker at the end of the poem.¹⁵⁹

Langbaum argues that the repetition of such dramatic sentiment is ‘the most effective climax in dramatic monologues.’¹⁶⁰ In other words, a dramatic monologue’s speaker exists in stasis and a reaffirmation of a speaker’s position at the end of the poem establishes this. That West is not aware of truth is typical of the speakers in dramatic monologues. The speaker, ‘can embody or live their truths but never speak them,’ which, in a manner of speaking, is a way that the speaker lies to himself to preserve their delusory mentality.¹⁶¹ For instance, while the idea of a ‘refuser’ might evoke images of strength and conscious will, West also describes herself as ‘crippled,’ implying weakness and lack of control. What the reader comes to understand through use of this manner of repetition is that West is more capable of choice and self-control than she either knows or admits to herself, marking her as wholly unreliable. West’s unconscious need for self deprecation and the idea that she has choices become the poem’s unconscious revelations.

¹⁵⁵ *Poetry of Experience*, p. 230.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid* 230.

¹⁵⁷ *Sessions*, p. 510.

¹⁵⁸ ‘Ellen West,’ p. 30, ll. 3, 9-12.

¹⁵⁹ *Poetry of Experience*, p. 191.

¹⁶⁰ *The Poetry of Experience*, p. 154.

¹⁶¹ ‘Masks of the Unconscious,’ pp. 439 & 442.

As part of her defence, West must add to her discourse on what coping mechanisms she has attempted in order to escape the constant ‘dread’ that drives her towards what Langbaum calls the ‘only ultimate conclusion of a dramatic monologue’: ‘the speaker’s death.’¹⁶² West argues that all methods she undertakes to combat thoughts of eating and lack thereof ‘[are] like trying to appease thirst | with ink.’¹⁶³ Each night, West regurgitates laxatives and other contents of her stomach, and dares to hope that in the morning, the night’s rejection of food will have quieted her mind.¹⁶⁴ It doesn’t. Hope serves an inverse function within the poem; any grain of it within the poem amplifies its own ineffectiveness.

‘Ellen West’ does not meet a number of criteria that critics regard as essential for a poem to qualify as a dramatic monologue. There are two speakers, and though the second speaker is focused on the first and the two do not interact, the meaning of ‘mono’ is undermined. Neither speaker is presenting their case from a known present-time space and an original event that initiates the dramatic action is missing. ‘Ellen West’ is meant to be dramatic and the hyperbolic nature of the speaker’s illness is meant to increase the dramatic nature of the poem where adherence to genre is disregarded. What the poem does have are the unconscious revelations and ‘unpredictable apostrophes or swerves of voice.’¹⁶⁵ Most importantly, ‘Ellen West’ employs the use of a feint, what T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound regarded as ‘the poet speaking to the audience through a mask.’¹⁶⁶ Bidart uses the poem not only as a reinvention of Ellen West’s psychological history, but as a front for his own. The poem, then, harnesses the ‘essence’ of what a dramatic monologue is generally through it be. It is able to function as a loose form of dramatic monologue that encourages us to further investigate the genre’s innovative possibilities.¹⁶⁷

¹⁶² *The Poetry of Experience*, pp. 157.

¹⁶³ ‘Ellen West,’ p. 40, ll. 237 – 238.

¹⁶⁴ ‘Ellen West,’ p. 31, ll. 24-27.

¹⁶⁵ Shaw, *Origins of the Monologue*, p. 12.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid* 13

¹⁶⁷ Culler, p. 368.

III. Covert Confessionalism: Bidart's Use of the Feint As Agent of Loss

Many literary critics who discuss the dramatic monologue have surmised that while it contains a first person speaker that was not the poet, the poetic form still contained strong hints of a third voice, ostensibly the poet, 'speaking to the audience through a mask.'¹⁶⁸ Pound echoed this exact sentiment, adding only that the act of wearing masks could be interpreted as an act of translation and provide the poet with the freedom to experiment with different forms and linguistic modes.¹⁶⁹ Prior to 'Ellen West,' Bidart had used a feint in 'Herbert White' to display his anti-self as a vehicle to work through very real issues he experienced with his family.¹⁷⁰ Bidart used what he was not in order to say what he was.

Subsequently, the mask worn for 'Ellen West' subsists in a manner a little more difficult to name, the obvious surface differences between the poet and his character Ellen West give credence to Bidart's classification as a post-Confessional poet who creates characters or utilises historical figures to 'gain access to otherwise inaccessible characters.'¹⁷¹

Consequently, Dan Chiasson hits upon something critical when he maintains that to explore Bidart's poems is equivalent to 'encounter[ing] Bidart's presence – often contentious -- within another, foreign, presence.'¹⁷² Ellen West occurs on the page as a character just as unlike Bidart at face-value as two of Bidart's other characters from his dramatic monologues: Herbert White and Vaslav Nijinsky. Like Nijinsky, West is a historical figure, one that Bidart was trying to translate rather than create.¹⁷³

In attempting to 'translate,' as Pound described, Bidart designed a character linked to the person in Binswanger's case-study: a woman filled with 'dread' concerning both familial and romantic relationships, food, gender, the role women were required to fill in society, and

¹⁶⁸ Shaw, *Origins of the Monologue*, pp. 66-67.

¹⁶⁹ Sinfield, pp. 71-72.

¹⁷⁰ 'An Interview --- With Mark Halliday (1983),' p. 238.

¹⁷¹ Chiasson, *One Kind of Everything*, p. 80.

¹⁷² Ibid 80

¹⁷³ 'An Interview – With Mark Halliday (1983),' p. 239.

even her own gender identity. As West's illness progresses, so too does her isolation; her sphere shrinking, contracting so that her obsessions with food and existing become a 'psychophysical garb' she wears as justification for her inflexible ideal. This ideal functions as a prison where there is no escape.¹⁷⁴

While Bidart does not suffer from the symptoms of anorexia, he claims he felt an obsession with food.¹⁷⁵ It can also be inferred from 'West' and Bidart's personal poetry that both the real West and Bidart experienced overwhelming, co-dependent familial relationships. These kinds of bonds between poet and the speaker in a dramatic monologue are part of what is termed the feint. The speaker, in some way, promotes the opinions, emotions, and biographical similarities of the poet while maintaining the form of dramatic monologue.

A number of poets that came before Bidart were known for employing this technique. Browning used Fra Lippo Lippi as a platform to discuss human individuality, Andrew Marvell's speakers in 'Bermudas' shared the poet's strong religious views, and Yeats' poems concerning Crazy Jane shared the poet's views on 'love, life and death.' Bidart's mentor, Robert Lowell, used the speakers in his dramatic monologues, 'After the Surprising Conversions' and 'Mr. Edwards and the Spider' to signify his own dissatisfaction with 'hell-fire theology.'¹⁷⁶ The aforementioned Randall Jarrell wrote dramatic monologues using female characters; Mary Jarrell labelled this as Jarrell's 'semi-self portraits' which 'dramatized [Jarrell's] own sensibility.'¹⁷⁷

If one is to start simply, we find that it is Bidart who likes 'three scoops of vanilla ice cream,' and that the historical account of Ellen West in Binswanger's case study doesn't

¹⁷⁴ 'The Case of Ellen West,' pp. 239-242, 245, 249, 281, 336.

¹⁷⁵ 'Writing 'Ellen West,' p. 4, ll. 8-10.

¹⁷⁶ Sinfield, pp. 13-15.

¹⁷⁷ James Longenbach, *Modern Poetry after Modernism*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 55.

contain any such description.¹⁷⁸ In fact, West was averse to milk products.¹⁷⁹ In these opening lines, Bidart not only chooses to speak through his character, he chooses to present himself first. It is as if he is saying through this one detail, ‘I am her, she is me.’ West and the poet are then firmly categorised together as being simultaneously repulsed and preoccupied with food. Food and lack of food challenges the concept of corporeality and how this coincides with expectations placed on the different genders.¹⁸⁰ Bidart uses food, the most fore-grounded image in ‘West’ to make various points, some conflicting, regarding intimacy, its loss or the rejection of.

What we find is that food does not satisfy either poet or character on an emotional level. West says that, ‘...trying to stop my hunger with FOOD | is like trying to appease thirst | with ink.’¹⁸¹ If Bidart’s poems ‘Glutton’ and ‘Mouth’ are read as confessional poems, then he too is unable to find gratification from food, especially in the form of taste.¹⁸² In the poem ‘Glutton,’ Bidart recalls his grandmother’s sausage, but he is unable to remember how it tasted. He applies the same longing for the taste of a perfect pear he once ate.¹⁸³ He hungers for a sensation that is irrevocably lost, and coincidentally, appears to hunger for a past relationship or an emotional connection that has been severed. Likewise, West’s sense of taste seems also misplaced, as the mentioning of particular foods within ‘Ellen West’ generate images rather than producing memories of what these particular foods offered in the way of exposing other sensations. The reader witnesses the restrained manner in which West ‘allows’ herself the action of eating bread and ice cream. However, she doesn’t truly experience the food; or rather, she does not remember the experience. She chooses to focus

¹⁷⁸ Alice Mattinson, ‘The Tumult in the Heart Keeps Asking Questions ...,’ *On Frank Bidart: Fastening the Voice to the Page*, eds. Liam Rector and Tree Swenson, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007), p. 43.

¹⁷⁹ Binswanger, ‘The Case of Ellen West,’ p. 238.

¹⁸⁰ ‘Writing ‘Ellen West,’’ p. 4, ll. 8-10.

¹⁸¹ ‘Ellen West,’ p. 40, ll. 236-238.

¹⁸² ‘Glutton,’ *Metaphysical Dog*, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013), p. 55, ll. 2-11.

¹⁸³ ‘Ellen West,’ p. 30, ll. 1-3, 8-11 & 15-18.

on the idea that she feels isolated in a crowded restaurant.¹⁸⁴ Essentially, food is being used as a prop, a disguise and excuse to eavesdrop. It is a tool used to promote one of her other neurotic compulsions: obsessions with people and relationships.

In the restaurant, West observes a couple that, at first, meet her idea of physical perfection. She wants to be the slender woman and, concurrently, desires to replace her as the slender man's 'lover.'¹⁸⁵ It is as if West is looking to this couple for meaning, to sate a mental hunger that physical food cannot. David Holbrook refers to such hunger as 'existence-hunger,' which is an infantile hunger aimed at 'substantiality of identity.'¹⁸⁶ Bidart creates a character searching for a stable relationship to live through vicariously, having failed to establish one of her own that offers complete fulfilment. The couple has shown itself capable of sharing an intimacy that West cannot. While the couple act in tandem, as one, West cannot as she has denied herself any capability needed for a true and healthy union. Such fear causing 'mutual incorporation' can be found in a schizoid individual according to R.D. Laing.¹⁸⁷ If this is the case and Bidart has crafted a character prone to these tendencies, food then morphs into a weapon as an object that threatens the West's small world. Food is representative of failure rather than food serving as the main aggressor that assaults West.

Bidart's treatments of food in other poems are echoes of what we see in 'Ellen West,' reinforcing the idea that Bidart's person is a background presence in the poem. The experience Bidart shares in 'Glutton' indicates that food is a similar representation; it is a foil for the loss of intimacy or inability to create such a connection. The link that Bidart shared with his grandmother has been cut off. She is dead.¹⁸⁸ In other words, the mutual attachment created by their familial relationship has ceased to exist on the side of the grandmother,

¹⁸⁴ 'Ellen West,' p. 31, ll. 35-42.

¹⁸⁵ 'Ellen West,' p. 32, ll. 43-60.

¹⁸⁶ *Sylvia Plath: Poetry and Existence*, (London: The Athlone Press, 1976), pp. 5 & 12.

¹⁸⁷ Holbrook, p. 25;

Alan Williamson, *Introspection and Contemporary Poetry*, p. 34.

¹⁸⁸ 'Glutton,' p. 55, ll. 1-2.

leaving the grandson figure bereft. What is left is the memory of her sausage, something so singular and special; it warrants its own line and stanza:

Ropes of my dead
grandmother's unreproducible

sausage, curing for weeks¹⁸⁹

The familial intimacy between grandson and grandmother has also been lost. The act of making this food, 'curing [it] for weeks | on the front porch' indicates that through food, there was a bond forged which was completely unique based on the irreproducibility of the recipe.¹⁹⁰ The feint of this sort goes beyond shared histories between West and Bidart. Where Bidart treasures the familial intimacy, West does not. It is West, ultimately, who dies never having known what it is like to be 'drawn [...] into a circle.'¹⁹¹

However, Bidart also uses the feint to promote the danger in relationships. The mother figure in 'West' is rejected as is the mother figure in 'Glutton.' In 'Glutton,' the mention of the mother serve as a warning to the speaker to rebuff dangerous associations, like Laing's examples of 'love or [...] any human contact,' that might harm the speaker's identity. Bidart's mother finds the food 'shameful,' which implies a rejection of the child-figure.¹⁹² The newfound shame warns the speaker to maintain an emotional distance, and the result is that the speaker forgets, casts out something and someone he had desired a connection with. One might even argue that the mother-figure in 'Glutton' has the same role as West's mental condition: an isolating element that seeks to destroy the speaker's well-being and wrest authority from their person. And like West, the young Bidart character seemingly transfers this control away on purpose; he's let it happen due to being in a position of fragility. The undeniable links in theme between these two poems reveal another aspect of the feint. If the dramatic monologue is a vehicle for the poet's opinions and veiled experiences, then Bidart's

¹⁸⁹ 'Glutton,' p. 55, ll. 1-3.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid p. 55, ll. 2-3.

¹⁹¹ 'Ellen West,' p. 43, ll. 319.

¹⁹² Ibid p. 55, ll. 4-7.

have been fairly steadfast for all the years that occurred in between these poems. All of the implications that accompany food in Bidart's poem are evidence of irresolvable issues.

Another contemporary poem, 'Mouth,' utilises food consumption for a similar purpose as 'Ellen West' and 'Glutton': food cannot serve as a substitute for intimacy. Like West, the speaker is a 'refuser.' However, it seems as though in this instance, his body is rejecting the food in spite of his desires:

...his stomach
rebelled at food, as quickly as he ate
it passed right through him, his body
refused what his body needed.
[...]
... he shoved
meat into his mouth but still his
body retained nothing. Absorbed
nothing.¹⁹³

What the speaker really pursues is 'Love, which always to his surprise | exhilarated even as it tormented | and absorbed him.'¹⁹⁴ By way of torment, love produces feelings of danger and need to escape: 'Faces too close, that despite themselves | promise, then out of the panic disappointment.'¹⁹⁵ Love forces sensation on him so that 'when you smell your | flesh you smell | unfulfilment.'¹⁹⁶ Flesh is treated impersonally, just as the treatment of food, where nothing other than meat is mentioned. Even then, the word 'meat' is noticeably vague. Thus, 'flesh' and 'meat' can be treated as interchangeable, so that now, two sensations produced by interaction with food cause mental anguish. This is a sentiment expressed so strongly in 'Ellen West' that it has become perhaps the most discussed critical aspect of this poem.

This anguish is indicative of the feelings of love that the speaker cannot reciprocate. The lover makes demands, but the speaker does not do the same, thus indicating a

¹⁹³ 'Mouth,' *Metaphysical Dog*, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013), p. 85, ll. 1—4 & 7-10.

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid* p. 85, ll. 16-18.

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid* p. 86, ll. 34-35.

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid* p. 86, ll. 40-42.

helplessness and absence of symbiosis.¹⁹⁷ Instead, the speaker, ‘twists inside the box | he cannot exit or rise above. | He thinks he must die.’¹⁹⁸ Lack of reciprocation and the possibility of being forced into abandoning one’s principle equals death. Bidart cannot abide or endure the demands of the lover so he imagines his death. West takes this action to an extreme in a similar situation. After being unable to live up to the expectations she feels her husband and ‘Dearest’ have, she kills herself. Neither poem contains an ending where self-annihilation is the equivalent of peace; and thus, the problems that the two speakers face in life, as when we compare ‘West’ and ‘Glutton,’ remain unresolved. With the images in ‘West’ reappearing in Bidart’s other works, ‘Ellen West’ itself can be read as more complex than originally thought.

A feint of this sort, says Sinfield:

places the individual in a wider context of thought and events. On one hand we have a powerful impression, through his own mind, of the kind of person the speaker is. On the other, we feel the pressure of an external force which threatens to qualify or even nullify the efforts of the speaker. [...] the validity of their approach to the world and their own significance within it is challenged by our larger consciousness.¹⁹⁹

The ‘wider context’ is the ‘why’ of ‘Ellen West,’ an element of the poem that is barely visible: that of death and the mother that Bidart lost at the same time as encountering West in Binswanger’s work.²⁰⁰

Death and the end of the self are the answers that all three of Bidart’s dramatic monologues arrive at, an impulse that developed within Bidart himself after the death of his mother.²⁰¹ As *Golden State* explored and sought to work through Bidart’s relationship with his father, and to a smaller extent his mother, ‘Ellen West’ and ‘Confessional’ focus on the psychological negativity provoked by his relationship with his mother almost exclusively.

This connection exists in spite of the fact that ‘Ellen West’ only mentions a mother figure

¹⁹⁷ Ibid p. 86, ll. 40-41.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid p. 86, ll. 53-55.

¹⁹⁹ *Dramatic Monologue*, p. 34.

²⁰⁰ ‘Writing Ellen West,’ p. 4, ll. 5-7.

²⁰¹ ‘Writing ‘Ellen West,’’ p. 4, ll. 2-4.

twice within the poem. Bidart reveals in ‘Writing “Ellen West”’ that the poem was, ‘Exorcism of that thing within Frank that wanted, after his mother’s death, to die.’²⁰² The extraordinary feint in ‘Ellen West’ is strongly focused on the mother without the poem having to be.

The mother figure that is present in ‘Ellen West’ is representative of the breaking of a natural bond. West views her mother as an object forced to succumb to aging as dictated by nature:

Even as a child,
I saw the “natural process of aging
is for one’s middle of thicken ---
one’s skin to blotch;

as happened to my mother.
And her mother.

*I loathed “Nature.”*²⁰³

For Bidart, nature was also an adversary of sorts; at the least, an inaccessible medium which he needed to exist to bond with his mother. In ‘Confessional,’ he writes, ‘We couldn’t meet in Nature, --- | ... AND ALL WE HAD WAS NATURE.’²⁰⁴ For both West and Bidart, biological life and familial relationships were accessible when based on opposing wills or foreign actions and emotions. West’s dependence was tied up not in her mother’s actions toward her, but in what the slow decay represented. The slow death of West’s mother due to biological aging haunted and challenged West more than action or lack-of-action on the mother or grandmother’s part. For Bidart, the mother figure ‘*JUST DIED*,’ ‘the issues in her life | didn’t come out of somewhere, reached no culmination, | climax or catharsis, ---.’²⁰⁵ The haunting that Bidart experienced, was inescapably tangled up in, was the co-dependent nature

²⁰² p. 4, ll. 2-3.

²⁰³ ‘Ellen West,’ pp. 33-34, ll. 85-91.

²⁰⁴ ‘Confessional,’ *The Sacrifice*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1983), p. 40, II, ll. 21-22.

²⁰⁵ ‘Confessional,’ p. 44, II, ll. 109 & 113.

of their relationship. As a child, he wanted ‘to be the centre, the focus of her life.’²⁰⁶ It was as an adult that he wanted to sever the co-dependent connection:

All he had told her in words and more than words for years was
that her possessiveness and terror at his independence were
wrong, wrong, wrong.

*

He was the only person she wanted to be with but he refused to
live down the block and then she died.²⁰⁷

As Bidart denied the mother figures a physical nearness in ‘Writing “Ellen West”’ and ‘Confessional,’ West denied her mother (and more futilely, nature) and the mother/daughter connection forged by two female bodies aging.

Alan Williamson claims that such rejection and revulsion are in line with a theory developed by Melanie Klein where the child or speaker rejects ‘the Good Object [...] because it cannot be controlled.’²⁰⁸ Bidart writes about an unhealthy connection with a mother figure that the speaker promotes until he, as the ‘complicit co-conspirator | CHILD | was about twenty | [...] and wanted his “freedom,”’ and likewise, ‘TO SURVIVE, I HAD TO KILL HER INSIDE OF ME.’²⁰⁹ Such an undertaking resulted in failure, however, as Bidart seems to still be ‘exorcising’ his mother in the poem ‘Writing “Ellen West,”’ published thirty-six years after the initial poem of ‘Ellen West’ and thirty-years after ‘Confessional.’

Bidart’s personal poems indicate a lack of control in concerns to the wants of the mother. The speaker feels that the mother figure unconsciously wants him ‘to die.’²¹⁰ The lack of control the faced in ‘Ellen West’ is equally distressing for the speaker. West could not control the aging process of her mother and grandmother. She could only reject them and attempt to fight off the natural maturation processes in her own body. To give in to what could not be controlled would be to compel West to give up the ‘ideal’ she adopted after

²⁰⁶ ‘Confessional,’ p. 41, II, ll. 45.

²⁰⁷ ‘Writing ‘Ellen West,’’ p. 6-7, ll. 36-40.

²⁰⁸ *Almost a Girl*, p. 10

²⁰⁹ ‘Confessional,’ p. 45, II, ll. 131-133 & 143.

²¹⁰ ‘Writing ‘Ellen West,’’ p. 6, ll. 36.

developing such disgust towards the process she witnessed in the female members of her family as a child and such a ‘compromise’ seemed ‘sterile and unreal.’²¹¹ Both poet and character, then, wage war on themselves, much like the Victorian poets. Shaw says, ‘Victorians are notoriously self-divided, often at war with themselves,’ and thus gravitate towards the dramatic monologue. Shaw continues by saying that, ‘the genre [...] keeps its speakers in touch with their shadow selves by cultivating the genius for impersonation.’²¹²

In an interview concerning ‘Ellen West,’ Bidart confirms this usage of the shadow self. He explains that, ‘As a graduate student, I had taken a course in Yeats, who talks about the “anti-self,” about the usefulness of including an anti-self in the work of art—which is to say, someone who is all the things that one is not. By giving voice to what one is not, one understands oneself by confronting one’s shadow.’²¹³ In consequence, by writing ‘Ellen West,’ once again ‘being what he was not,’ Bidart confronted the impasse he was at with yet another parent, this instance being his mother and not his father. Bidart was not his Ellen West, but by donning her as a mask, he was able to find a common ground with her. This work provided him the means to develop other poems like ‘Confessional,’ ‘Glutton,’ and ‘Mouth’ despite the seemingly futility, in *that moment* of writing ‘Ellen West,’ of his struggles. Having dealt with similar issues in a post-Confessional manner, within the genre of the dramatic monologue, Bidart’s personal poems circumvent one of the pitfalls of Confessionalism: the ‘intoxication of narcissism.’²¹⁴

Autobiography in the dramatic monologue provides Bidart with the space for him to ‘exorcise’ the ghost of his mother in the space he has created for West.²¹⁵ Where West is the subjective object of this universe, Bidart is able to be the objective commentator. He

²¹¹ ‘Ellen West,’ p. 44, ll. 325-327.

²¹² *Origins of the Monologue*, p. 86.

²¹³ Hix, p. 194.

²¹⁴ Adam Kirsch, *The Wounded Surgeon: Confessionalism and Transformation in Six American Poets: Robert Lowell, Elizabeth Bishop, John Berryman, Randall Jarrell, Delmore Schwartz, and Sylvia Plath*, (New York: W.W. Norton, 2005), p. 2.

²¹⁵ ‘Writing ‘Ellen West,’’ p. 4, ll. 1-3.

confronts the memories of his mother when he ‘no longer must face her;’ to escape unchanging ‘MEMORY.’²¹⁶ Nonetheless, there is a difficulty in defeating such memories when one is inextricable from them: he was the one creation his mother ‘had made,’ and he contained all of her ‘unappeasable anger, and remorse.’²¹⁷ Even here, when his mother’s death should provide closure, Bidart encounters a Jungian problem:

A man cannot get rid of himself in favor of an artificial personality without punishment. Even the attempt to do so brings on, in all ordinary cases, unconscious reactions... To the degree that the world invites the individual to identify with the mask, he is delivered over to influences from within...An opposite forces its way up from the inside; it is exactly as though the unconscious suppressed the ego with the very same power which drew the ego into the persona.²¹⁸

For Bidart, then, success and ‘UNDOING THIS was beyond me...’ at least by conventional means.²¹⁹ Instead, Bidart’s solution, as with ‘Herbert White,’ was to show what he wasn’t in order to show what he was.²²⁰ He was not the schizophrenic, bulimic or anorexic female that West appeared to be. The *feint* occurs in the meanings behind West’s actions, not just in the actions themselves. Bidart, too, experienced the toxicity of relationships and the harmful feelings, thoughts, and behaviours that can result from such faulty connections. He could empathise with obsession, the need for internal and external control, and the weight of exterior expectations. Moreover, he understood the process of developing irrational views that seemed perfectly logical and the surrender disguised as escape and freedom.

Bidart’s approach to the topic of self-annihilation as a discourse in ‘Ellen West’ and his confessional poem ‘Mouth’ reveals the possibilities of healing and coping via a public platform. ‘Ellen West’ and ‘Mouth’ end in death, perhaps indicating that even closure is subject to limitations. Poems that followed the writing of ‘Ellen West,’ like ‘Glutton,’ ‘Writing ‘Ellen West,’ and ‘Confessional’ completed the poetic framing of healing by

²¹⁶ ‘Confessional,’ p. 55, II, ll. 364.

²¹⁷ *Ibid* 55, II, ll. 358-363.

²¹⁸ Williamson, *Introspection and Contemporary Poetry*, p. 41.

²¹⁹ ‘Confessional,’ II, ll. 181, 358 & 363 - 364

²²⁰ ‘Writing ‘Ellen West,’ p. 9, ll. 64-65.

indicating the desire for continued existence. Bidart indicates in ‘Writing “Ellen West”’ that he intended to accomplish this by using West's character as a vessel to ‘expel’ his crisis.²²¹

Prior to writing ‘West,’ Bidart read the historical person as waging

war between the mind and body, lived out
in her body each stage of the war, its journey and progress, in
which compromise, reconciliation is attempted then rejected
then mourned, till she reaches at last, in an ecstasy costing not
less than everything, death.²²²

And while Bidart was not in a full-blown ‘war,’ he admitted to feeling certain impulses and obsessions which threatened to fully overwhelm him after the death of his mother. The most intense of these obsessions surfaces in Ellen West’s fixation on the idea of corporeality.

The dramatic apex of Bidart’s conversation on physical existence through the monologue’s speaker occurs in the section regarding Maria Callas. We are to believe that Maria Callas is Ellen West’s ‘favorite singer’ and that West identifies with Callas so closely that she regards Callas’ weight-loss and career decline as autobiographical.²²³ Yet such an association between the two females is an impossibility. Ellen West died in 1921 while Maria Callas was not born until 1923.²²⁴ The interest in Maria Callas was Bidart’s own, originating during his collegiate years at Harvard.²²⁵ Therefore the use of a feint becomes obvious and the presence of the poet overwhelming. Sinfield notes that, ‘the slightest touch can bring [the poet] into full focus’ and ‘at such moments the poet obtrudes and the illusion of the feint is specially transparent.’²²⁶ Such an intrusion makes us more aware that Ellen West is a ‘dramatic creation’ and ‘we are obliged to posit simultaneously the speaking ‘I’ and the

²²¹ ‘Writing ‘Ellen West,’ p. 7, ll. 46-47.

²²² ‘Writing ‘Ellen West,’ p. 5, ll. 11-15.

²²³ ‘Ellen West,’ pp. 35 & 37, ll. 114 & 172.

²²⁴ Vincenzo di Nicola, ‘Enigma of Ellen West: Ludwig Binswanger’s Foundation Case of Existential Analysis,’ *Slideshare*, (1994) < <http://www.slideshare.net/PhiloShrink/the-enigma-ellen-west-mcgill-university-151210> > [accessed September 12, 2013];

Bruno Tosi, ‘Chronology,’ *La Divina: The Maria Official Website*, < <http://www.callas.it/english/cronologia.html> > [accessed on 28 September 2012].

²²⁵ ‘An Interview – With Mark Halliday (1983),’ p. 226;

Mattinson, pp. 38-39.

²²⁶ *Dramatic Monologue*, pp. 31-32.

poet's "I."²²⁷ Gray makes an excellent assertion that Callas' inclusion is a 'postromantic allegory for the artistic process, practically, in a moment of conflation of Bidart- Ellen-Callas, an *ars poetica*.'²²⁸ This section, though, appears to have more than one function within the text as indicated by the multi-layered textuality produced when both West and Bidart are simultaneously present. Bidart addresses the reader through the lens of his speaker; West's presence is more attuned to Callas' biography than the poet; the link between these two characters cause Callas to appear as an object and metaphor for rebirth after a bodily decay.

West's austere ideals are still firmly in place in the Callas section. She appears dismissive of Callas' early career as Callas' physical stature did not meet with West's ideals. The discussion plays out like a reverse of the restaurant scene. Callas and her voice were 'fat,' 'enormous,' and faced a need to 'obliterate her flesh' to 'express' what her over-weight self was consuming and burying.²²⁹ Drawn to the gossip, West ponders the story of Callas' possible use of a tapeworm to lose weight.²³⁰ Bidart stops the line right after 'tapeworm,' in what is seemingly an attempt to make us wonder if perhaps West is contemplating using such an extreme method in order to lose weight herself. After all, West routinely ingested enough laxatives each day so that she was continuously ill.²³¹ Use of another dangerous weight-loss method would not be much of a stretch.

Bidart, however, corrects the reader in the next line:

But of course she hadn't.

was her *soul*. . .²³²

The *tapeworm*

'But of course' creates a sense of shaming aimed at the reader or unknown auditor. The reader is the nonsensical one for contemplating such gossip, even though we were seemingly

²²⁷ Ibid 31-32

²²⁸ 'Necessary Thought,' p. 730.

²²⁹ 'Ellen West,' p. 35, ll. 121-132.

²³⁰ 'Ellen West,' p. 35, ll. 133-136.

²³¹ 'Ellen West,' p. 31, ll. 25-28.

²³² 'Ellen West,' p. 36, ll. 137-139.

lured into believing this fiction. By dispelling one myth, West increases her credibility concerning her opinion on Callas and, in the process, her subsequent musings on discovering herself through existence ‘without a body’ through ‘acting; choosing; rejecting.’²³³ This serves as a subtle way for Bidart to reinforce the poem’s position of the possibility of life continuing after corporeal destruction. In fact, one can understand one’s self even better after this transition from being to ethereality as West does not appear to equate loss of body with loss of consciousness.

This ‘new’ Maria Callas, one that even Bidart preferred, is not glamorised as one might assume.²³⁴ The renewed body is not referred to with any more positivity than her body pre-obliteration. ‘Insatiable,’ ‘fragile,’ ‘shrill,’ and lacking ‘athleticism’ are just a few descriptors that indicate Callas, just like the couple in the restaurant, have failed to live up to West’s ideals.²³⁵ Callas now fights with herself to sing, her ‘art’ becoming ‘more refined,’ ‘more capable of expressing humiliation, | rage, betrayal.’ Through making herself smaller, Callas has made her essence more ‘*manifest*,’ and defiant against her peers and a business designed to ‘annihilate the spirit.’²³⁶ Callas, too, is painted as a ‘refuser;’ an opponent to not only herself, but to the unreasonable expectations placed on her. What West resolves to do is transcend Callas, learn from Callas’ failure. What Bidart has done, then, is lend his interests back to West in a reverse feint. Rather than use West to speak to the reader, he is lending part of himself so that West can use it as part of her defence. Bidart lending aspects of himself to West is the equivalent to the lending in ‘Herbert White’: lending his autobiography to his character allows or facilitates the reader being able to recognise an otherwise inaccessible psychological feature.

²³³ ‘Ellen West,’ p. 39, ll. 226 & 229.

²³⁴ Mattinson, p. 39.

²³⁵ ‘Ellen West,’ p. 36, ll. 141, 144, 150, 176.

²³⁶ ‘Ellen West,’ pp. 36-37, ll. 155-162.

The Callas section also seems to be a refutation of ‘suffocating customs’ by way of using a cadence with a halting style, many erratic italics, and punctuated with many dashes and ellipsis to increase the fragmentation beyond what the rest of the poem does. Stanzas are one to three lines in length, forcing the reader to pause and reassess. Callas’ weight loss is an idealised version of how West sees her weight loss. West does not recount the details that the Binswanger voice shares: her method of weight loss involves vomit and diarrhoea,²³⁷ hardly an elegant or refined process. The apex of their complaint against compromising themselves occurs when they simultaneously cry, ‘Art has *repaid* me LIKE THIS!’²³⁸ The intense manner of the West/Callas diatribe perhaps surfaces elsewhere in *Book of the Body*, especially in the poems where Bidart admits to his homosexuality; something that he had not addressed in *Golden State*. To a degree, the rest of *Book of the Body* was a ‘coming out’ to the community of art on a national level and perhaps even a rebirth of self following the death of both parents;²³⁹ the book was uncompromising, an admission that Bidart had experienced ‘terror at my own homosexuality.’²⁴⁰ Bidart imitates a kind of terror in West’s ‘inability not to fear food | day-and-night’ and the assumption that Callas felt ‘torment, bewilderment’ over the destruction of her voice.²⁴¹ For all of them, Bidart asks:

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

that she was an idiot ever to think
anything
material wholly could satisfy? . . .²⁴²

He partially answers himself in ‘Book of the Body’: ‘reconciliation with the body that is | annihilation of the body.’²⁴³ It is after the elimination of one’s body that they can finally connect to others and to one’s self. In the case of ‘Book of the Body,’ Bidart speaks of his

²³⁷ ‘Ellen West,’ p. 31, ll. 26-27.

²³⁸ ‘Ellen West,’ p. 37, ll. 170.

²³⁹ ‘The Book of the Body,’ *Book of the Body*, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977), p. 27, ll. 4.

²⁴⁰ ‘The Book of the Body,’ p. 27, ll. 18.

²⁴¹ ‘Ellen West,’ pp. 37 & 38, ll. 167 & 206-207.

²⁴² ‘Ellen West,’ p. 38, ll. 193-197.

²⁴³ p. 28, ll. 38-39.

parents and his sexual identity.²⁴⁴ The speaker of the poem exhibits desperation towards watching other's connection and needing one of his own. If 'Book of the Body' is read as confessional, then this aspect of the poet is in direct opposition to the character of Ellen West. As with 'Herbert White,' Bidart has crafted a character that was at once him and not him. By crafting his opposites, Bidart succeeds in calling more attention to his voice as the poet.

West is never truly recognised as she would like. Her perceptions cause her to see her husband and friends' recognition of her transformation as steeped in disappointment. Thus, her isolation is maintained both by external and internal forces. She, through madness-tinged lenses, observes their rejection and in turn rejects them.²⁴⁵

The reciprocal rejection in 'Ellen West' is similar to how the 'I' rejects the mother 'Confessional.' However, in 'Confessional,' the speaker's viewpoint is rooted in 'anger,' having been 'made' by someone, his mother, instead of being free to make himself, as Ellen West did.²⁴⁶ To 'unmake,' West kills herself. Holbrook writes, 'To die is the ultimate freedom from ambivalence, or 'stickiness,' the mess of human emotions: its purity is an escape from humanness.'²⁴⁷ For Bidart, then, selecting a doomed character as the vehicle for a feint served as a way to pursue such purity without literally facing the dangers of self-annihilation. His appropriation of Binswanger's psychoanalytic case study provided him an 'unwilled' plot he could meld with his own where Ellen West's fate could not be avoided, Bidart could approach torment, add himself to the 'double plot,' without staking the body that existed.²⁴⁸

'Ellen West' functions as an approximate dramatic monologue drawing from a number of precursory styles. The physical shape of Bidart's poems preserve the intensity

²⁴⁴ p. 27-29, ll. 5-7, 39-40, 45-49.

²⁴⁵ 'Ellen West,' pp. 42-44, ll. 295-297, 322 & 329.

²⁴⁶ 'Ellen West,' pp. 35-37, ll. 119-125, 127, 133-138, 144, 150-151, 163-164, 177-178.

²⁴⁷ *Sylvia Plath: The Poetry of Experience*, p. 85.

²⁴⁸ Hix, p. 33.

where the poem departs from the form of the dramatic monologue. 'Ellen West' as a poem with a plot adapted from Binswanger's portrayal of West, secedes from the case study diagnosis as well as any ones that critics have presented. 'Ellen West,' as a poem that serves as a mask for one part of Bidart, speaks forwards to the reader and backwards to the poet. Bidart projects a sense of himself onto West and the whole of the poem then expresses a dual consciousness. Bidart realises the full reach of the feint in 'Ellen West,' further establishing himself as a post-Confessional poet, rather than a poet writing in the fashion of his contemporaries.

Conclusion

‘Herbert White’ and ‘Ellen West’ are poems of experience and limitation; poems where mentally unsound speakers proceed toward annihilation while the very landscape, the text that contains them, burns in their wake. They prove how Bidart’s work renovates the genre of Confessionalism, borrowing the unique circumstances of his speakers and integrating it as part of his phantasmagoria. Their narratives intensify the degree to which the speaker of dramatic monologues can compel the reader to extend sympathy to them and recognise the severity of their mental illness. Frank Bidart’s ‘bizarre’ application of punctuation and lineation fuels the debate on the line or the punctuation as a means of reading a poem’s voice.⁴⁸¹ The lyrical intensity of ‘Herbert White’ and ‘Ellen West’ is supplied by the manic shape of the poem and its punctuative circus. Breath is no longer dependent on the white space at the end of the line or after a period. Pauses take on an array of length, complementing the wide range of indentions and breaks. The syncopated momentum of the language became a direct representation of the disturbance within Bidart’s characters. Their voices are their unique world perspective and history, examples of the abnormal psyche cleaved and made accessible to the reader in ways that psychological profiling and popular media have failed.

In Bidart’s poetry, the revealing of a mentally ill character is not an exercise in psychological analysis and the speaker’s abnormal mind is not made the sole focus of the narrative. Bidart’s characters refuse the exploration of ‘the definable, the psychological self’ in favour of contemplative retrospection on their experiences.⁴⁸² The poets preceding Bidart were ‘committed to a quest to define [...] the pattern of individual character – the psychological Fates.’⁴⁸³ The definition and revelation of the self was at the centre of many

⁴⁸¹ Lloyd Schwartz, ‘Frank Bidart and Punctuation,’ *On Frank Bidart: Fastening the Voice to the Page*. eds. Liam Rector and Tree Swenson, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007), p. 31.

⁴⁸² Alan Williamson, *Introspection and Contemporary Poetry*, (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1984), p. 4.

⁴⁸³ *Ibid* 2

confessional poems, most notably Robert Lowell's *Life Studies*. Bidart eschews what Elizabeth Sewell calls 'poetic psychology' and its focus on, 'the normal mind and body, and in their functions of thought and imagination.'⁴⁸⁴ It is through the extraordinary that Bidart summons us below the 'relatively unexceptional surface of repeated social and economic relations.'⁴⁸⁵ 'I wanted to see beneath it, cut | beneath it, and make it | somehow, come alive . . .' is not only the mantra of 'Herbert White,' but a central component of Bidart's ars poetica.⁴⁸⁶

'Herbert White' and 'Ellen West' are his first two poems within his body of work that focused on the rare psyche. These minds briefly endure under the weight of what Allen Grossman calls the 'repressive cultural forces which have rendered inaccessible [...] the scene of poetic practice.'⁴⁸⁷ The drama that derives from the speakers' limits and the limits of their respective poems can be found an assumption voiced by Mark Halliday:

... all human beings have some important portion of their experience in common. The difficulties involved in having both a body and a mind, in having parents, in wanting love and achievement, in growing up, in having children (or choosing not to have children), in facing death – there is a universal element in these difficulties and there are (I feel) universal elements in what will be a healthy and/or moral repose to these difficulties by each person.⁴⁸⁸

In the difficulties shared by Bidart's characters, the 'moral and healthy' are the opposite of how they respond. Action as reaction to trauma drives the overlaying narratives and what the reader recognises as a parallel to the everyday stems from the tensions that arise from the speakers' everyman and formal semantics and also and also the shared histories of poet and creation. The suspense of judgment encouraged by the dramatic monologue pushes us into regarding the silence as much as the harsh environment that houses the unmatched aspects of his poems that deny the universal.

⁴⁸⁴ Elizabeth Sewell, *The Human Metaphor*, (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1964). pp. 107-108

⁴⁸⁵ 'Interview with Mark Halliday (1983),' *In The Western Night: Collected Poems 1965 – 1990*, (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1990), p. 240.

⁴⁸⁶ ll. 49-50

⁴⁸⁷ Allen Grossman and Mark Halliday, *The Sighted Singer: Two Works on Poetry for Readers and Writers*, (London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), p. 174.

⁴⁸⁸ Grossman and Halliday, p. 167.

The form of the dramatic monologue also allowed Bidart to disengage from the direct display of the poet's set of circumstances found in confessional poetry. Alan Williamson described confessional poetry as a 'critical self-absorption that finally allows one to stand a little apart from the self, to see it as an entity among entities.'⁴⁸⁹ Through the use of the dramatic monologue's feint, Bidart starts at the Confessional finish line. He 'stands apart' from other poets like Ron Silliman, Alan Davies, Rosmarie Waldrop, and John Cage, who are also proponents of the 'poetry of ideas' because, Jeffrey Gray argues, 'playful puns, ironizing, word substitutions and the like have little place in [Bidart's] poems.'⁴⁹⁰ Gray adds that:

The numerous "mad" narrators of Bidart's poems have in common, as we will see, their search for meaning and the failure of that search. That failure has as its parallel the failure of poetry; that is, the nonmastery which Bidart both discusses and attempts to body forth paradoxically recuperates, in a new and vivid form, the subjective power we previously associated with the now exhausted and questionable poetics of authenticity.⁴⁹¹

This thesis argues that in the case of 'Herbert White' and 'Ellen West,' the characters are not searching. White runs from realisation and West is already self aware. As is common with dramatic monologues, their realisations are unconscious. That they reach their limits of experience at the end of their respective poems is not due to a search failure but that the dramatic monologue limits what can be shown to the reader.

The dramatic monologue also makes use of the 'I' in a way that Bidart's Confessional predecessors did not. The feint leaves his own set of experiences free to materialise and disappear from 'Herbert White' and 'Ellen West' at will. His use of autobiography evolves in subsequent works. An anecdote concerning Augustine's estrangement from his mother mirrors the raw theatrics of Bidart's autobiography in 'Confessional.' Augustine and the cat's death are crafted from Bidart's imagination, much like the fictitious scenes thought up in

⁴⁸⁹ *Introspection and Contemporary Poetry*, (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1984), p. 6

⁴⁹⁰ Jeffrey Gray, "'Necessary Thought': Frank Bidart and the Postconfessional," *Contemporary Literature*, 34: 4 (Winter, 1993), 714-739 (p.719)

⁴⁹¹ 'Necessary Thought,' p. 716.

‘Ellen West.’ Bidart’s speakers are thrust into events that, in spite of their fictive nature, seem right at home in the authentic energy of the real figure that they are based on.

‘Confessional’ shares the same book with Bidart’s third great dramatic monologue: ‘The War of Vaslav Nijinsky.’ ‘Nijinsky’ draws its lyric-prose combination and appropriation of a historical figure from ‘Ellen West.’ The descent into madness and the refusal to acknowledge it is dredged up from the Hell that Herbert White fell into. The tone is fiercer and more rebellious than its older siblings.

The likeness begets the point that Bidart learns from his own work. Each dramatic monologue builds upon what came before it. ‘Herbert White’ is tightly coiled in comparison to the frantic abandonment of ‘The War of Vaslav Nijinsky.’ The loosening of the physical shapes of Bidart’s dramatic monologues, from ‘White’ to ‘West’ to ‘Nijinsky,’ mimics the identity of the speakers that Bidart inhabits. The stanzas of ‘Herbert White’ are neat in comparison to ‘Ellen West;’ the lines only becoming scattered in their positioning when White himself suffers a breakdown in the face of revelation. Bidart writes Ellen West from the position that the speaker already understands her condition. The serrated shape of ‘Ellen West’ resumes where ‘Herbert White’ left off, adding to the agitated nature of it with sparse use of capitals and passionate proclamations. The shape of ‘Nijinsky’ resembles a dance; a beau ideal of ‘battle, horror, | catastrophe, apocalypse.’⁴⁹² Every physical aspect of the poem is made larger and more erratic. Bidart’s Nijinsky does not quietly descend into madness, but breaks loudly and the voice is similar in pitch to that of the Maria Callas section of ‘Ellen West.’ ‘Nijinsky’ also returns to the idea of the dual self, the other who threatens the identity of the speaker and seemingly pulls the speaker towards annihilation. Each dramatic monologue takes a literal stance with respect to the formulation of each speaker’s

⁴⁹² ‘The War of Vaslav Nijinsky,’ in *The Sacrifice*, (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1983), pp. 1- 30 (p. 22, ll. 520-521).

perspective. Nijinsky says, 'Suffering has made me what I am' and we witness the long march towards the realisation and acceptance of his circumstance.⁴⁹³

The extraordinary perspective of an impossible person and the positioning in the landscape of the speaker's making, and in ours, is a universal subject in Bidart's dramatic monologues. Each speaker gives over their loci of control to some other entity. White believes that the murderer is somebody else while West places blame on her mind and soul for her inability to quash her obsessions. It is uncommon for these characters to accept responsibility for their circumstances and they call upon us to extend our sympathies in order to do the same. As a reader, Grossman writes in *Summa Lyrica*, we 'come to luminous patience' to understand that for the speaker, 'the principle of life [...] is loss.'⁴⁹⁴ Bidart's speakers address their auditors from this place of loss, their fictions bisecting this fundamental part of life. Once Bidart has established a tangent between the reader and fiction, he asks us to abandon the perspective we bring to the reading of the poem in favour of the speaker's truth of 'experience.'⁴⁹⁵ To do so, says Robert Langbaum, creates an 'ambiguity' that forces a change in 'meaning.'⁴⁹⁶ As with Browning, these dramatic monologues serve as 'an excellent vehicle for the 'impossible' case.'⁴⁹⁷

By 'case,' it is not meant the type of 'case' that Ellen West believes she is viewed as.⁴⁹⁸ The dramatic monologue provides Bidart with an 'excellent vehicle' to elevate these characters above models that can be subjected to official, clinical diagnoses. Certainly, we could assign many definitions that applied to each character but never come away feeling like they were adequate and accurate enough, especially when Bidart includes the use of a feint as a fundamental component of the forces shaping their circumstances. Bidart's poems prompt a

⁴⁹³ Ibid 2, ll. 19

⁴⁹⁴ Grossman and Halliday, p. 253.

⁴⁹⁵ Robert Langbaum, *The Poetry of Experience: The Dramatic Monologue in Modern Literary Tradition*, (London: Chatto & Windus, 1957; repr. 1972), p. 51.

⁴⁹⁶ Ibid 50-51

⁴⁹⁷ Ibid 86

⁴⁹⁸ 'Ellen West,' p. 30, ll. 13.

reading of extreme experience within the rigidity of unyielding inter-poetic and intra-poetic limitations, boundaries set by the form and narrative of the poem and the cohesion of his collections. These characters have adopted patterns; or rather have been assigned patterns by Bidart. We are compelled to realise that circumstances do not always have a resolution, just limits where life ends when the narrative action and parts of the poem give way to white space.

The problems that test the inflexible will of Ellen West and dual-identity of Herbert White and from the poem's genesis, they will never fix inside them what is broken. The self and the difficulties representing it are expressed best in the dramatic monologue and offer a post-Confessional poet like Bidart a method of bringing us nearer to the impossible 'case.' The culmination of Bidart's dramatic monologues are not unlike the ending of Browning's *Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came*. There is no ending but their individual perspectives being ripped from them by Bidart that they spent the length of the poem giving over to the reader. That, rather than the frightening neuroses that consume his speakers, is perhaps the crux and true origins of the shock generated within the reader when encountering one of Bidart's dramatic monologues.

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