The Lyric "I" and the Anti-Confessionalism of Frederick Seidel

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Abstract

This thesis investigates the anti-Confessionalist status of the lyric "I" in the poetry of Frederick Seidel and in a collection of my own poems. Seidel's use of autobiographical details, including his own name, in his poems has been treated by critics as an invitation to identify the lyric "I" with the poet himself. His poetry has been discussed by both his admirers and his detractors in a Confessional context. To his admirers, Seidel extends the Confessional poetry tradition in exciting ways, breaking new taboos as he incorporates details from his glamorous, privileged lifestyle into his poems. To his detractors, he is a retrograde reactionary, stale and derivative. I argue that although Seidel uses Confessional strategies, and owes obvious debts to Confessional poets, his poetry is fundamentally outward rather than inward looking; it is a poetry of cultural critique, and not of personal revelation. This outward looking focus also distinguishes Seidel's poetry from various post-avant poetics that, in their own sophisticated ways, are as concerned with the subjective, lyric "I" as Confessional poetry is. I argue that in Frederick Seidel's poetry, the lyric "I" is of interest insofar as it provides a means of cultural critique—a way of interrogating the complicity of the individual in its engagement with capitalism in its various aspects.

In the poems that comprise the creative component of my thesis, the influence of Seidel is evident in their tone, their outward focus, and their limited interest in the lyric "I." I have attempted in these poems to get beyond the absorption with the self that I perceive to be a besetting quality in much contemporary mainstream poetry. The various post-

avant poetics explored in my research seem in their own ways deeply invested in the lyric "I." Seidel's poems offered other possibilities, other ways of representing the subject in the world, and of critiquing that world, that I could use in my own poems.

Acknowledgements

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Table of Contents

The Lyric "I" in the World—A Bridging Essay

Some years ago, after the publication of my first collection of poems, I read a poem by Mary Oliver, "The Summer Day" (see Appendix for the text of this poem), and as I read, I felt building within me a kind of unreasonable anger. "The Summer Day" is an innocuous-sounding if not particularly interesting mainstream lyric from Oliver's 1990 collection, *House of Light*. Anger is not the kind of emotion one commonly associates with a Mary Oliver poem, and I reflected on what it was about the poem that made me feel this way. Was it the poem's overt religiosity, the naive ontological questions at the beginning ("Who made the world? / Who made the swan, and the black bear? / Who made the grasshopper?" [1-3])? Was it the transparent move to an immersive, concrete, natural world, a repository of empirical answers to spiritual questions? "This grasshopper, I mean— / the one who has flung herself out of the grass, / the one who is eating sugar out of my hand" (4-6). Was it my disbelief in this speaker, who goes out into a field with a handful of sugar to feed grasshoppers? Was it the showy description and anthropomorphizing of the grasshopper, serving to underpin the speaker's faux-humility and self-regard ("I don't know exactly what a prayer is. / I do know how to pay attention" [11-12])? Was it the unconscious privilege in claiming to know "how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields, / which is what I have been doing all day" (14-15)? Who owns these fields? Was it the easy epiphany, the portentousness of the poem's concluding question?

"Tell me, what is it you plan to do / with your one wild and precious life?" (18-19). Was it that there is nothing in the poem to suggest that it is describing a contemporary reality, rather than a pastoral scene of, say, two hundred years ago?

It was all of these things, but it was also something more personal, something to do with my subjective, extreme response to Oliver's poem, something to do with *me*. In the wake of publication of my first poetry collection, I was wary and restless—wary of repeating myself, of falling back on familiar strategies and techniques, of my writing hardening into formula—and restless for I didn't quite know what, but which I knew I wasn't finding in the poetry I was reading. This vague dissatisfaction no doubt informed my reading of Oliver's poem. Another reader might dispute my characterization of the poem as "innocuous-sounding if not particularly interesting." Such a reader might also challenge "overt religiosity" and "transparent move to an immersive, concrete, natural world, a repository of empirical answers to spiritual questions"—perhaps invoking Whitman. This reader may not find the description "showy" at all, but precise, attentive, a contemporary rendering in the tradition of the Romantic poets Clare and Keats. The anthropomorphizing of the insect may be seen not as a sentimental indulgence but as an imaginative identification with the non-human realm. As for the sugar, it's plausible that the speaker brought it to the fields as a treat for a favoured horse. To this hypothetical reader, the question at the end may seem inevitable and right, earned and

powerfully moving, comparable to Rilke's resounding conclusion to "Archaic Torso of Apollo": "You must change your life" (Rilke). The poem requires no contemporary references because the verities it embodies are timeless.

How would I attempt to explain my seemingly uncharitable reading of Oliver's poem to such a reader? To some extent, this would be to attempt to explain myself. My angry reaction to Oliver's poem had, as I have noted, some readily identifiable causes, which might easily be countered or dismissed as aesthetic differences, a matter of personal taste. But beneath these aesthetic differences, which I readily concede, lay a philosophical one. This philosophical difference had to do with concepts of sincerity, or candour, and selfhood or identity. I did not believe in the speaker, the "I" that strolls through fields in Oliver's poem. I admit to not liking the fields. Fields, meadows of wildflowers, pinewoods—tamed nature, with animals as tutelary presences and purveyors of moral platitudes—are almost default settings for Oliver's poems. In my own poem, "The Colour of Birds," included here, I also situate the speaker in a field—and a valley, and a river, but the field is burning, in the valley there is a coalmine, and the river is a black canal. Of course, there is nothing necessarily more authentic about a degraded, polluted environment than there is about one that is beautiful and unspoiled: both exist in the world. It is the "I" in Oliver's poem that struck me as inauthentic, and insincere, but I had read enough literary theory to know that these words are themselves slippery, suspect, contestable. If I felt this "I"

was inauthentic, insincere, what might authenticity and sincerity look like? "*Je est un autre*," as Arthur Rimbaud wrote, in a letter in 1871 (Rimbaud 306)—but what is this other? If the "I" is indeed somebody else, who is this somebody? How might that somebody be represented in a poem? One possible reading of Rimbaud's declaration is that we are not knowable to ourselves; that the "I" is a stranger. This would seem to contradict Descartes, who believed the contents of one's own mind were available to introspection, and to anticipate modern psychology, and theorizing about the conscious and the unconscious. A staple in the history of the lyric, from Sappho to Wordsworth to Mary Oliver, is the overheard, self-expressing, introspective "I." But the modern science of psychology, and developments in postmodern poetics, have questioned the stability and the knowability of this "I." The stories we tell about ourselves in lyric poems have, along with other kinds of narrative, become increasingly suspect. The speaker, the "I" of Mary Oliver's poem, with its confident claims to knowledge, and its implicit assumption of wisdom, struck me as offensively false, and I have become increasingly interested in various contemporary poetics—which I have grouped under the broad label of post-avant—that acknowledge the difficulties that complicate representations of the lyric "I." Two critical essays helped me articulate what I was seeking: "Elliptical Poetry," by Stephanie Burt, and "Fear of Narrative and the Skittery Poem of our Moment," by Tony Hoagland. Burt coined the term "Elliptical poets" to describe poets who

> believe provisionally in identities... but they suspect the I's they invoke: they admire disjunction and confrontation, but they know how a little can go a long way. Ellipticists seek the authority of the rebellious; they want to challenge their readers, violate decorum, surprise or explode assumptions about what belongs in a poem or what matters in life, and to do so while meeting traditional lyric goals. (Burt 346)

Hoagland, who quotes Burt's essay in his own, and who is broadly in sympathy with it and the poets it champions, is ambivalent in his praise of specific examples: poems by Mark Halliday and Matthea Harvey, for instance, are characterized as "ingenious," "playful," and "imaginatively frolicsome." In their sophistication and scepticism about narrative—both "hold narrative up for our inspection, at arm's length, without being caught inside its sticky web"—they establish a distance which "is as much the distinctive feature of the poems as play; distance, which might be seen as antithetical to that other enterprise of poetry—strong feeling" (Hoagland). Hoagland surveys a range of contemporary poets with widely differing aesthetics and approaches, and wonders whether, "despite a certain charm, the coy ellipticism of these poems signifies a skepticism about the possibilities for poetic depth, earnestness, even about feeling itself?" He concludes that "there is a moment when the poetic pleasure of elusiveness commits itself, inadvertently, to triviality" (Hoagland). This is astute, and it's a charge to which

Hoagland's own poetry is vulnerable (see my comments on his poem, "Muchness," in Chapter 3).

I wanted to write poems that were as cognizant of the issues concerning identity and narrative as those of the Elliptical poets (and other poets of a post-avant persuasion), but which did not dispense with "strong feeling." About the same time I read the Oliver poem, I discovered the poetry of Frederick Seidel. This poetry bristled with an offensiveness of a different order—it was challenging, difficult, sometimes deeply unpleasant, even shocking. Seidel deployed an "I" in his poems that seemed to me both a self-portrait and a caricature, a performance of the self in ways reminiscent of the Confessional poets of the 1950s (e.g. Lowell, Berryman, Plath, and Sexton), but also very distinctive. The self-performative element is more or less explicit in Confessional poetry, and apparent in some of its more melodramatic gestures: Lowell's poems of mental break-down, Berryman's Henry axing open his dead father's casket, Plath re-imagining herself as a Jew carted off to the concentration camp. Paradoxically this performative element makes Confessional poetry less confessional, or less straightforwardly confessional, than a lot of other contemporary mainstream lyric poetry (including Mary Oliver's). It came as no surprise, when I began reading the available critical material on Seidel, that both his admirers and his detractors almost uniformly placed him in a Confessional context, noting the influences of (especially) Lowell and Plath. Still, there was something that to my mind set Seidel apart. When I read the Confessional poets, it seemed

to me that the performative element ultimately directed my attention to a dramatization of the self of the speaker (so often intimately linked to the poet). That is its purpose. But reading Seidel, I always found my attention directed elsewhere—outward, into the world. This world wasn't merely a backdrop, a stage for the speaker's performance of selfhood or working out of personal trauma: rather, it was the world the speaker inhabited, one in which he was vitally interested, and in which he was subject. These poems seemed to construct the concept of identity or selfhood of the speaker through his (the gendering of the speaker is always, and often exaggeratedly, masculine) interactions with that world. The speaker in a Seidel poem is clearly situated in a late-twentieth or early twenty-first century setting; he recognizes the limits of individual agency, and the inevitable complicity of those who benefit from the unequal distribution of privilege, power and wealth in contemporary capitalist society. This struck me as a kind of poetry that is knowledgeable and sophisticated about the issues raised by Burt and Hoagland, but is also capable of evoking strong feeling, and avoids triviality. The often remarked offensiveness of Seidel's poems seemed to me necessary rather than gratuitous, a response to the barbarism of contemporary Western life (in his poems, barbarism is always just beneath the skin of civilization). From Seidel, it seemed I could learn a tone and a strategy that allowed me to say certain things that were difficult if not impossible to say in other ways. I have tried, in my poems, to focus not on the lyric "I," so much, as on the world in which the "I" lives

and acts. The “I” in my poems is often an unpleasant character, someone who, if I were to encounter him in real life, I would avoid. These poems are not Confessional: the “I” is not simply an autonomous self, a vehicle for expressing my inner thoughts and feelings. At the same time, I have incorporated real events—a kiss in a graveyard, a personal bereavement, family arguments, a song remembered from childhood—in poems that look outward more than they look inward. In my poems, the lyric “I” is an unstable, unreliable, sometimes loathsome, sometimes self-loathing presence, a subject in the world looking outward, and describing what he sees.

Chapter One: Frederick Seidel: Biographical Background and Critical Reception

Despite publishing ten volumes of poetry over the course of half a century, Frederick Seidel has only recently begun to receive scholarly attention. Much of the critical attention he has received has tended to be in the form of brief magazine and newspaper reviews and commentary. Over the last decade or so, since the publication of *Ooga Booga* (2006) and, particularly, *Poems 1959-2009* (2009), his work has become the focus of increasing acclaim and notoriety, and a handful of chapters in recent scholarly books have been devoted to his work. There has yet to be a full-length published academic study of Seidel's poetry.

The critical responses are sharply divided in their assessment of his achievements, but both positive and negative readings dwell on the markers of the poet's white, upper-class, male privilege. Frederick Seidel's biography is almost an archetypal tale of privilege. He was born in St. Louis, Missouri, the birthplace of T.S. Eliot, in 1936, to wealthy parents. Seidel's father was a mine-owner and a prosperous businessman. In an interview with his editor and friend, Jonathan Galassi, Seidel remarks that "My father had a coal company originally called Seidel Coal and Coke. It supplied those two things to St. Louis homes and factories, as well as ice in the days before refrigerators" (Galassi 144-45). A childhood memory is of his father's coal-trucks with "Seidel" emblazoned on the side. In recalling this image, Seidel aestheticizes capitalist enterprise, and links it with his

own name or identity: “I loved the trucks. I grew up with handsome dark blue trucks, some of them immense, everywhere in the city, every day of my life, passing in front of me, on the side of which in clean white lettering was the name SEIDEL” (145).

Seidel immediately adds, though, that this early identification with and attraction to the glamour of capitalism was juxtaposed with a recognition that he was also other than, and perhaps opposed to, the world of commerce: “But I felt quite early on that I belonged somewhere else, and had to get to that somewhere else” (145). “Somewhere else” became more specific when, at the age of thirteen, he chanced upon an excerpt in *Time* magazine from a key modernist text, Ezra Pound’s *The Pisan Cantos*, which set him upon a career in poetry: “In reading that lyric I had a moment that’s stayed with me for a lifetime” (139). A few years later, the seventeen-year-old Seidel sent Pound a poem, which must have made an impression, as he was tersely invited to call the superintendent of St. Elizabeth’s Hospital, Washington, where Pound was incarcerated after World War II (narrowly avoiding being tried for treason). Seidel recalls presenting Pound “with a set of proposed corrections to his translation of Confucius, *The Unwobbling Pivot*. I’d been studying Chinese on my own. Need I say I didn’t know any Chinese?” (140). In Ezra Pound’s own *Paris Review* interview with the poet Donald Hall in 1962, he recounts a personal memory of his father’s work as an assayer at the United States Mint that is curiously similar to Seidel’s memory of his father’s coal trucks in its aestheticization of capitalism: “This

spectacle of coin being shoveled around like it was litter—these fellows naked to the waist shoveling it around in the gas flares—things like that strike your imagination" (Hall 40). The rapport between the elderly Pound and the precocious teenager Seidel did not last, but some of the themes of the *Cantos*—in particular, anti-semitism and capitalism—would become preoccupations in Seidel's poetry, too.

The charge of anti-semitism was levelled at Seidel's first collection, *Final Solutions*, which won and was then denied a prize sponsored by the 92nd Street Young Men's and Young Women's Hebrew Association in 1962. In Seidel's recollection, some of the poems were perceived by the Association as "anti-Semitic and anti-Catholic—it was preposterous" (Mason). The Association's committee withdrew the prize, and the judges—Robert Lowell (a figure with whom, as we shall see, Seidel has been frequently associated), Stanley Kunitz, and Louise Bogan—resigned in protest. The book was published without alteration by Random House the following year. Thus began a half-century history of polarized responses to his work, though there would be a sixteen-year gap between *Final Solutions* and Seidel's second poetry collection, *Sunrise*. Fifteen more volumes followed, but it was the publication of *Ooga Booga* in 2006 and *Poems 1959-2009* in 2009, an omnibus of his published collections to date, that brought wider recognition and notoriety. The controversy surrounding his work has only increased

with the publication of *Nice Weather* (2012), *Widening Income Inequality* (2016), and *Peaches Goes It Alone* (2018).

Both positive and negative readings tend to discuss the poetry in straightforwardly autobiographical terms. For the most part, his admirers tend to regard him as an attractively sinister figure, darkly appealing for his disregard for social taboos. The critic Adam Kirsch declares that "Seidel has a good claim to be the best poetic interpreter of his age, the second half of the twentieth century" ("Again, a Dangerous Art"), and, in a review of *Ooga Booga*, where he again praises Seidel as "the best American poet writing today," Kirsch appears to claim that the allure of Seidel's wealth and lifestyle is inextricable from an appreciation of his poetry:

> That Mr. Seidel's dark night takes place in much plusher surroundings has always been part of his ambiguous appeal. Sag Harbor is just one of the rich and fashionable New York locales pressed into service in *Ooga-Booga*: we also spot the poet in Barney's and the bar of the Carlyle Hotel, not to mention in Paris, Milan, and Singapore. ("The Art of Motorcycle Maintenance")

In yet another review, Kirsch notes the privileges of wealth Seidel has accrued: "his apartment on the Upper West Side, his love of deluxe Italian motorcycles" ("A Poet for Our New Gilded Age"). The poet and critic Michael Robbins's review of *Ooga-Booga* also nods to Seidel's wealth with an odd precision, observing that "Frederick Seidel's six-figure Ducati 999FO5 factory Superbike racer is one of

four Italian professional racing motorcycles he owns," and admiring the poetry collection's "moneyed outrageousness" ("Review" 194).

Seidel's privilege and wealth acquire, in the views of such critics, a Mephistophelian glamour, which is then also discerned in the poetry. He is, in Christian Lorentzen's phrase, "a demonic gentleman" (qtd. in Mlinko). In a review of *The Cosmos Poems* and *Life on Earth*, Calvin Bedient approvingly declares that Seidel is "the most frightening American poet ever—phallus-man, hangman of political barbarism—Seidel is the poet the twentieth century deserved ... a spokesman and scourge of marauding testosterone," and "an example of the dangerous Male of the Species" (Bedient). Robbins calls him "a ghoul" ("Review" 194). Such epithets suggest the writing is primarily of interest insofar as it reveals the satanic, aggressively male character of the writer, and his audacity: as Philip Connors says, he is "the writer willing to say the unsayable" (Connors). In a rare interview, Seidel comments sardonically that

> it's too bad, but unsurprising, that this myth of the beautifully outfitted, elegant, elegantly sinister, Baudelaire sort of fellow striding and sliding down the streets of New York has become a way of not talking about the poems. Some reviewers over the years have liked that figure, liked summoning him up. He doesn't exist, and isn't really in the poems. (Stein)

Critics have generally disagreed. The association of Seidel's biographical details with the subject matter of his poems is frequently made in a Confessional context: his work is placed in a tradition that

descends from Robert Lowell, John Berryman, Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton, the most prominent poets that consistently attract the Confessional label. As we will see in Chapter 2, the Lowell comparison praises or damns Seidel, depending on one's estimation of Lowell. The problem, I think, with this placement is that it mistakes strategy and technique for subject and focus. Adam Kirsch may discern "a defiance of confessional sincerity" in the poems, and assert that "the tame earnestness of second-rate confessional poetry is at the furthest imaginable remove from Mr. Seidel's protean playfulness," only to declare that "you would have go back to confessional masters like Lowell and Berryman to find poetry as daringly self-revealing, as risky and compelling, as the best of Frederick Seidel's" ("The Art of Motorcycle Maintenance"). Thus Seidel's work is carefully distinguished from "second-rate confessional poetry," but aligned approvingly with that of "confessional masters." The critic, poet and translator Michael Hofmann finds, in Seidel's first two books at least, that "Seidel beautifully, consummately, and mystifyingly 'channels' Lowell" (Hofmann 91). The critic Roger Gilbert disparages early Seidel "as an almost embarrassingly slavish acolyte of Robert Lowell," and observes that this unfortunate Confessional tendency has only increased over time, as "[s]ince then he has gradually drifted toward the more hyperbolically theatrical members of Lowell's Confessional cohort, especially Berryman and Plath" (Gilbert 64). The critic Marjorie Perloff dismisses Seidel as "a throwback to the worst of

John Berryman and Robert Lowell in the 1950s" (Perloff "Poetic Throwback" 10); the poet and critic Ange Mlinko likewise disparages Seidel as "a Confessional poet, who has learned his craft from the contemporaries he has outlived," and, like Gilbert, makes a distinction between early Seidel, "an acolyte of Robert Lowell," and later Seidel, where the comparison is with Sylvia Plath, though "a more pertinent model yet might be Anne Sexton. ... Seidel plows closely in her footsteps" (Mlinko).

Seidel's admirers thus laud his poetry as strikingly original for its willingness to extend the Confessional tradition in disturbing and thrilling ways, while his detractors criticize him for his stale derivativeness. After all, what's new about misogyny and racism, couched in a Confessional poetics? Indeed, Perloff's critical alignment of Seidel with Lowell and Berryman—rather than Mlinko's alignment, say, with Confessional women poets Plath and Sexton—is suggestive of a strategy to pigeon-hole him as belonging to a certain male writing tradition that wears misogyny and privilege on its sleeve.

It's not difficult to quote passages from the poems that appear to support the negative assessments. In the opening poem from Seidel's very first collection, *Final Solutions* (1963), for example, "Wanting to live in Harlem" (*Poems*), the title itself suggests a privileged daydream—a desire made possible by *not* living there, but in a wealthy enclave. The poem and the collection as a whole owe an obvious debt, as critics and Seidel himself have noted, to Lowell's

Life Studies (1959), and already there is an evident willingness to be offensive about class, race, gender, and sex, comparing the "color of the young light-skinned colored girl we had then" (8) to the colour of "a calabash-and-meerschaum pipe" (6). "I used to dream about her often" (9), the speaker says, and then adds—in what would later become a characteristic Seidel kind of aside—"In sheets she'd have to change the day after" (9). The language of offence becomes more explicit in later collections. In the poem "Gethsemane," for example, from *These Days* (1989), the language seems calculated to offend: "My penis pants. My penis / Rises, hearing its name, like a dog. // I ought to cut it off" (15-17). In "The Black-Eyed Virgins," from *Ooga-Booga* (2006), the speaker describes "a flock of Japanese schoolgirls ready to be fucked" (4); in "Climbing Everest," from the same collection, "A naked woman my age is just a total nightmare" (41). In "A Song for Cole Porter," from *Evening Man* (2008), the speaker says, "I make her oink when we fuck" (27). Such language has polarized Seidel's critics.

Of course, a lyric speaker willing to say these things does not mean Seidel himself thinks like this, but the poems' seemingly Confessional mode makes him extraordinarily vulnerable to such a charge. As I will argue in Chapter 2, this kind of excessiveness and willingness to break taboos is abundantly evident, too, as Mlinko notes, in the work of women poets such as Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath, also commonly labelled as Confessional, though it is used to different ends.

The majority of responses to Seidel's poetry may be summarized as follows:

(i) Seidel's poems are indebted to the Confessionalist poetry of the 1950s;

(ii) Seidel and the speaker in his poems are one and the same readily identifiable lyric "I," either comfortably ensconced among his privileged peers in exclusive locations such as the Carlyle, or comfortably removed from the often sordid, underprivileged world he observes from a safe, detached distance;

(iii) This lyric "I" is a marker for an interior life made manifest and accessible in Seidel's poetry;

(iv) As Seidel and the speaker in his poems are indistinguishable, his poems are either admired because of a perceived transgressive glamour, or dismissed because of a perceived flaunting of his position of wealth and privilege.

In a survey of Seidel's work, Michael Hofmann offers a more nuanced view. I have noted above Hofmann's observation about Seidel's early debt to Lowell, but in the later work he claims the Lowell influence is merely superficial. Hofmann focuses on Seidel's interest "in taboos," as other critics have done, but crucially observes that this interest is focused not inwards but outwards, on broad, external markers: "Everything in him is sex, politics, religion, race, and class" (Hofmann 88). Despite the ventriloquizing of Lowell,

Hofmann says that Seidel has always gone his own, distinctive way. Hofmann catalogues a list of Lowellian tics of style in Seidel's early work, noting in the later work that although "Lowell is still there, as a similitude, or a point of reference," there is a shift in that "the product itself is now pure Seidel." This is demonstrated "in an element of excess, of taunt, of trash," what Hofmann calls "the world of American attitude." He notes that this "isn't Seidel 'finding his voice'"; on the contrary, "[t]here is a strange distanciation—a coldness, a deliberateness, a caricatural warp and yawp, a cartoonishness—that always interposes itself, a distanciation that has grown stranger and more pronounced over the years" (93). This is an important but difficult point about Seidel's poetry, as it both finds profitable comparison with and at the same time essential distinctions from Lowell's kind of Confessionalism. Quoting Seidel's poem, "Milan," the last line of which is, "You get Fred Seidel," Hofmann says, "It's important to understand the poet is not in the lines. We're not talking advanced self-scrutiny and truth-telling here" (94). Hofmann then quotes an interview with Wyatt Mason in which Seidel himself warns against Confessional assumptions:

> [A]t a certain moment, it [a poem] has its separate being from you to which you have your obligations. You're you; it's it; and eventually it really will separate from you and be absolutely not yours anymore—even if you made it. It is, of course. But it isn't. It's a thing out there. (95)

Seidel's poems, as Hofmann astutely perceives, lack the inwardness that characterizes Confessional poetry. Hofmann aptly quotes the final lines from "The Death of the Shah" that are also the final lines in the collection, *Ooga-Booga*: "Open the mummy-case of this text respectfully. / You find no one inside" (95). Form—the emphatic trochees, the end-stopped lines, the obsessive rhyming—"is valued in a Seidel poem for its externality, its invasive obtrusiveness. These poems are written from the outside" (96).

This seems to me a valuable insight, but, in his rejection of the all-too-common Confessional label, I believe Hofmann exaggerates, and thus overlooks a key element in Seidel's poetry. That is, I argue that although the focus is primarily outward, Seidel is a presence in his poetry as an implicated subject. If everything in his poems were indeed "sex, politics, religion, race, and class" (Hofmann 88), there would arguably be no room for individual agency or responsibility. I would agree that these attributes of selfhood are not his primary focus, and thus to characterize his poems as Confessional is a mistake. But I argue that he does not dispense with these attributes altogether: the atmosphere of self-loathing that pervades his work is an indicator of his sense of complicity, of being a conspicuous beneficiary of late capitalism—and of the sense that we are all, to varying degrees, complicit.

In what follows, I will argue that the bad taste of much of Seidel's subject matter (and of his aesthetic: obscene and horrific content combined with a patrician elegance, delivered in Dr Seuss

rhythms and rhymes) is in fact tightly bound up with his assault on the conventional good taste that underpins twentieth (and twenty-first) century capitalism, and that issues of identity, gender and race are manifestations of capitalism in its different aspects. The emphasis on Seidel's undeniable aesthetic heritage—Confessionalism—has distracted attention from the essentially ideological concern with the agency of the self within capitalist society. It is my contention that in Seidel's work the critique of capitalism overarches everything else. Unlike both his admirers and detractors, I will argue that a focus on the self (whether that of Seidel himself or a constructed persona) in the poetry is less important than a critique of the capitalist society in which selves are constituted. In the world of Seidel's poems, capitalism, not the inner life of the self, is fundamental. The expression of loathsome speech and behaviour presents itself as a kind of revelling in personal disgust: if, in "Climbing Everest," "A naked woman my age is just a total nightmare" (41), then so, of course, am I. The line from "A Song for Cole Porter, "I make her oink when we fuck" (27), also has its corollary, in the same poem's penultimate line: "I oink when we fuck" (34). Everyone, including the speaker, is reduced to brute, bestial urges.

There are indeed useful comparisons to be made in the Confessional context—comparisons that distinguish the various ways poets deploy the lyric "I" in their poetry (discussed in Chapter 2). But what looks like Confessionalism in Seidel is completely unlike the Confessionalism of Lowell, Plath, or Sexton, in that it is a strategy to

achieve, by a different route, the sincerity sought by poets writing in modes variously called postmodern lyricism, Third Way, elliptical poetry, and American Hybrid, whose strategies I will discuss in Chapter 3. How is sincerity possible? And how do you critique an overarching capitalist system, of which you are both a product and a conspicuous beneficiary? The lyric "I" in Seidel's poetry shares some significant characteristics with the "I" in Confessional poetry, but there is a crucial difference. Confessional poetry is a poetry of interiority: the outer world is invoked as an objective correlative of a (usually tortured) interior, Cartesian self (see Chapters 2 and 3). In Seidel's poems, the subject is by turns elusive, impossible to pin down, yet also external, in plain sight. The subject is not, as it is in the Confessional poetry of Lowell, Plath, or Sexton, the primary focus of the poems. Seidel's poems are more concerned, as Hofmann says, with the public sphere, and the individual only in its relations to this sphere. In the next chapter I intend to show the complexity of Seidel's use of Confessional techniques to this end, and to expose not so much the interiority of his lyric speaker, but the capitalist system in which that speaker's identity is constituted, acts, and is acted upon. I argue that, despite the use of Confessional strategies and techniques, and the parading of the lyric "I," Seidel is essentially anti-Confessionalist, and interested in the self only insofar as it makes manifest the pervasive effects of living in the late capitalist era.

Chapter Two: Frederick Seidel as Anti-Confessionalist

In this chapter I will challenge the common critical situating of Frederick Seidel in a Confessional context. I will examine the development of Confessionalism as a subgenre of the conventional lyric, and then analyse and compare poems by three distinguished poets commonly labelled Confessional (Anne Sexton, Sylvia Plath, and Robert Lowell) with poems by Seidel to demonstrate both the influence of these poets on his work, and his crucial differences from them.

A character called Frederick Seidel often makes an appearance in Frederick Seidel's poems. Sometimes more folksily called "Fred", this character is represented both in the first- and the third-person, and, along with the foregrounded "I," is, as I have noted, frequently identified by critics with Seidel himself. Such an identification of poet and speaker enables the situating of Seidel in a Confessional context. I noted in Chapter 1 how Marjorie Perloff considers Seidel a derivative reactionary, and situates his work in a Confessional context, while adversely judging the lineage: "To me, these oh-so-witty and painful psychodramas feel like a throwback to the worst of John Berryman and Robert Lowell in the 1950s" ("Poetic Throwback" 10). Perloff is relying on an implicit understanding of the pairing of Berryman and Lowell—exemplars of Confessionalism. Perloff's judgment encodes this implicit understanding of these poets, and locates Seidel's work in this context. Misogyny is one aspect of

this (it's significant that Perloff does not mention Sylvia Plath or Anne Sexton, poets who are also commonly tagged with the Confessional label):

> What the critics (almost all male, I should note) seem to like about Seidel is his candor—his willingness, in casual, chatty (but occasionally rhyming) free verse, to let it all hang out, to talk about the messes he's gotten into, especially with the women he's gone to bed with—women who have absurd foibles and hang-ups. (9)

Other aspects of Perloff's judgment have to do with excessiveness ("the worst of John Berryman and Robert Lowell"), her conflation of the poems' speaker and Seidel's public persona, and identification of this amalgam with a perspective of egocentric privilege. Of Seidel's poem, "The Bush Administration," Perloff observes that Seidel is cushioned and detached by his wealth and privilege from the horrors described in the poem, and sarcastically notes that "the poet who has these fleeting thoughts is comfortably *inside* [Perloff's emphasis] his taxi, most often on the East Side where he lives so well . . . . Is this a daring revelation of one's inner demons?" (10). Seidel's poems are thus perceived derisively as a representation of the tortured interior life of the lyric "I" ("these oh-so-witty and painful psychodramas"). Perloff asks, "How cleverly condescending can one get?" (9), deriding a *de haut en bas* attitude towards those less privileged.

Ange Mlinko also negatively perceives Seidel as "a Confessional poet, who has learned his craft from the contemporaries he has outlived." She considers Seidel to be overrated, the sort of poet "who would resonate with readers who don't read much other poetry," and she is puzzled by the "accolades" from critics who should know better: "Reading them, you'd think that Seidel's *Poems* was our *Flowers of Evil*, our *Inferno*." She finds that the collected volume, *Poems 1959-2009*, clearly demonstrates the limitedness of his oeuvre, in both subject matter and technique: "But the repetitiveness of Seidel's autopilot rhythms is so grating: Seidel achieves a kind of mesmerism, but there's no range" (Mlinko).

Seidel's biographical entry on the Poetry Foundation's website supports this situating of Seidel in a Confessional context, more positively observing that "Seidel's admirers contend that his poems are sophisticated masques, each subtly altering a poetic performance of 'Frederick Seidel' in the manner of the Confessional poets whom he came of age with" ("Frederick Seidel"). The poet and reviewer Dan Chiasson locates Seidel precisely among Confessional poets: "He borrowed his imbalance from Lowell, John Berryman, and, especially, Sylvia Plath, whose poems' occasional comparisons of her personal trauma to the atrocities of the Holocaust influenced Seidel's many blasphemous poems about the camps" (Chiasson 105).

But if Frederick Seidel is generally viewed (with the notable exception of Michael Hofmann) by his admirers and his detractors as a Confessional poet, what does this mean, exactly? And how is

Confessional poetry distinguishable from lyric poetry in general? Isn't lyric poetry also notable for its prioritization of and willingness to reveal the inner thoughts and feelings of the private self? Definitions and discussions of lyric poetry tend to emphasize its inwardness. Contrasting it with dramatic and epic poetry, Georg Hegel wrote that the lyric satisfies the need "for self-expression and for the apprehension of the mind in its own self-expression," and that "the proper *unity* of the lyric is not provided by the occasion and its objective reality but by the poet's inner movement of soul and his way of treating his subject" (Hegel 1113). The contemporary poet and writer on poetics, John Drury, likewise contrasts lyric poetry with dramatic and narrative poetry, emphasizes its origins in song, and observes that "lyric poetry now tends to be quiet, inward, and mental" (Drury 165). *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*' long entry on lyric also preserves Hegel's tripartite division and the lyric's "origins in musical expression," and presents a Wordsworthian definition: "In its modern meaning, a l. [lyric] is a type of poetry which is mechanically representational of a musical architecture and which is thematically representational of the poet's sensibility as evidenced in a fusion of conception and image" (Preminger 715). The literary critic Scott Brewster notes "consistent features in definitions of lyric: it is characterized by brevity, deploys a first-person speaker or persona, involves performance, and is an outlet for personal emotion" (Brewster 1). Brewster warns, however, that "the lyric persona is not to be confused with the poet her- or himself: the

emphasis on the author's sincerity and authenticity has been profoundly questioned by literary and critical theory in recent decades" (2). Various responses to these theoretical developments are explored in Chapter 3.

When we talk about "Confessional poetry," we usually have in mind the poetry of a small number of specific post-World War II poets who have been given the "Confessional" label, but what "Confessional" means in this context is ill-defined. The concept was introduced by critic M. L. Rosenthal in a review of Robert Lowell's *Life Studies* (1959). The review, "Poetry as Confession," was published in *Nation* in September of that year, and characterized Lowell's collection as "soul's therapy," observing that "Lowell removes the mask. His speaker is unequivocally himself, and it is hard not to think of *Life Studies* as a series of personal confidences, rather shameful, that one is honor-bound not to reveal" (Rosenthal 64). *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* doesn't define the term at all, but in a broad survey of disparate post-World War II poets (Robert Lowell, John Berryman, Elizabeth Bishop, Gary Snodgrass, Anne Sexton, and Sylvia Plath), it simply notes Rosenthal's observation, elaborating that "Confessionalism … should not be considered as a prescriptive formula … but as a general permission felt by most poets of the period to treat personal experience, even in its most intimate and painful aspects" (Preminger 61). Old wine in a new bottle, perhaps: such a general permission was also felt, surely, by Sappho, Horace, Catullus, Wordsworth, Keats,

Dickinson, Whitman, and the Tennyson of *In Memoriam*. This self-consciously subjective perspective is perhaps best summarized in Walt Whitman's "I am the man, I suffered, I was there" (Whitman 65). M. H. Abrams's *A Glossary of Literary Terms* observes that Confessional poetry "designates a type of narrative and lyric verse, given impetus by Robert Lowell's *Life Studies* (1959), which deals with the facts and intimate mental and physical experiences of the poet's own life" (Abrams 56). Abrams seeks to delimit the poetry properly called "Confessional" by distinguishing it from other lyric poems that also treat autobiographical material, emphasizing "the candor and sometimes startling detail with which the poet reveals private or clinical matters about himself or herself" (56).

Such tentative formulations direct the reader to the poets gathered under the "Confessional" label. Abrams, like *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, offers a short list—"Allen Ginsberg, Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, John Berryman, and other American poets" (56)—as writers of Confessional poems. Confessional poetry is, in Rosenthal's and Abrams's formulations, a poetry of candid disclosure. The poetry of Robert Lowell, Anne Sexton, and Sylvia Plath (to cite three poets very often labelled "Confessional") was innovative in its inclusion of taboo subject matter such as mental breakdowns, marital fights, abortions and suicide. Some critics were discomfited by this subject matter: the fourth section of Lowell's *Life Studies*, for example, which dealt with his mental breakdowns, his parents' troubled marriage, and other

family matters, was perceived as distasteful for its uninhibited "series of personal confidences, rather shameful, that one is honor-bound not to reveal" (Rosenthal 64). The intimacy of confession is assumed by many readers, including literary critics, as a guarantee of candour, of authentic experience. Poets sometimes play with this assumption: Weldon Kees, for example, in his poem, "For My Daughter," elaborates the speaker's fears for the daughter's future, but ends with the line, "I have no daughter. I desire none" (Kees 14). We have been lured into empathy for the speaker's fears regarding his (his?) daughter, only to realize that these fears are a kind of paralysing projection. Is that last line, then, candid? Would it be less so if we discovered that, for instance, Kees the poet had a daughter? When, if ever, do poet and speaker coincide? Poet and scholar David Elliott recalls, in an interview with the poet Marie Howe, how Sharon Olds (widely regarded as a Confessional poet, and with a reputation for an unusual degree of candour) responded to a questioner who presumed a correspondence between the poems and the life: "Once I heard someone say to Sharon Olds, 'Tell me, how old are your son and daughter now?' And she said, 'I have no son or daughter. Those are fictitious children'" (Elliot). Olds does, in fact, have both a son and a daughter, so if Elliott's recall is accurate, Olds presumably meant this as a corrective admonition not to read her poems as straightforward autobiographical record. As she says elsewhere: "Poems like mine—I don't call them Confessional ... I call work like mine 'apparently personal.' Or in my case apparently very personal" (Macdonald).

Nonetheless, the conflation of poet and speaker—at least in some poems—is held by others to be justifiable, even ethically necessary. In his essay, "Lying for the Sake of Making Poems," the poet Ted Kooser makes exactly this argument:

> I once knew a husband and wife, both aspiring poets. He had a young son from a prior marriage whose face was badly scarred. One evening the stepmother showed me a poem in which she described her husband's first wife cutting the child in a drunken rage. Horrified, I asked, "Did that really happen?" and she answered, "No, it was an innocent accident. I just thought my version would make a better poem." (Kooser 120)

Kooser distinguishes this kind of poem from one where the speaker is clearly a persona (as in, say, Browning's dramatic monologues), and concludes: "It is despicable to exploit the trust a reader has in the truth of lyric poetry in order to gather undeserved sympathy to one's self. Why do we permit this kind of behaviour in poetry when we would shrink from it in any other social situation?" (Kooser 123).

One might share Kooser's indignation about the exploitation of the reader's sympathy, and yet also note assumptions about the self, and about "the truth of lyric poetry," which I will explore further in Chapter 3. For now, we might note Kooser's easy identification of speaker with poet in a seemingly candid poem —that is, in such a poem, his assumption that the speaker is a proxy used to convey some personal, subjective truth about the poet. This seems very close to

Rosenthal's and Abrams's descriptions of the distinguishing characteristics of Confessional poetry.

Where, then, does this situate the poetry of Frederick Seidel? Is it within the Confessional subgenre of the conventional lyric tradition? The "I" of his poems often strikes a dramatic, self-regarding pose, seeming to justify Perloff's dismissal of his poetry as retrograde Confessionalism. The debt to Lowell in Seidel's early work has been, as noted in Chapter 1, acknowledged by Seidel himself. But Seidel also has a debt to two other well-known Confessional poets: Anne Sexton (as Ange Mlinko noted), and Sylvia Plath. I will now examine three closely related poems: Sexton's "My Friend, My Friend," Plath's "Daddy," and Seidel's "Mr. Delicious" (see Appendix for the texts of these poems) to demonstrate this debt, but also to demonstrate that, despite surface similarities in strategy and technique, the first two poems are indeed Confessional, but the Seidel poem is not.

Anne Sexton attended, along with Sylvia Plath and George Starbuck, Robert Lowell's now famous writing workshop at Boston University in 1958 and 1959. Sexton's poem, "My Friend, My Friend," which did not appear in any of her published collections during her lifetime, appeared in *The Antioch Review* (Sexton 150) in 1959, and was probably workshopped in Lowell's class earlier that year. Critic Katherine Rose Keenan assumes this, and Plath's familiarity with the work: "[T]he poems Sexton was workshopping in Lowell's class, such as "The Double Image," "My Friend, My

Friend," "Her Kind," "The Moss of His Skin," and "You, Dr. Martin" would have especially stimulated Plath" (Keenan 88). Keenan notes the similarities in diction between various poems by Sexton and Plath, focusing on "My Friend, My Friend" and Plath's much better-known "Daddy." Heather Cam also remarks on the similarities: "For its own purposes, 'Daddy' borrows and slightly alters rhythms, rhymes, words and lines from the early Sexton poem" (Cam 225). The rhyme similarities are striking: "Plath borrows Sexton's 'do,' 'you,' and 'Jew' ... Of particular note is Plath's 'gobbledygoo' to Sexton's 'bugaboo'" (225). Cam also notes how Sexton's refrain, "I think it would be better to be a Jew," is closely echoed in Plath's variations in "Daddy" on the line, "I think I may well be a Jew."

Neither Keenan nor Cam remark on the quasi-villanelle structure of Sexton's poem: the tercets are lengthened into quatrains, but the essential form of five stanzas with alternate refrains followed by a final stanza ending with both refrains is preserved. Poet and critic Philip K. Jason, among others, has remarked on the obsessive, self-reflective effect of a villanelle's refrains:

> When the reflecting mind or speaking voice comes back to dwell on the same idea in the same words over and over again, is it not fair to say that the persona is obsessed? My own readings suggest that *the villanelle is often used, and properly used, to deal with one or another degree of obsession* [Jason's emphasis]." (Jason 141)

Jason goes further: in the repeating lines of the villanelle, "a monomaniacal dwelling on some problem can be adduced. The mind of the persona is stuck in a groove." There is, he says, "even the potential for the two repeating lines to form a paradigm for schizophrenia" (142).

Jason is careful to confine his discussion to "the mind of the persona," but his remarks, occurring in the context of a discussion of a villanelle by Sylvia Plath, is clear enough in its implications. "The mind of the persona" replicates the human mind of its creator, and makes manifest its inner workings and aberrances. We need not make this conjecture to recognize the concept of mind here as the conventional Cartesian one (see Chapter 3) of a self capable of introspection, if not self-knowledge: "The mind may not fully know itself or its subject, may not be in full control, and yet it still *tries*, still festers and broods in a closed room towards a resolution that is at least pretended by the final couplet linking of the refrained lines" (Jason 142).

In Sexton's quasi-villanelle, pronouns referring to the subject —the first-person singular pronoun, "I," the first-person singular possessive, "my," and the object pronoun, "me"—occur thirty times (excluding the title) in the poem's twenty-five lines, sometimes three times in a single line. The speaker feels guilt at her sensation of "first release" (14) granted by her mother's dying, but also castigates herself for other, unnamed transgressions: "Who will forgive me for the sins I do?" (1). Unlike the poem's dedicatee, Sexton's friend, the

American-Jewish writer Maxine Kumin, the speaker "can not blame my origin" (7) for this feeling of guilt: she is not cursed by "some ancient bugaboo" (14); nor has she suffered "your reasonable hurt" (18). Her repeated conclusion is that "it would be better to be a Jew" (4, 12, 20, 25), because such an identity would offer an explanation for her feelings of guilt, and solace in the form of religious faith. This poem is Confessional in the Rosenthal sense in its revelation of a shameful secret (the speaker's relief at her mother's dying) and its inward focus. This poem does not, for example, examine what Jewishness might really amount to; rather, it examines what Jewishness might mean for *her*, if she were to assume its identity. The poem really concerns the speaker's quest for self-definition, identity—which is ultimately a quest for victim-status; hence the expressed envy for the friend's Jewishness.

Sylvia Plath's poem, "Daddy," as noted above, echoes Sexton's imagery and diction in obvious ways. Pronouns referring to the subject—including the German *ich*—occur forty-one times in eighty lines, and as in Sexton's poem, the focus is very much on this "I" as she tries on various subjugated personae: an imprisoned foot; "poor and white" (4); "a Jew" (repeatedly in the fourth stanza); a descendant of gypsies; an attempted suicide; a vampire's victim. Plath takes Sexton's desired identification—"I think it would be better to be a Jew"—further: "I think I may well be a Jew" (35). "Daddy" is the quintessential Confessional poem: it assembles biographical facts (relating to Plath's German father, Otto Plath; her husband, Ted

Hughes; her several suicide attempts) in a Freudian context of father-fixation, and deploys imagery that refers directly to the Holocaust to dramatize the speaker's struggle to free herself from patriarchy. The biographical elements of Plath's poem lend themselves to a reading that fuses the poet with her persona, a reading the poem itself appears to anticipate in the fifth stanza, where the speaker represents her speechlessness: "Ich, ich, ich, ich" (27) is both the sound of "My tongue stuck in my jaw" (25) and German for "I, I, I, I." The speaker's ego, it is suggested, has been determined by and confined within the ego of another, more powerful figure—that of the German father whose violation of her sense of self is equated with the brutal acts of Nazi concentration camp guards. The repetition suggests an insistent attempt to articulate an independent self, and at the same time, perhaps, a weariness of preoccupation with the ego. The poem thus anticipates its own critical reception as self-obsessed, but its attempted integration of Holocaust imagery with its Confessionalist mode has struck critics as problematic. Jon Rosenblatt, for example, observes that "the rapid, often wild succession of elements relating to the father are not entirely integrated into the poem," and that "the entire poem may seem to have stretched the permissible limits of analogy" (Rosenblatt 124). The "general permission," then, "felt by most poets of the period to treat personal experience, even in its most intimate and painful aspects" (Preminger 61) only goes so far: to locate one's personal trauma in the context of the suffering and death

of millions is perceived as tasteless and excessive. The writer and critic Theodore Dalrymple represents a frequently stated view:

> Plath felt it right to allude to one of the worst and most deliberate inflictions of mass-suffering in the whole of human history, merely on the basis that her father, who died when she was young, was German. … [T]he metaphorical use of the holocaust measures not the scale of her suffering, but of her self-pity. (Dalrymple 160)

Just as Jewishness is a vehicle for exploring a desired identity for the self in Sexton's poem, so, too, Holocaust imagery is a vehicle for Plath's projections and dramatizations of her speaker's identity in "Daddy."

Frederick Seidel's poem, "Mr. Delicious," bears as obvious a relation to Plath's "Daddy" as "Daddy" does to Sexton's "My Friend, My Friend." Like "Daddy," "Mr. Delicious" appears to appropriate Holocaust imagery to dramatize a psychologically tortured self. The surface similarities between the two poems are apparent. Seidel undoubtedly draws on Plath's images, rhythms, rhymes and diction, just as Plath drew on Sexton's. The Holocaust imagery is more extensive in Seidel's poem: as well as Jews, Nazis and trains, he invokes the stock images of camps, ovens, chimneys, and smoke, images which, in their countless incarnations, are at once stale and shocking. These are the received images from survivor literature (e.g. Primo Levi's *If This Be a Man*, Paul Celan's "Death Fugue"), old newsreels, and (commodifying these historical witness accounts)

contemporary popular novels and films. The rhythms, rhymes and diction in both poems borrow heavily from those of children's stories and nursery rhymes. Seidel's use of some of the same rhymes we find in Plath (e.g. "goo," "choo," and "Jew") obviously situates his poem in relation to hers—but what precisely is that relation?

Plath wrote "Daddy" in 1962. The countless iterations of Holocaust imagery since then, including cultural productions intended for a mass audience (e.g. the films *Schindler's List* and *The Boy in Striped Pyjamas*, and the books on which these films are based), have provided us with a script on how these images are to be interpreted. The Holocaust is commodified for mass consumption in ways that accommodate rather than challenge, in Theodor Adorno's terms, the "petrified relations" (Adorno *The Culture Industry* 100) among human beings. Thus the Holocaust becomes, like any other commodity, a consumable good divorced from history. Its commodification belongs to the same pseudo-culture as the kind of art Adorno says "is adept at promoting the right attitudes" (*The Culture Industry* 61).

Neither Plath nor Seidel can be accused, in these respective poems, of "promoting the right attitudes." This is implicitly Theodore Dalrymple's complaint about "Daddy": it doesn't follow the right script. Not following this script is an offence against taste, an offence that is made even more extreme in Seidel's poem. In both poems, the childish diction, cadence and rhyme are, as Michael Robbins observes of Seidel's poem, "grotesquely out of place—until one reflects that

children *were* grotesquely out of place in the death camps" (*Quarrels with Ourselves* 117). But in Plath's poem, this reinforces the reader's sense of self-indulgence: the speaker is comparing her individual psychic pain with the mass suffering and murder of millions. Seidel parodies that inward, Confessional orientation: "I stick my heart on a stick / To toast it over the fire. / It's the size of a marshmallow" (1-3). It's remarkable, too, how worldly, how outward looking, his poem is, roaming among those great representative centres of Western civilization, Rome, Venice, and Paris. Both Plath and Seidel appear to flaunt Adorno's famous dictum that "to write a poem after Auschwitz is barbaric" ("Cultural Criticism and Society" 34). Not only do they write poems; they write poems that allude, seemingly blithely, to the horror that Adorno says makes high culture (of which poetry is a part) so barbaric. But Adorno's assertion is often decontextualized, without noting his observation at the beginning of the essay from which it is taken: "The cultural critic is not happy with civilization, to which alone he owes his discontent. He speaks as if he represents unadulterated nature or a higher historical stage. Yet he is necessarily of the same essence as that to which he fancies himself superior" ("Cultural Criticism and Society" 19). In other words, the cultural critic is implicated in the evils he denounces. "He speaks as if he represents unadulterated nature": Adorno's phrasing suggests that the cultural critic's error lies in the assumption that he or she is somehow detached, and of a different, higher order than the criticized object. As sociologist Robert Witkins explains, "The 'cultural critic' imagines

himself to be superior to the world he criticizes whereas in reality he is mediated to the very core by the object of his criticism, by the culture he criticizes" (Witkin 177).

Michael Robbins observes that the grotesqueness of "Mr. Delicious" can be read, as the grotesqueness of "Daddy" cannot, as an answer to Adorno's condemnation of high culture: "Of course poetic language is incommensurate to the horrors of the Holocaust, Seidel says—and here's how incommensurate it is" (*Quarrels with Ourselves* 117). Robbins dismisses this plausible reading, however, as "adequate neither to the gleeful, infernal energies with which the poem violates propriety nor to the perversely clichéd subject matter" (117-18). I would argue that the violation of propriety works precisely to undermine the clichéd material and the commodification of the Holocaust.

Both Plath and Seidel, then, deal in already-known, already-interpreted images of the Holocaust, but there is a crucial difference. Where Plath brings these images to bear on her speaker's personal predicament, Seidel mocks the whole Confessional enterprise. "I stick my heart on a stick / To toast it over the fire" is the first of only three occurrences of first-person singular pronouns in the fifty-four lines of the poem. The second occurrence in Seidel's poem is, like the first, parodic, and not self-revelatory. "I turn towards the east and bow five times" (20) implies the speaker is Muslim, yet the immediately following lines point to Roman Catholicism: "One puff of smoke signifies the College of Cardinals / Has found a new pontiff" (21-22).

The Vatican's traditional signal that it has successfully elected a new pope is associated with the smoke from trains on their way to the death camps—an association that prompts recollection of what Alexander Stille describes as "the particular role Pius XII played in negotiating a concordat with Hitler's Germany" (Stille 21). Seidel is widening the net of implication here, including in its folds both the individual subject and institutions in the public sphere. The smoke from the death camps' crematoria casts its pall not just over Nazi Germany, but also—in the image of "the twentieth century's / 24/7 chimneys" (8-9)—over late capitalism, of which the crematoria are both symptom and manifestation.

Seidel's poem is characterized, therefore, not by the inward-directed language of self-revelation, but the outward-directed language of implication, of blame: everyone, including the "I," is implicated in the horror the poem attests to. The lyric "I" is not falsely elevated above such horror, as Adorno accuses his hypothetical cultural critic of being. In the poem's final lines—"This completes, thank you very much, / This year's / Report of the Paris Cricket Club" (52-54)—the cricket club, as archetype and representative of Western capitalist civilization, with its elaborate code of conduct, exclusiveness, cult of leisure and air of privilege, is also culpable: the rewards of capitalism come at a usually concealed cost (the commodity being divorced from its means of production). That it is the *Paris* Cricket Club is perhaps an allusion to the active anti-Semitism, including the forced deportation of Jews to the death

camps, of the Vichy-led government in World War II; that the catalogue of atrocity constitutes the Club's annual "Report" conflates horror and bureaucracy, recalling the death camps' meticulous record-keeping of humans exterminated as inputs and outputs.

Although there are superficial similarities between Sexton and Plath's Confessional poems, on the one hand, and Seidel's poem on the other, a crucial difference is the status of the lyric "I." Sexton's "My Friend, My Friend" is purely concerned with the identity and the feelings of the speaker. Plath's "Daddy" is also concerned with the speaker's threatened identity and feelings, and it unfolds as a kind of psychodrama, with the Holocaust deployed offensively as an exaggerated backdrop and objective correlative for the speaker's inner struggle towards her own identity. In "Mr. Delicious," Seidel's gaze is directed outwards, from the perspective of an implicated subject. Seidel may, like Plath, be vulnerable to the charge of exaggerated, excessive effects, but these effects are darkly satirical rather than self-indulgent. As Adorno observes, "only exaggeration per se today can be the medium of truth" (Adorno *Critical Models* 99).

We have seen that Seidel is characterized—or placed—by admirers and detractors alike as a Confessional poet indebted to Robert Lowell, and that by his own admission he was influenced in his early work by Lowell (Galassi 146). I will now examine this debt to Lowell as something Seidel outgrew, focusing on poems from *Evening Man*, *Nice Weather* and *Ooga-Booga*. I believe the characterization of his work as straightforwardly Confessional is

mistaken, and that such a characterization is a partial and inadequate label. In my view, Seidel makes use of Confessional techniques for non-Confessional—indeed, anti-Confessional—purposes. As in my comparison of "Mr. Delicious" with Confessional poems by Sexton and Plath, I will show that although his poetics demonstrates a familiarity with Confessional strategies, his Lowell-influenced poems are to a large extent anti-Confessional and anti-lyrical in nature, with only a cursory interest in the lyric "I"—which is often merely an implicated subject, to be held up and perhaps inspected in mockery or self-disgust.

Randall Jarrell observes of Lowell that

> [m]ore than any other poet, Robert Lowell is the poet of shock: his effects vary from crudity to magnificence, but they are always surprising, and always his own. ... The awful depths, the plain absurdities of his own actual existence in the prosperous, developed, disastrous world he and we inhabit are there in the poems. ("Robert Lowell" 251)

This is strikingly similar to observations made by admirers and detractors of Seidel: Philip Connors' characterization of Seidel, for example, as "the writer willing to say the unsayable" (Connors); Michael Hofmann's assertion that Seidel is "a carnivore if not a cannibal in the blandly vegan compound of contemporary poetry" (Hofmann 88); and Marjorie Perloff's acerbic comment on Seidel's "willingness ... to talk about the messes he's gotten into" ("Poetic Throwback" 9). Hofmann and Perloff, both of whom have written

extensively on Lowell, explicitly compare the two poets. Lowell's and Seidel's careers overlapped, and they had much in common. Both were born into white, male, wealthy privilege—Lowell in Boston, Seidel in St. Louis—and both parade this privilege ironically or satirically. Lowell was, as noted in Chapter 1, one of the judges who controversially awarded Seidel's first collection, *Final Solutions*, a literary prize in 1962. When *The Paris Review* interviewed Lowell in 1959 (in an interview published in 1961), it was a young Seidel who was the interviewer. Both poets are perceived as shocking, as breakers of taboos. Both incorporate highly personal material alongside the public and political in their poems. As I noted in Chapter 1, Michael Hofmann has described Lowell's strong influence on Seidel's early work. Seidel's "Wanting to live in Harlem" (the first poem in *Final Solutions*, and a poem Seidel was apparently sufficiently pleased with that he chose to include it also in his second collection, *Sunrise*), with its range of historical and cultural references, its integration of intimate childhood memory with social critique, its voyeurism and sexual confession, its repudiation of inherited privilege (and wry acknowledgement of the impossibility of such repudiation—privilege is not shrugged off so easily), its invocation of the dying, distant mother, and its evocation of a family and a society in decline, would fit seamlessly into *Life Studies*. Technically, the early poems borrow less from the sonnet sequences and stately pentameters of the early *Lord Weary's Castle*, and more from the looser, irregular line-lengths and half and full end-rhymes in regular stanzaic patterns of *Life*

Studies and *For the Union Dead*. As in Lowell, the pentameter for Seidel, often iambic, provides a kind of baseline he freely departs from and returns to: “And silver, like a child, and shape a kiss” (“Wanting to Live in Harlem,” *Poems* 459). Admirers and detractors have remarked on Seidel’s apparently unchanging style over his career: Hofmann, for example, observes that the reverse chronology of *Poems 1959-2009*, beginning with Seidel’s newest work and ending with his first collection, confounds the reader’s expectation of development, making *Final Solutions* “not a launching-pad but a destination” (Hofmann 90); Ange Mlinko complains of the same collected works that “there’s no range” (Mlinko). But one evident technical development is the exaggeration of these effects Seidel learned from Lowell. The end-rhymes in Seidel’s later work become heavier (the half-rhymes decrease as the full rhymes become more obtrusive); the rhythms become more irregular and emphatic, with Dr Seuss-sounding anapaests replacing iambs. An extreme example, from the 2008 collection, *Evening Man*, is the poem “Sii romantico, Seidel, tanto per cambiare [Be romantic, Seidel, for a change]” (*Poems*), where a monorhyme, “-ide,” is sustained over the poem’s thirty otherwise irregular lines. Even here, there is the occasional perfect iambic pentameter, to jarring effect: e.g. “The way he stayed alive to stay inside” (5). The poem’s monorhyme provides a kind of constraint that intensifies the violence within. Compare Seidel’s use of the pentameter with almost any pentameters of Lowell’s, such as the final lines of “The Quaker Graveyard at Nantucket”: “And blue

lung'd combers lumbered to the kill. / The Lord survives the rainbow of his will" (*Lord Weary's Castle* VII 16-17). Seidel's light movement and satiric tone have more in common with the pentameters of Pope in "Rape of the Lock," or of Swift in "A Description of the Morning." Lowell's, on the other hand, tend towards a Miltonic solemnity and authoritativeness. Nonetheless, Seidel learned from Lowell's prosody, exaggerating some of his effects. In the following discussion of three poems, one by Lowell and two by Seidel, I hope to demonstrate both what Seidel assimilated from Lowell, and significant differences. These differences are concentrated in the two poets' use of the lyric "I."

The poem by Lowell is one of his most well-known, "Skunk Hour" (*Life Studies*). (See Appendix for the text of this poem.) Lowell's poem is dedicated to Elizabeth Bishop, and owes an obvious debt to her poem, "The Armadillo" (Bishop). But Bishop's poem, with its regular rhyme scheme and its iambic trimeters and tetrameters, is more formally metrical. Within his regular sestets Lowell's line-lengths and rhymes vary considerably: in his final stanza, for example, the first and third lines have only four syllables; the third line has sixteen. There is a kind of jarring awkwardness here, a deliberate unmusicality, that is also characteristic of Seidel. "Skunk Hour" begins with a kind of rogues' gallery of a run-down seaside village's more prominent citizens. The speaker uses the first person plural possessive pronoun "our"—"Her farmer / is first selectman in our village" (4-5)—to subsume the speaker among the village's other

inhabitants, suggesting a communal perspective, a kind of omniscience borne out of deep familiarity. But this is all scene-setting for the individual drama that is revealed in the fifth stanza, where the narrator switches to the first person singular, and is represented as a solitary outsider, a voyeuristic figure: "I watched for love-cars" (27). This self-isolating, self-loathing representation is also self-aggrandizing. "I myself am hell" (35) identifies this figure with Milton's Satan: "Which way I fly is Hell; myself am Hell" (*Paradise Lost* IV 75). Milton was an abiding influence on Lowell: Randall Jarrell has noted, for example, that the most important influence on Lowell's first book, *Land of Unlikeness*, was "early Milton" (Jarrell *Kipling, Auden & Co.* 132); Marjorie Perloff considers the use of (and reactions against) the elegiac framework of "Lycidas" and its narrative and thematic parallels in "The Quaker Graveyard in Nantucket" (Perloff "Death by Water" 125-26); and Stephen (now Stephanie) Burt analyses the precise technical imitation of Milton in "Mary Winslow" (Burt "Rebellious Authority" 339). The first line of Lowell's poem, "Man and Wife" (*Life Studies*), "Tamed by Miltown, we lie on Mother's bed," cleverly alludes to Milton even as it names an anti-anxiety medication popular in what Lowell calls, in another poem from the same collection, "Memories of West Street and Lepke," "The tranquilized *Fifties*" (12). But the "I myself am hell" allusion in "Skunk Hour" is of a different order. Here, Lowell's lyric "I" identifies himself with the anti-hero of *Paradise Lost* to represent, most obviously, his mental anguish: "My mind's not right" (30). Hell

is an internal, psychological condition. But the identification of the "I" with Satan is also a self-aggrandizement, a romanticizing self-dramatization. In a literary context, it suggests heroic rebellion, transgression—the Mephistophelian glamour that Seidel's admirers often attribute to him (see Chapter 1). "Skunk Hour" is Confessional in the most glaring way—the entire poem is brought to bear, through scene-setting and personal revelation, on the speaker's somewhat histrionic anguish. The external details—the run-down, tawdry seaside town, the voyeurism, the skunk—are, like the Holocaust imagery in Plath's "Daddy," ultimately used as a vehicle to represent the sufferings of the lyric "I."

In Seidel's poetry, and particularly in his more recent poetry collections, *Widening Income Inequality*, *Nice Weather*, *Evening Man*, and *Ooga-Booga*, the "I" signifier is ubiquitous, yet the self it signifies is elusive. For example, in "Homage to Pessoa" (*Poems*), from *Ooga-Booga*, six of a total of fourteen lines begin with "I." Pessoa, of course, is famous for writing under a variety of heteronyms; Seidel's referencing him here, coupled with the proliferation of the first person singular pronoun, suggest less the revelations of an inner self, and more a parade of multiple, provisional, and mutable identities. In Seidel's poem, "I'm Here This" (*Poems*), from the 2008 collection, *Evening Man* (see Appendix for the text of this poem), the redundancy of the phrasing of the poem's title ("I'm here" or "I'm this" would catch the import) rhetorically emphasizes the reality and presence of the "I," and we

might expect the poem to begin with that pronoun. Instead, it begins with a dog—albeit "my" dog: "My dog is running in his sleep. / He's yipping, his paws twitching, fast asleep" (1-2). This recognizable if unexpected beginning is immediately followed by a disorienting detail: "Hey, wait a minute, he's been dead two years" (3). If there's a logic here, it's the logic of dreams, in which the dead return to haunt us. In our dreams they are present; when we awake, we know this to be an illusion. In these opening lines, the poem presents both states, with the second a corrective to the first. The poem's title is already starting to seem oddly insistent, a willed certainty amidst swirling uncertainties.

The second stanza cuts to "Salt Lake City, how exotic, here I come!" (5). We know to read this line ironically, the irony signalled by the tone of breathless excitement, the claimed exoticism, and the off-the-shelf phrasing. But we also note the echo of the title: "Here I come!" is both the familiar cry of the facile tourist, and a future indicative of "I'm here," in the sense of "Here I will be." The innocuous phrase, like the phrasing in Robert Frost's line from "The Road Not Taken," "I shall be telling this with a sigh" (Frost 16), posits a location for the self that is not here, now, but will be "here" in another location—the poem promises—in the future. Even the dog, seemingly present, is not—it is, in fact, located in the past. Its presence can be entertained only in dreams—and, fleetingly, in the world of the poem. "Here" is elusive and, paradoxically, somewhere else: "I can't believe how far it is to here" (6). So if the poem's title

asserts the presence, the truth of the "I", as "here", the poem itself, from the outset, problematizes that assertion, and the status of the "I" itself. The title appears to herald a Confessional poem, but that's not what the poem itself delivers. In the final line of this stanza, "Just pack and leave yourself behind and fly" (8), the "I" is suddenly objectified in the second-person. The poet Peter Gizzi characterizes the use of "you" in this way as "a figure of besidedness," an "amplification of self by standing next to oneself, outside of one's life, to look at one's self in and through the world" (Lerner). The irony is sustained in the glibly phrased representation of the stale paradox of leaving oneself—one's cares, one's workaday self—behind when going on holiday. Seidel is again using familiar language to unsteadying effect, repurposing the cliché to query the nature of the self. Is the self the sum total of our past, the things left behind? Or is it reinvented from moment to moment? This query is problematized further by the resort to the second-person, another splitting of the self.

Seidel's traveller goes on to do what people typically do when arriving in a new city: he takes in the sights (visiting the Mormon Temple); he dines out; he goes to his hotel. The route to the Temple is described in the stale, familiar register of the travel-guide ("take the free trolley three stops" [9]), but the destination is "Saudi Arabia in the middle / Of snow-capped Switzerland!" (13-14). If the traveller is "here," where is here, exactly? The line evokes the subject's location by alluding to an imagined juxtaposition of two other disparate

locations, a standard travel-guide trope (the travel-guide register is also suggested by the hackneyed adjective, “snow-capped”). These two geographical references are easily explained: “Saudi Arabia” by Salt Lake City’s strict alcohol laws and semi-arid climate, and “Switzerland” by the encircling mountain ranges. The locations are accumulating, especially as we remember the traveller’s injunction to “leave yourself behind” at an unidentified originary point of departure. And if “here” is slippery, unstable, not easily pinned down, then the “I” that is identified with it (“I’m here”) is, too. Seidel is exploiting the latent ambiguity of the phrase, “I’m here”: the obvious meaning, “Here I am, in this location” is shadowed by the less obvious “Who I am is where I am.” That is, Seidel is defining the self not by looking inward, but by looking outward: the self acquires definition through its ever-changing positioning in the world.

The representation of the traveller’s experience at a restaurant continues the critique of the city’s most prominent demographic, Mormonism: “Picture a blue-eyed sky / Above a white man waiting on God” (17-18). But the speaker then corrects himself: the “white man” becomes “a waiter”: “I mean a waiter. / I mean serving a meal” (19-20). Clearly he doesn’t know what he means, yet the tone becomes more emphatic in the next stanza: “Here I am, cooked through. / Here I am, covered with snow” (21-22). Again we hear an echo of the title, and again, “here” is both a location and a predicament (Lowell, *pace* Milton, makes a similar rhetorical move in the line from “Skunk Hour” quoted above, “I myself am Hell”), and

contradictorily so: the traveller *is* the meal, *is* the waiter (and, "covered with snow," is also "a white man"). The admixture of religion and race alludes to discriminatory Mormon doctrines, and segues into an ironic allusion to the Fugitive poet Allen Tate's "Ode to the Confederate Dead" in the final stanza: "It's the Ice Age—spa for the tuxedoed dead" (39). (Tate was well-known for his elegant tuxedoes.) This allusion extends to Robert Lowell's closely associated "For the Union Dead," and thus ironically references two poems that deploy the poetry of public, bardic utterance to Confessional ends. The title of the poem finally appears in the penultimate stanza: "Bush and an army of secret agents stayed here last week—/ "I'm here this" (33-34). The "I" of the poem is not simply located "here," as a disinterested observer, but rather, like the President and his agents, he is *implicated*, wherever he is, historically and ideologically. The lyric "I" of "I'm Here This" is not a locus for self-dramatization, confession and self-recrimination. It is, rather, paraded ironically, even parodically, as an everyman figure, a generic tourist, a vantage-point from which to critique public issues of race, religion, and politics (and, via the trope of vacuous consumerism, capitalism as an overarching whole). The lyric "I" does not stand apart, in the way that Lowell's "I" stands apart. The speaker's identity merges with that which he criticizes ("Here I am, cooked through"); he, too, is one of "the tuxedoed dead." Where Lowell's poem, in true Confessional fashion, isolates, melodramatizes, and self-aggrandizes the lyric "I," Seidel's poem interrogates, even mocks, such procedures.

Another poem in which Seidel uses the lyric "I" to non- or anti-Confessional ends is "Back Then" (see Appendix for the text of this poem), from his 2013 collection, *Nice Weather*. The discomfort we feel as we read this poem begins with its first, now discredited word, "Negroes": "Negroes walking the white streets" (1). "White streets" intensifies our discomfort, reminding us of "whites only" theatres and public facilities. But "Back Then" is set in 1971, not 1961: "One morning in 1971 it began" (3). The symbolic order that encoded racial segregation before the Civil Rights movement is, the speaker implies, still intact, and made suddenly visible by its traumatic disruption. The speaker's response to the presence of black people on the streets of Manhattan was, he frankly admits, along racist lines: "I converted so to speak on the spot to the Ku Klux Klan" (4). As a reader, my immediate response is: "He shouldn't feel like that." Or perhaps, "He shouldn't say that." This, I think, is Perloff's objection: that Seidel feels sentiments that should not be expressed, sentiments that reflect badly on him, the subject-and-poet. One notices how the subject's racist reaction is shared by others, and not just the KKK: the "friend in the D.A.'s office" (7), a representative of institutionalized racism and power; the "rich whites" (8) class to which he belongs (another locus of power); the "always Irish doormen" (11), who are only one step above black people in the hierarchy of discrimination. The last three lines of the poem suggest the sense of transgression the speaker experiences at the breach of the symbolic order: Harlem is a neighbourhood within Manhattan, and

there is of course no physical border separating them. “And there were barbarians wandering the streets of Rome” (13) sounds like another gratuitously racist comment—but we remember that this speaker was “completely ready to burn a cross and buy a gun” (6); racism and fear have in fact made barbarians of these white defenders of entrenched privilege. The final line—“I knew the man who wrote this poem” (14)—seems to suggest a detachment from a former, racist perspective, but actually rejects that consolation: though it recalls what the speaker felt like “back then,” this poem was not written in 1971. The “man who wrote this poem” may be the present-day Seidel, but the sentence appears to split the “I” in two: the past tense of “knew” suggests a futile attempt to distance himself from the man capable of thinking and writing such terrible things. The speaker, in other words, is complicit in the racism he denounces, and not just retrospectively—but this is a wry acknowledgement rather than an expression of personal anguish. The focus of the poem is directed outward, not inward. It is the racism and the barbarity of those who police it that is the focus, and not the speaker’s predicament: the lyric “I,” though implicated, counts for little.

In a poem such as “Barbados” (*Poems*), from *Ooga-Booga* (see Appendix), Seidel is quite explicit about this. “*I* isn’t anything” (4) in an ideological morass of colonialism, postcolonialism, and religious extremism. Later, in the same poem, Seidel reiterates this point about the “I,” this time through an allusion to John Berryman: “*I* is the first one hacked to pieces” (81). In “Dream Song 29,”

Berryman's mutable persona, Henry, imagines himself a murderer: "But never did Henry as he thought he did, / end anyone and hacks her body up / and hide the pieces" (Berryman 13-15). Seidel takes Berryman's sense of guilt out of its Confessional context, and relates it instead to the individual's complicity or, in the historical context of slavery, helplessness. Capitalism makes human beings into the means of its own perpetuation: "The machine inside the windmill isn't vegetarian. / A 'lopper' lops off a limb caught / In the rollers and the machine never has to stop" (20-22). In feeding the capitalist machine, human beings lose their humanity, their individuality, their lives.

It isn't enough, however, to say that Seidel's objective, here, is to expose and condemn the means of production—the real, horrific cost of the commodities we consume. If that were so, his poem would, in Theodor Adorno's terms, be yet a further commodification, serving up as an entertainment, a spectacle, that which it purports to condemn. If the crimes of totalitarian ideology (such as the Holocaust, or slavery) are incomprehensible in the scale of their barbarity and horror, then the representation of these crimes in a work of art, insofar as that work seeks to comprehend them, inevitably reduces them: it makes "an unthinkable fate appear to have had some meaning; it is transfigured, something of its horror is removed" (Adorno "Commitment" 189). Such representation also has a redemptive tinge: it tacitly suggests that, in coming to understand such horrors, it is possible to learn from them. Seidel's poem is not redemptive in this way: the history of modern civilization is not one of progress—the

standard Enlightenment view—but one of domination and exploitation, atrocity following atrocity. The enslavement of African people in the sugar plantations of Barbados is capitalism stripped bare of its civilized veneer: such exploitation in fact enables 'civilization,' a pattern recurrent in history. This pattern is repeated in postcolonial nations, with black leaders acting at the behest of more powerful nations "in order to secure those international loans" (66), exploiting and persecuting their people: "This was their man who brought the crime rate down / By executing everyone" (60-61). As the speaker says in the opening poem of *Ooga-Booga*, "Kill Poem" (*Poems*), "Civilized is about having stuff" (13). That is, modern civilization is defined by the pursuit and fetishization of commodities. In "Barbados," Seidel shows that the first casualty of this fetishization is the autonomous "I," who consumes and is consumed.

In this chapter I hope I have demonstrated that the seeming similarity between Seidel's poetics and Confessionalism belies some fundamental differences, and that these differences have to do with their outward rather than inward focus, and with the problematization in his poems of the concept of the self. In the next chapter I will explore the concept or self in the Cartesian context, and how changes in how the self is understood and conceptualized have been incorporated in non-conventional contemporary poetics, which may be broadly labeled as "post-avant." I will also examine how Seidel's poetry is situated in relation to these poetics.

Chapter Three: Frederick Seidel and Post-Avant Modes of Representing the Lyric "I"

In Chapter 2, I noted the poet Ted Kooser's indignation at the seeming candour of some lyric poems, revealing itself, on investigation, to be a ruse to manipulate the reader's emotional response: "It is despicable to exploit the trust a reader has in the truth of lyric poetry in order to gather undeserved sympathy to one's self. Why do we permit this kind of behaviour in poetry when we would shrink from it in any other social situation?" (Kooser 123). One might share this indignation, and yet object to his claim for the "trust the reader has in the truth of lyric poetry" as misguided—dismissed over four centuries ago in Sidney's *The Defence of Poesie*: "Now for the Poet, he nothing affirms, and therefore never lies" (Harmon 139). But what is striking about Kooser's condemnation is that he uses the phrase "one's self" as if there were universal acceptance of what it means, or that it means anything at all. It may be useful, here, to offer a brief summary of the concepts of self and self-knowledge as they have evolved in philosophical and literary history. What is "one's self"? Where does it reside? And what truths can one know about one's self?

The primacy of the self is the basis of René Descartes' epistemological investigations. Descartes offers the classical philosophical formulation for the existence of the self in his *Meditations on First Philosophy* (*Meditations*). Beginning from a

foundation of radical scepticism, Descartes arrives at his enduring though contested philosophical proof of the existence of the "I":

> I have convinced myself that there is absolutely nothing in the world, no sky, no earth, no minds, no bodies. Does it now follow that I too do not exist? No: if I convinced myself of something then I certainly existed. But there is a deceiver of supreme power and cunning who is deliberately and constantly deceiving me. In that case I too undoubtedly exist, if he is deceiving me; and let him deceive me as much as he can, he will never bring it about that I am nothing so long as I think that I am something. So after considering everything very thoroughly, I must finally conclude that this proposition, *I am*, *I exist*, is necessarily true whenever it is put forward by me or conceived in my mind. (*Meditations* 16-17)

Descartes later more succinctly expressed this as "I think, therefore I am" (*Principles* 5). Earlier expressions of this idea appear in the works of Plato, Aristotle and Augustine: Aristotle, for example, says that "life seems to be essentially the act of perceiving or thinking," and reaches a Cartesian conclusion: ". . . to perceive that we perceive or think is to perceive that we exist (for existence was defined as perceiving or thinking)" (Aristotle 178). But whereas these predecessors express this premise as an aside, Descartes makes it foundational. Descartes establishes this one, sure point, from which he proceeds to prove the existence of God and the existence of the material, external world: "I think, therefore I am" becomes the

foundation of a system of knowledge that uses rational deduction rather than the evidence of the senses to arrive at a set of principles that we know to be true, beyond any doubt.

A profound consequence of Cartesian philosophy is that it makes thinking the defining human characteristic: “But what then am I? A thing that thinks. What is that? A thing that doubts, understands, affirms, denies, is willing, is unwilling, and also imagines and has sensory perceptions” (*Meditations* 19). Descartes defines thought as “all those things which occur in us while we are conscious, insofar as the consciousness of them is in us” (*Principles* 5). “Insofar as the consciousness of them is in us” implies an autonomous, interior self capable of both knowing and expressing itself in transparent language. However, it also implies other “things which occur in us” of which we are *un*conscious. Descartes disregards these, but they would later become important to modern concepts of identity that admit the unconscious, as in the work of Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan. For Descartes, thinking takes place in the mind, which is distinct from yet inside the corporeal body: “The mind is proved to be really distinct from the body, but is shown, notwithstanding, to be so closely joined to it that the mind and the body make up a kind of unit” (*Meditations* 11). Having identified “I” with “mind,” Descartes locates this “I” in the pineal gland: “My view is that this gland is the principal seat of the soul, and the place in which all our thoughts are formed” (*The Philosophical Writings* 143). Why the pineal gland? First, because it is singular: “The reason I believe this is that I cannot

find any part of the brain, except this, which is not double"; second, because it is supposedly located in the innermost centre of the brain: "the most suitable possible place for this purpose, in the middle of all the concavities" (*The Philosophical Writings* 143). These attributes of the "I"—singularity and interiority—have proved remarkably enduring in conventional lyric poetry (perhaps the kind of poetry Ted Kooser favours), but, as we shall see, they have also been increasingly contested.

Descartes' concept of a singular, centred, introspective, interior "I" is implicit in much lyric poetry: as we have seen from the definitions proposed by Hegel, Drury, and Brewster (see Chapter 2), it is the essential characteristic of the conventional lyric poem, from Sappho to Wordsworth to Sylvia Plath to Mary Oliver. Wordsworth articulates this concept clearly in his 1800 Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*:

> For all good poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings; but though this be true, Poems to which any value can be attached, were never produced on any variety of subjects but by a man who being possessed of more than usual organic sensibility had also thought long and deeply. For our continued influxes of feeling are modified and directed by our thoughts, which are indeed the representatives of all our past feelings. (Wordsworth 744-45)

Wordsworth emphasizes here the primacy, in poetry, of the self as a feeling, thinking centre. The "organic sensibility" is one that intimately connects feelings to thoughts, so that the latter are

"representatives" of the former (albeit "modified and directed"). Wordsworth is proposing a reorientation of contemporary focus, from the object to the subject: "I should mention one other circumstance which distinguishes these Poems from the popular Poetry of the day; it is this, that the feeling therein developed gives importance to the action and situation, and not the action and situation to the feeling" (746).

Poetry thus performs a kind of conjuring trick: it delivers a simulacrum of the original powerfully felt emotion, processed through tranquil contemplation. The tranquility that produces this simulacrum leaves no trace of itself. This is analogous to T. S. Eliot's metaphor of the poet's mind as a catalyst, a shred of platinum:

> When the two gases previously mentioned [oxygen and sulphur dioxide] are mixed in the presence of a filament of platinum, they form suphurous acid. This combination takes place only if the platinum is present; nevertheless the newly formed acid contains no trace of platinum. (Eliot 26)

Eliot is of course advocating his "Impersonal theory of poetry" (26), but like Wordsworth, like Descartes, he assumes an interior mind that can inspect, recombine, and represent its own contents in language. The lyric poem is understood as a crafted representation of these contents. The lyric "I" may or may not invite identification with the poet, but its status in the poem as a proxy for an organic sensibility, for a unified, singular, feeling and thinking centre, is not, for Eliot, in question, and Wordsworth's observation that "the feeling therein

developed gives importance to the action and situation, and not the action and situation to the feeling" is essential to the conventional contemporary lyric poem.

Many contemporary poets and critics, however, contest this Cartesian concept of the "I," and its status in the context of a lyric poem. Such contestation takes various forms that may be broadly characterized as "post-avant," defined here by the poet and critic Reginald Shepherd:

> "Post-avant" (as in, "post-avant-garde"—insider groups love shorthand) poets can be described as writers who, at their best, have imbibed the lessons of the modernists and their successors in what might be called the experimental or avant-garde stream of American poets, including the Objectivists (especially Oppen and Zukofsky), what have been called the New American Poetries (from Jack Spicer and Robert Duncan to John Ashbery and Frank O'Hara), particularly the Projectivist/Black Mountain School and the New York School(s), and the Language poets (including such poets and polemicists as Charles Bernstein and Ron Silliman), without feeling the need (as so many other poetic formations have) to pledge allegiance to a particular group identity. (Shepherd "Who You Callin' 'Post-Avant'?")

Marjorie Perloff contrasts these new poetics with the mainstream, conventional lyric, and criticizes

> a certain kind of prize-winning, 'well-crafted' poem' that will, with rare exceptions, exhibit the following characteristics: 1) irregular lines of free verse, with little or no emphasis on the construction of the line itself or on what the Russian Formalists called "the word as such"; 2) prose syntax with lots of prepositional and parenthetical phrases, laced with graphic imagery or even extravagant metaphor (the sign of "poeticity"); 3) the expression of a profound thought or small epiphany, usually based on a particular memory, designating the lyric speaker as a particularly sensitive person who really *feels* the pain. ("Poetry on the Brink")

There is an obvious note of derision in Perloff's catalogue. This note is shared by the poet and critic Ron Silliman, who has characterized such poetry as "School of Quietude," observing that "[t]he phrase itself was coined by Edgar Allan Poe in the 1840s to note the inherent caution that dominates the conservative institutional traditions in American writing" (Silliman). Like Charles Bernstein's coinage, "Official Verse Culture," "School of Quietude" is used to denote the conventional lyric that denies its own ideological investments in the status quo. As Bernstein says, "Ideology, as in a particular and restricted point of view … everywhere informs poetry …. To pretend to be nonpartisan, above the fray … is an all too common form of mystification and bad faith" (Bernstein 3). There is an echo, here, of Adorno: "The cultural critic … speaks as if he represents unadulterated nature or a higher historical stage. Yet he is

necessarily of the same essence as that to which he fancies himself superior" ("Cultural Criticism and Society" 19). Perloff, Silliman and Bernstein were all early advocates of Language (L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E) Poetry (and Silliman and Bernstein are among its best-known practitioners). Language Poetry and its various offshoots (including Flarf and Conceptual Poetry) represent the subject as a construct of language. The products of language-centred poetics are often characterized by disjunctive uses of language that make them difficult to read in the conventional sense, and which undermine received concepts of the lyric speaker and narrative (e.g. that the lyric "I" is stable, singular, autonomous, self-determining, and that language is a means this "I" uses to express itself). Silliman has noted that Robert Grenier's "On Speech" manifesto (Grenier 5) signalled an outright rejection of "simple ego psychology in which the poetic text represents not a person, but a persona, the human as unified object" (*In the American Tree* xx). Lyn Hejinian, a prominent poet often associated with Language Poetry, questions the singularity and the interiority of the Cartesian "I":

> The personal is already a plural condition. Perhaps one feels that it is located somewhere within, somewhere inside the body—in the stomach? the chest? the genitals? the throat? the head? One can look for it and already one is not oneself, one is several, incomplete, and subject to dispersal. (Hejinian 207)

Language poetry and its offshoots are avowedly not, in the Wordsworthian sense, products of "a more than usual organic

sensibility"; indeed, they often rely on 'uncreative' strategies that deny the possibility of such a sensibility, such as 'found' language (e.g. Kenneth Goldsmith, Craig Dworkin), chance operations (Flarf), or techniques that foreground the materiality of language by means of self-imposed constraints, or an aural or visual poetics (e.g. Christian Bök, Steve McCaffery). They imply meaning as something not residing in the poem waiting to be discovered, but as something created by the reader in an engagement with the language-generated experience of the poem.

Between, on the one hand, a poetry that posits an inner mental or emotional state expressed in language by a single, unified speaker (that is, conventional lyric poetry and its subgenre, Confessionalism) and, on the other hand, a poetry that posits itself as an instance of language from which the reader may construct meaning, lies a range of other distinct possibilities that I have, following Reginald Shepherd (above), grouped together as "post-avant."

As Shepherd explains, these possibilities, variously labelled as Third Way, New Sincerity, Lyric Postmodernism, Hybrid, or Elliptical, combine "lyricism and avant-garde experimentation in a new synthesis" (*Lyric Postmodernisms* ix). As Cole Swensen acknowledges in her introduction to an anthology of Hybrid poetry, *American Hybrid*,

> The hybrid poem has selectively inherited traits from both of the principal paths outlined above [Language Poetry and New Formalism]. It shares affinities with what Ron Silliman has

> termed “third wave poetics” and with what is increasingly known as “post-avant” work ... And Stephen Burt touched on something similar when he introduced the term “elliptical poetry.” (Swensen xxi)

Burt observes that

> Elliptical poets are always hinting, punning, or swerving away from a never-quite-unfolded back-story; they are easier to process in parts than in wholes. They believe provisionally in identities (in one—or in at least one—“I” per poem), but they suspect the I’s they invoke: they admire disjunction and confrontation, but they know how a little can go a long way. Ellipticists seek the authority of the rebellious; they want to challenge their readers, violate decorum, surprise or explode assumptions about what belongs in a poem or what matters in life, and to do so while meeting traditional lyric goals. (Burt *Close Calls with Nonsense* 346)

The boundaries are of course blurred: some poets that feature in *American Hybrid* are also commonly associated with Language Poetry (e.g. Rae Armantrout and Lyn Hejinian) or with the conventional lyric (e.g. Mary Jo Bang and Jorie Graham). Burt’s summary of what it means to be Elliptical suggests a foot in every corner, and this, as we shall see, poses logical difficulties.

So how is the lyric “I” represented in these different kinds of poems? I have argued (see Chapter 2) that Seidel is not to be

characterized as a Confessional poet: might he be characterized as a poet working in one or another of these post-avant modes? To answer the first of these questions, I will examine some poems that work within these different modes, and the function of the lyric "I" in these poems. I will conclude with an analysis of Seidel's poem, "The Ballad of Ferguson, Missouri" (*Widening Income Inequality*), to demonstrate how Seidel, while working within the lyric tradition, demonstrates a limited interest in the interiority of the lyric "I" (as I have shown in the comparisons with Sexton, Plath, and Lowell), focusing instead on external issues of race and power. This analysis will contrast Seidel's approach with that of Kenneth Goldsmith in his Conceptualist found poem, "The Body of Michael Brown," and compare Seidel's poem with the poem it references in its title, Dudley Randall's "Ballad of Birmingham."

I will begin with what seems a relatively straightforward conventional lyric poem. Robert Frost's traveller in "The Road Not Taken" (Frost 105), first published in 1916, may serve as an example of the "I" in the traditional mainstream lyric. (See Appendix for the text of this poem.) The "I" in Frost's poem is clearly a persona, one who perhaps shares some common ground with Frost himself, but primarily represents an interesting psychological case. Frost ironically represents the play of thought in the mind of this traveller who chooses one road over the other, for the spurious reason that "it was grassy and wanted wear" (8). This reason is made more spurious in the following four lines: "the passing there / Had worn them really

about the same" (9-10), and neither road has been used recently: "both that morning equally lay / In leaves no step had trodden black" (11-12). The reader's pleasure derives, at least in part, from this play of the speaker's confused thought in the poem, including his *a posteriori* rationalization of his success, or perhaps failure, in life:

> I shall be telling this with a sigh
> Somewhere ages and ages hence:
> Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
> I took the one less traveled by,
> And that has made all the difference. (16-20)

The repetition of "I" ("and I—/ I took . . .") both enacts the sigh in the stanza's first line, and reminds us—a reminder emphasized by the line-break—that the "I" is split between the "I" who acted, and the "I" who misunderstands both its motives for doing so, and the consequences of the action. We might say that the traveller makes a choice, but in representing from a projected future vantage point his reasons for doing so, and in attributing his subsequent successes (or failures) to that choice, he demonstrates his own confusion. Behind this confused speaker, of course, is Frost himself, who represents but does not partake in the confusion. Frost presents a speaker who anticipates his own achievement in life, and who rehearses his future rationale for that achievement.

Our interpretation of this poem hinges on its tone. Is that a sigh of complacency, a performative sigh for the speaker's implied listeners? Or is it a sigh of defeat? Is the speaker congratulating

himself on having taken the tougher (less travelled) road, and attributing his later success to that decision, or ruing the moment he made a bad judgment, and attributing his later failures to that? As the poem reveals the choice to have been arbitrary, these different readings are alike in that they both demonstrate the speaker's partial and faulty self-knowledge. This seemingly simple narrative-driven poem shows us that the conventions of the mainstream lyric do not preclude complex representations of the lyric "I"—in this case, a self that, in thinking it can inspect its own thoughts, gazes instead into the mirror of its own ego. In other respects, though, the "I" here is unproblematic, a stable (if deluded) identity. Frost's poem demonstrates that the premise of a stable, singular lyric subject does not imply a lack of sophistication in analysis of psychological motivation.

The poet Tony Hoagland's poem, "Muchness" (see Appendix), first published in 2007 and reprinted in *The Best American Poetry 2008* (Wright), is an example of a contemporary poem that, like Frost's poem, works within the mainstream lyric tradition, but also incorporates an awareness that Confessional narrative is a strategy that, like any other chosen lyric strategy, has no special claims on authenticity, sincerity, or transparency. At the same time, these concepts have value, and Hoagland is loath to dispense with them. Conventions of the lyric poem—a specific time and setting; autobiographical details; direct address positioning the "I" as a speaker/observer in relation to a "you," thus establishing an intimate

appeal to an ostensible other in the poem, and also to the reader; the external details that contribute to an internal epiphany—all serve as stage props for the poem's lyric purposes. In her introduction to *American Poets in the 21st Century*, Lisa Sewell notes that "[w]hile many of these poets claim a space for lyric interiority and 'emotive effect,' almost all treat the speaking subject as provisional, expressing doubts about a lyric poetry that dramatizes the self's fixed relationship with the world" (Rankine 3). Hoagland's poem is an example of this strategy. In the poem, the speaker observes from the vantage point of a hotel window another person—someone we surmise, from clues seeded in the poem, the speaker is close to—boarding a boat. There is an implied contrast between the speaker's idleness and the departing person's sense of purpose—"You were going to work / with your backpack and sketchbook" (8-9)—and affectionate, seemingly incidental details. The pivotal line in the poem is "That's how my heart is, I thought—" (13): this is what the preceding anecdote (revealed now to be an extended simile) has been leading to; here is the inner emotional state of the lyric "I," made manifest via an objective correlative. The "I" and the "you"—("I saw you in the rainy morning" [1]) are observable—the "you" from the outside, and the "I" from the inside. We have no external description or action relating to the "I," though, at all: the lyric "I" is a locus of outward-directed observation ("I saw you"), inward feeling and thought ("That's how my heart is, I thought"), and imagination ("as I was dreaming" [17]). The departing person is made vividly present by

metonymic details: “your famous orange pants” (4), for example, where the adjective, “famous,” hints at a back-story, and perhaps other anecdotes the speaker could impart; “your backpack and sketchbook”; “and your bushy gray hair / which bursts out in weather / like a steel wool bouquet” (10-12). That last detail is related, of course—is made to relate, through simile—not just to the speaker’s unruly heart, but also to “the gray sheen / of the harbor left behind, like unpolished steel” (18-19): in Eliot’s terms, “the poet’s mind… is constantly amalgamating disparate experience… in the mind of the poet, these experiences are always forming new wholes” (Eliot 117). The meta-lyrical gesture that concludes the poem—“And the narrative then, having done its work, / it vanished too”—recalls the vanishing acts described by Wordsworth and Eliot (above): the narrative is synonymous with the poet’s mind, the catalyst that disappears after its work is done. Here, Hoagland makes explicit to the reader that the whole preceding anecdote is invented, a means to an end. The artifice of the poem is paraded and dismissed, leaving “Description, which lingers”—just as the image of the departed person lingers in the description of the harbor.

Hoagland’s poem thus incorporates a self-consciousness about language’s narrative-making function and at the same time places this function as a useful tool to be put aside when its work is done. The narrative of the poem is an artifice, a strategy for revealing the lyric “I” and its relation to the “you.” The speaker candidly confesses this artifice to the reader, and paradoxically, this confession that the

narrative is all a lie disarms the reader in its frankness. Philip Sidney would approve. We have been charmed by the story, and though the speaker has confessed that the story is an invention, the charm remains, and our trust in the speaker is preserved. The poem's meta-lyrical gestures may not be enough to satisfy readers of an Elliptical or Hybrid persuasion, and Marjorie Perloff would, perhaps, dismiss it as an exemplar of the "certain kind of prize-winning, 'well-crafted' poem" she characterizes above. Hoagland's poem, which offers narrative and then exposes that narrative as a fictive device, dispenses with consequence, both in the sense that narrative is a sequence of causally linked events, and in the sense that the human agents represented in this drama—agents in whom the poem has invited us to invest our empathy—are revealed as props in that illusory narrative. (I suspect Ted Kooser would condemn the poem on these grounds.) Is this woman, with her "famous orange pants," her "backpack and sketchbook," and her "bushy gray hair," there at all? Is the narrator there? Of course not: this is a poem. The reader's empathy is both enlisted and exposed as a kind of naivety: the entire poem is representing a kind of extended objective correlative for the complex emotion it evokes, nothing more. "Muchness" risks triviality, even as it attempts candour and a kind of knowing sincerity.

A logical objection to a poem such as Hoagland's that adopts this inclusive strategy is that, in cherry-picking from conventional and post-avant modes, it meaningfully engages with none. Michael Robbins criticizes this tendency in Hybrid poets who, he says,

"imagine that this conflict can be resolved aesthetically, by appropriating opposed styles, without resolving or really engaging their underlying ethical and ontological commitments" (*Quarrels with Ourselves* 9). Robbins's criticism is, I think, perceptive: one can see how a poem such as Hoagland's struggles to accommodate the "traditional lyric goals" adumbrated by Burt, who says, in a very Hegelian formulation, that lyric poetry "consists in short pieces of language (spoken, or sung, or written, or all three) in which the psyche finds the language and the sounds to fit its own internal states" (*Close Calls with Nonsense* x).

Lack of consequence, of commitment, and of responsibility, are aesthetic considerations with a moral tinge. Those on the side of consequence, commitment and responsibility would seem to commit to the concept of the inner self, where such things are felt, where choices are made and responsibility assumed, and where resolutions are formed, resulting in outward action—the site of Descartes' "mind," for which the conventional lyric "I" is a proxy. The lyric subject is represented, in other words, as a thinking, introspective, moral agent. Language Poetry and its offshoots, and at least some of the poets Burt calls Elliptical, replace or supplement this interior "I" with the external ideological power structures inherent in language, which, it is claimed, govern what we think and how we think it. In a discussion of the contemporary American poet Denise Riley, Burt observes how

> Riley acknowledges the double sense that no self-presentation is me (that I am something else or more than any name for me) and also that I am not under my own control (I'm a product of language, the unconscious, the economy, and time, which may combine to make me somebody else). (Burt *Close Calls with Nonsense* 176)

Hoagland has written diagnostically on the "Fear of Narrative and the Skittery Poem of our Moment" (Hoagland 508-19), arguing that Elliptical poems that rely on dissociation for their effects risk triviality. (As I note above, he also risks this in his own practice.) Hoagland suggests that Elliptical poems exhibit "a passive-aggressive relation to meaning"; that their "coy ellipticism…signifies a skepticism about the possibilities for poetic depth, earnestness, even about feeling itself" (517). Another example of an Elliptical poem—Mark Levine's "Work Song" (see Appendix), an example Burt alludes to in "The Elliptical Poets"—provides further evidence, I think, for Hoagland's contention. As Burt says, "Ellipticals love poems that declare 'I am X, I am Y, I am Z,' where X, Y, and Z are incompatible things" (*Close Calls with Nonsense* 347). The incessant repetition of "I am" in "Work Song" paradoxically destabilizes Levine's speaker's identity: there is nothing this speaker *isn't*. Levine's persona, "Henri," is an obvious nod to John Berryman's "Henry," who assumes multiple conflicting identities in *The Dream Songs* (the word "Song" in Levine's poem title is another nod.) "Work Song" is the poetic equivalent of an identity parade where the

guilty person is impossible to pick out from the line-up (and the sense of an unspecified crime is yet another nod to Berryman, particularly "Dream Song 29"). At the same time, the poem does provide (as *The Dream Songs* also do) a sense of a lively, contentious, intriguing figure, if also an unstable, morphing, fundamentally unknowable one. It also contains teasing traces of narrative, even as it playfully dismisses these as illusory: "I live in Toulouse, which is a piece of cardboard" (9). Levine's poem would seem to have gone further down the path more moderately taken by Hoagland, and one can see why Hoagland raises the suggestion of triviality: for all its verve, the poem remains an exercise in display and evasiveness, and in trying on different guises, its feelings are lightly worn and quickly exchanged for others. "Henri" flirts with but finally eludes our imaginative engagement.

Those poets who are sceptical about an autonomous, singular lyric "I" expressing itself in language would appear to attribute to the "I," however they perceive it, a diminished agency, and therefore a diminished responsibility. Yet Language Poetry, from which Elliptical poets borrow some of their strategies, is self-consciously a poetry of dissent, with overtly political aims: as Charles Bernstein declares, "I care most about poetry that disrupts business as usual, including literary business: I care most for poetry as dissent, including formal dissent; poetry that makes sounds possible to be heard that are otherwise not articulated" (Bernstein 2). This declaration has a moral fervor, and seems to attribute to the poetry Bernstein favours a moral

purpose. The distinctions to be made, then, between the conventional lyric and some of the recent poetic developments outlined above regarding the status of the lyric "I" may also include the site or sites of moral agency. In a series of eighteen poems, each titled "Autobiography," Michael Palmer, a poet often associated with Language Poetry, presents the reader with what purports to be autobiography, but doesn't sound at all like one. The first in the series, "Autobiography" (see Appendix), promises a life-story that never gets told. There are signals throughout this poem that its real subject is language itself, and the internal logic of propositions, independent of their referents ("*A* and *Not-A* are the same" [7]; "logic of types, Buridan sentences, the *lekton*" [27]). "I come from Kolophon" (10) sounds autobiographical, and Kolophon is, or rather was, a geographical location, an ancient city situated on the Aegean coast. But "colophon" is also a summary description of a book, usually found at the end: this speaker originates from text. "The world is all that is displaced" (14)—displaced by what? Language? The proposition echoes Wittgenstein's "The world is everything that is the case" (Wittgenstein 25), acknowledged in "The poet's stutter and the philosopher's" (18). We are learning about this speaker, but as a linguistic, philosophical construct.

Yet the poem is shot through with particular observations: "On the crescent beach, a drowned deer" (12); "Apples in a stall at the streetcorner by the Bahnhof, pale yellow to blackish red" (15). Such concretely specific fragments are not made to cohere, and may be

widely separated in time and place: do such fragments constitute an identity? Is this what is meant by "Parts are greater than the whole" (2)? "Memory does not speak" (16) is an implied rebuke to Nabokov's autobiographical memoir, *Speak Memory*, yet the poem seems to summon specific memories. "A philosopher … / … regards the self as just another sign" (3-4): the poem appears to share that Saussurean view, yet the philosopher is a caricature, "starving in a rooming house," lying "in a doorway, discussing the theory of colors // with himself / the theory of self with himself" (24-26). Those apples in the stall seem more vivid, more satisfyingly "there," than the philosopher's theory. "*A* and *Not-A*," as unmoored abstractions, *are* the same; their difference is apparent only in their referents. An autobiography of a life is represented in this poem as fragments of memory displaced by language: the 'thereness' of those apples is of course an illusion; there are only words describing apples. And not just apples; the speaker, too, is displaced by text. Where does this leave the subject, the lyric "I"? Palmer adapts and repurposes Arthur Rimbaud's sentence from a letter written in 1871 to Georges Izambard, "*Je est un autre*" (Rimbaud 306): "The self is assigned to others" (19). Even as Palmer explicitly examines and dismantles the Cartesian concept of an interior, organic, individual self, selfhood remains his focus. The common complaint about Confessional poetry—that it is literally self-absorbed, and interested in the world only insofar as it provides a means for dramatic self-revelation—may

also be made here: the concept of selfhood has changed, but it remains central.

The different yet related poetics discussed above are each invested in a particular concept of the lyric "I," and adopt different strategies to represent this. In the traditional lyric, the "I" is autonomous, introspective, self-determining; language is a means of expression of this inner self (a self that is represented as a dramatized, absorbing focus in Confessional poetry). In poems variously characterized as Third Way, New Sincerity, Lyric Postmodernism, Hybrid, or Elliptical, this concept of an autonomous "I" is maintained, but at the same time exposed as a convenient fiction, appearing to shape yet really shaped by language. In Language Poetry, the "I" is still in focus, but as a linguistic signifier, a sign among other signs.

None of these poetics seems to capture what Frederick Seidel is doing in his poems. For a poet commonly identified with the persona in his poetry, Seidel seems remarkably uninterested in the internal workings of the lyric "I" (see, for example, the comparative analysis with poems by Sexton and Plath in Chapter 2), though very interested in how identity is shaped by the interplay between the individual and society. A recent Seidel poem, "The Ballad of Ferguson, Missouri," from *Widening Income Inequality* (see Appendix), is seemingly vulnerable to the objections made by Perloff (see Chapters 1 and 2) to his work, but also serves to demonstrate my point. Ostensibly a poem written and narrated by a privileged white man on the death of the black youth, Michael Brown, at the hands of

police in Ferguson, Missouri, the work drew immediate negative responses similar to those made against Kenneth Goldsmith's conceptualist piece, "The Body of Michael Brown" (a reframing with some alterations of Michael Brown's autopsy report). But whereas Goldsmith's performance—the text is unavailable, but descriptions of the performance and some of the responses are available online (Steinhauer)—was apparently oblivious to the implications of a white man essentially making cultural capital from the corpse of a black man (a black man killed by agents of state power, the police), Seidel's poem acknowledges and engages with those implications. The pronoun "I" occurs only once in this poem, and that occurrence is both banal and crucial: "I wouldn't want to be a black man in St. Louis County" (36). This speaker is fully aware of his privileged status, and would not exchange it for Michael Brown's. But if that were all, the poem would be much less challenging than it is. In its title, Seidel's poem begs more fruitful comparison with another poem concerning the killing of black people by whites in the American South, "Ballad of Birmingham," by Dudley Randall. Randall's poem commemorates "the bombing of a church in Birmingham, Alabama, 1963" that resulted in the killing of four black children. It has the formal characteristics of the ballad: a roughly regular meter (iambic trimeters and tetrameters), rhyming quatrains, and a tragic, linear narrative: a young girl begs her mother to let her go on a Freedom March but the mother, fearing for her daughter's safety, sends her to sing at her church instead—where she dies, victim of the bombing of

the church by KKK members. The poem suggests that for black people, there is no sanctuary from the violence of racism: state institutions (police, jails) and terrorists (the KKK) alike are threats to the lives of black citizens, even children. Randall's poem makes sense of the tragedy by recasting it as a story, its regular rhythm, rhyme, and pathos lending it to public performance:

> "Mother dear, may I go downtown
> Instead of out to play,
> And march the streets of Birmingham
> In a Freedom March today?" (1-4)

Seidel's strategy is different. His title is a misnomer: the poem that follows isn't remotely a ballad, with its irregular rhyme, meter and stanzaic structure, its idiosyncratic digressions, its failure to tell a story. The poem begins not with the killing by police of Michael Brown, but with an absurd image of exposure and danger: "A man unzipping his fly is vulnerable to attack" (1). The threatened "attack" from a "drone" is not that of a military strike, but an act of surveillance: a far away "monitor on Mars" is "carefully considering all your moves for terror output" (4-9). If these lines concern the shooting of Michael Brown, it is only in the most roundabout way: the police officer who shot him perhaps considered Brown's "moves for terror output" (according to his testimony, Brown reached for the officer's gun; according to bystanders, Brown raised his hands in the air); perhaps the reference to "Mars" signals the gulf between the white officer and the black victim, two people from different ethnic

and cultural worlds. The final line of the stanza, "But not to worry. Forget about about about it" (10) is suggestive of the way we go on, momentarily fascinated by the spectacle of trauma, only to turn away from it and quickly to forget, and to forget the act of forgetting; it also suggests the way we know we are being constantly monitored, yet dismiss this knowledge from our minds, as of no consequence. The next, two-line stanza is more direct in its reference to Brown's death: "The body of the man you were / Has disappeared inside the one you wear" (11-12). Following one of the poem's several digressions ("Reminds me of the time" [13]), the thinking about identity here is reiterated even more clearly in another two-line stanza: "A man has disappeared inside his corpse. / His corpse has disappeared inside a cause" (23-24). In his own, distinctive way, Seidel arrives at a similar insight to that in Palmer's line: "The self is assigned to others" (Palmer 19). But—recalling Michael Hofmann's declaration that "Everything in him is sex, politics, religion, race, and class" (Hofmann 88)—it is the interplay between the individual and the public realm that is Seidel's focus. Seidel is making a controversial point—that, in his violent death at the hands of police, Brown's essential identity has been lost, only for him to assume another. His dead body has become a cause to rally around (the same controversial point may be made about the dead bodies of the children in Randall's poem).

But as the poem begins to make (admittedly tenuous, conjectural) sense, that sense is seemingly undermined by the

absurdity of its digressions: “Reminds me of the story of the man who had nipples / Where his elbows should be and whose skeleton / Was on the outside of his body” (13-15). There is a kind of thematic, if not narrative, coherence here: the body of this man, too, has disappeared; his skeleton and his nipples, normally hidden, are exposed. This man, though, is used to privilege: he buys some clothes to wear in a Madison Avenue store, and, wearing them, he enters the upmarket, luxurious Carlyle Hotel, where he is a familiar enough presence for a waiter to recognize him and offer him “[y]our usual?” (22). He is, in short, as perhaps Perloff would say, a figure very like Frederick Seidel himself. This man has also lost his identity, only to assume another: what distinguishes him from Michael Brown is privilege.

Seidel’s speaker then launches into another digression: he remembers the night Robert Kennedy announced “That Martin Luther King had been shot / And killed and by a white man. / Martin Luther King is dead” (28-30). Here, too, “a corpse has disappeared inside a cause”—both the civil rights cause that King died defending, and Kennedy’s use of King’s death to further his own political ambitions. The digression has another layer of complexity: the reader’s knowledge that Kennedy himself was assassinated later in the same year as King. The next, three-line stanza is thus a truth and a simplification: “Skin color is the name. / Skin color is the game. / Skin color is to blame for Ferguson, Missouri” (31-33).

Seidel goes on to do what every bad storyteller does: he repeats himself, exaggerating for effect. The man who enters the

Madison Avenue store is now "on fire" (52); he crosses the street to the Carlyle Hotel "in flames" (53). The speaker repeats the anecdote about Robert Kennedy. He refers to "Jimmy Hoffa, the mobster union president / Who however supported civil rights" (60-61), another murder victim—one whose corpse has literally disappeared. Everything, in short, is complicated: "Some victims change from a corpse to a cause" (63).

The title of Seidel's poem announces that, like Randall, he is going to tell a story. What follows is a demonstration that he can't tell that story—both because of his privileged position, and because, unlike stories, the death of Michael Brown doesn't make sense. To make sense of it would be a falsification and a trivialization of Brown's death, a transformation of it into spectacle, a commodity for consumption, like Goldsmith's reworking of Brown's autopsy report: the kind of art that, in Theodor Adorno's terms, "is adept at promoting the right attitudes" (Adorno *The Culture Industry* 61). Seidel's poem, in its pseudo-anecdotal way, apes the procedures of the conventional lyric poem—but the focus of his poem is not on the interiority of the self (except as a caricature of white privilege); rather, it is directed outwards, interrogating the issues of racism, identity and institutional power that surround the killing of Michael Brown.

In this chapter I have surveyed some of the non-conventional approaches to lyric, using a conventional example, Frost's "The Road Less Travelled," as a basis for comparison. I have also surveyed the

philosophical context for the lyric "I," and how the Cartesian concept of a singular, stable "I" capable of self-knowledge and of expressing its thoughts and feelings in language, while still commonplace in the conventional lyric, is challenged in various ways by practitioners of non-conventional, post-avant poetics. I hope to have also demonstrated that the sophistication of these poetics does not dislocate the lyric "I," however it is conceived, from its prime position. The "Ich, ich, ich, ich" of Plath's "Daddy" (27) is variously redefined, and interrogated, but its centrality to the lyric poem is not questioned. In Seidel's poetry, the lyric "I" is not central. It provides a means—often offensive, often satirical—to examine capitalism in its various aspects, and in its engagement with these aspects it demonstrates a limited agency and responsibility. But the attention of the poetry is directed outwards. Seidel's poetics is not one of personal revelation, as those who would place him in a Confessional context would have it; nor does it fit in a post-avant context. It is, rather, a poetics of cultural critique, concerned with the "I" only insofar as it engages, as an implicated subject, with capitalism.

Appendix

The following poems are frequently cited in the text of this research essay. They are reproduced here in the order in which they are discussed. For the poems' sources, consult Works Cited.

The Summer Day
By Mary Oliver

Who made the world?
Who made the swan, and the black bear?
Who made the grasshopper?
This grasshopper, I mean—
the one who has flung herself out of the grass,
the one who is eating sugar out of my hand,
who is moving her jaws back and forth instead of up and down—
who is gazing around with her enormous and complicated eyes.
Now she lifts her pale forearms and thoroughly washes her face.
Now she snaps her wings open, and floats away.
I don't know exactly what a prayer is.
I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down
into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass,
how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields,
which is what I have been doing all day.
Tell me, what else should I have done?
Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?
Tell me, what is it you plan to do
with your one wild and precious life?

My Friend, My Friend
by Anne Sexton

Who will forgive me for the things I do?
With no special legend of God to refer to,
With my calm white pedigree, my Yankee kin,
I think it would be better to be a Jew.

I forgive you for what you did not do.
I am impossibly guilty. Unlike you,
My friend, I can not blame my origin
With no special legend or God to refer to.

They wear The Crucifix as they are meant to do.
Why do their little crosses trouble you?
The effigies that I have made are genuine,
(I think it would be better to be a Jew).

Watching my mother slowly die I knew
My first release. I wish some ancient bugaboo
Followed me. But my sin is always my sin.
With no special legend or God to refer to.

Who will forgive me for the things I do?
To have your reasonable hurt to belong to
Might ease my trouble like liquor or aspirin.
I think it would be better to be a Jew.

And if I lie, I lie because I love you,
Because I am bothered by the things I do,
Because your hurt invades my calm white skin:
With no special legend or God to refer to,
I think it would be better to be a Jew.

Daddy
By Sylvia Plath

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

Daddy, I have had to kill you.
You died before I had time—
Marble-heavy, a bag full of God,
Ghastly statue with one gray toe
Big as a Frisco seal

And a head in the freakish Atlantic
Where it pours bean green over blue
In the waters off beautiful Nauset.
I used to pray to recover you.
Ach, du.

In the German tongue, in the Polish town
Scraped flat by the roller
Of wars, wars, wars.
But the name of the town is common.
My Polack friend

Says there are a dozen or two.
So I never could tell where you
Put your foot, your root,
I never could talk to you.
The tongue stuck in my jaw.

It stuck in a barb wire snare.
Ich, ich, ich, ich,
I could hardly speak.
I thought every German was you.
And the language obscene

An engine, an engine
Chuffing me off like a Jew.
A Jew to Dachau, Auschwitz, Belsen.
I began to talk like a Jew.
I think I may well be a Jew.

The snows of the Tyrol, the clear beer of Vienna
Are not very pure or true.
With my gipsy ancestress and my weird luck
And my Taroc pack and my Taroc pack
I may be a bit of a Jew.

I have always been scared of *you,*
With your Luftwaffe, your gobbledygoo.
And your neat mustache
And your Aryan eye, bright blue.
Panzer-man, panzer-man, O You—

Not God but a swastika
So black no sky could squeak through.
Every woman adores a Fascist,
The boot in the face, the brute
Brute heart of a brute like you.

You stand at the blackboard, daddy,
In the picture I have of you,
A cleft in your chin instead of your foot
But no less a devil for that, no not
Any less the black man who

Bit my pretty red heart in two.
I was ten when they buried you.
At twenty I tried to die
And get back, back, back to you.
I thought even the bones would do.

But they pulled me out of the sack,
And they stuck me together with glue.
And then I knew what to do.
I made a model of you,
A man in black with a Meinkampf look

And a love of the rack and the screw.
And I said I do, I do.
So daddy, I'm finally through.
The black telephone's off at the root,
The voices just can't worm through.

If I've killed one man, I've killed two—
The vampire who said he was you
And drank my blood for a year,
Seven years, if you want to know.
Daddy, you can lie back now.

There's a stake in your fat black heart
And the villagers never liked you.
They are dancing and stamping on you.
They always *knew* it was you.
Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I'm through.

Mr. Delicious
by Frederick Seidel

I stick my heart on a stick
To toast it over the fire.
It's the size of a marshmallow.
It bubbles and blackens to
Campfire goo—
Burnt-black skin outside
Gooey Jew.
From the twentieth century's
24/7 chimneys, choo-choo—
Train puffs of white smoke rise.
The trains waddle full of cattle to the camps.
The weightless puffs of smoke are on their way to the sky.
Ovens cremate fields of human cow.
Ovens cremate fields of human snow.
The snow turns into sleet.
The sleet turns into smoke.
Eat a heart for a treat.
It is sweet.
It tastes like meat.
I turn toward the east and bow five times.
One puff of white smoke signifies the College of Cardinals
Has found a new pontiff.
The vote flutters like a moth
Above the roofs of Rome.
Venice looks like an atoll from the air.
It rises like a ring seal from the sea.
It rises like the famous *corno ducale*,
The hydrocephalic jewelled hat the doge wore.
His swelled head is a helmet made of brocade but hard as horn.
Mr. Delicious has started his descent with tray table stowed.
Seatback restored to its upright position.
Finally he is standing again
On one of the many bridges,
On the arched back of a footbridge filigree,
After all the years away,
After all the terrible miracles
And heart attacks of joy.
The Venetian canal water
Is hydraulic-green brake fluid
That runs through the veins
And embalms this exalted dead city.
It is incredible that they have to die.
The Nazis appear to know why.
The evidence suggests that they do.
Oh the smokestacks.
Oh the smokestacks in full view.
No one knew.

Oh the chimneys spew Jew.
Let me take a moment to talk about sex sounds.
These are the sounds Germans make when they are making love
When they are about to come.
This completes, thank you very much,
This year’s
Report of the Paris Cricket Club.

Skunk Hour
(For Elizabeth Bishop)
by Robert Lowell

Nautilus Island's hermit
heiress still lives through winter in her Spartan cottage;
her sheep still graze above the sea.
Her son's a bishop. Her farmer
is first selectman in our village;
she's in her dotage.

Thirsting for
the hierarchic privacy
of Queen Victoria's century,
she buys up all
the eyesores facing her shore,
and lets them fall.

The season's ill—
we've lost our summer millionaire,
who seemed to leap from an L. L. Bean
catalogue. His nine-knot yawl
was auctioned off to lobstermen.
A red fox stain covers Blue Hill.

And now our fairy
decorator brightens his shop for fall;
his fishnet's filled with orange cork,
orange, his cobbler's bench and awl;
there is no money in his work,
he'd rather marry.

One dark night,
my Tudor Ford climbed the hill's skull;
I watched for love-cars . Lights turned down,
they lay together, hull to hull,
where the graveyard shelves on the town. . . .
My mind's not right.

A car radio bleats,
"Love, O careless Love. . . ." I hear
my ill-spirit sob in each blood cell,
as if my hand were at its throat. . . .
I myself am hell;
nobody's here—

only skunks, that search
in the moonlight for a bite to eat.
They march on their soles up Main Street:
white stripes, moonstruck eyes' red fire
under the chalk-dry and spar spire
of the Trinitarian Church.

I stand on top
of our back steps and breathe the rich air—
a mother skunk with her column of kittens swills the garbage pail
She jabs her wedge-head in a cup
of sour cream, drops her ostrich tail,
and will not scare.

I'm Here This
By Frederick Seidel

My dog is running in his sleep.
He's yipping, his paws twitching, fast asleep.
Hey, wait a minute, he's been dead two years.
The sunlight's pouring down outside.

Salt Lake City, how exotic, here I come!
I can't believe how far it is to here.
I can't accept, Get on a plane and go,
Just pack and leave yourself behind and fly,

And take the free trolley three stops to the Mormon Temple.
It turns out there's nothing much to see.
The girl guides are darling, but watch it, they're sinister.
They're programmed to save you right there in the Visitors' Center.

Welcome to Saudi Arabia in the middle
Of snow-capped Switzerland!
No yodeling, no alcohol—and I'm forbidden even
To *think* about the inside of the Temple.

Picture a blue-eyed sky
Above a white man waiting on God.
I mean a waiter.
I mean serving a meal.

Here I am, cooked through.
Here I am, covered with snow.
The prehistoric lakebed is sunbaked in a crust of prayer, salt, lies,
Gold, silver, copper, lead, zinc.

Here we are at the Grand America Hotel
On Main Street, opposite the Little America Hotel
On Main Street. My room the size of a ballroom
Stares at the mountains.

The owner of Sinclair Oil and his wife
Designed their Taj Mahal and bought the best.
Handloomed English woolen carpets on every floor
Guarantee a blue-flash shock.

Bush and an army of Secret Service stayed here last week—
I'm here this.
I get the afternoon tea pianist to play Bach
When I get back from my motorcycle race.

It's *L'année dernière à Marienbad*, dude.
It's Mr. Sinclair Oil's idea of classy wow.
It's the Ice Age—spa for the tuxedoed dead.
Joy ahoy!

Back Then
By Frederick Seidel

Negroes walking the white streets
Was how it seemed on Manhattan's Upper East Side.
One morning in 1971 it began.
I converted so to speak on the spot to the Ku Klux Klan.
My big blue heartfelt eyes hid in a hood and white sheets,
Completely ready to burn a cross and buy a gun.
A friend in the D.A.'s office said it's a gun or run.
I had thought these particular streets belonged to rich whites,
Almost as a matter of rich whites' civil rights.
The block on Seventieth between Park and Lexington Paul Mellon's sister
sanctified.
The always Irish doormen along Fifth Avenue nearly died—
All of a sudden blacks were crossing over the border from their Harlem home
And there were barbarians wandering the streets of Rome.
I knew the man who wrote this poem.

Barbados
By Frederick Seidel

Literally the most expensive hotel in the world
Is the smell of rain about to fall.
It does the opposite, a grove of lemon trees.
I isn't anything.
It is the hooks of rain
Hovering with their sweets inches above the ground.
I is the spiders marching through the air.
The lines dangle the bait
The ground will bite.
Your wife is as white as vinegar, pure aristo privilege.
The excellent smell of rain before it falls overpowers
The last aristocrats on earth before the asteroid.
I sense your disdain, darling.
I share it.

The most expensive hotel in the world
Is the slave ship unloading Africans on the moon.
They wear the opposite of space suits floating off the dock
To a sugar mill on a hilltop.
They float into the machinery.
The machine inside the windmill isn't vegetarian.
A "lopper" lops off a limb caught
In the rollers and the machine never has to stop.
A black arm turns into brown sugar,
And the screaming rest of the slave keeps the other.
His African screams can't be heard above the roar.
A spaceship near the end of a voyage was becalmed.
Two astronauts floated weightlessly off the deck
Overboard into the equator in their chains and *splash* and drowned.

A cane toad came up to them.
They'd never seen anything so remarkable.
Now they could see the field was full of them.
Suddenly the field is filled with ancestors.
The hippopotamuses became friendly with the villagers.
Along came white hunters who shot the friendly hippos dead.
If they had known friendship would end like that,
They never would have entered into it.
Suddenly the field is filled with souls.
The field of sugar cane is filled with hippopotamus cane toads.
They always complained
Our xylophones were too loud.
The Crocodile King is dead.
The world has no end.

The crocodile explodes out of the water and screams at the crowd
That one of them has stolen his mobile phone.
On the banks of the muddy Waddo, *ooga-booga!*
What about a Christmas tree in a steamy lobby on the Gulf of Guinea!
Because in Africa there are Africans
And they are Africans and are in charge.
Even obstipation
Can't stop a mighty nation.
The tragic magic makes lightning.
Some of the young captives are unspeakable
In their beauty, and their urine makes lightning, black and gold.
The heat is so hot
It will boil you in a pot.
Diarrhea in a condom is the outcome.

The former president completely loses it and screams from the stage
That someone fucking stole his fucking phone.
The audience of party faithful is terrified and giggles.
This was their man who brought the crime rate down
By executing everyone.
The crocodile staged a coup
And ended up in prison himself
And then became the president.
He stood for quality of life and clitorectomy.
But in his second term, in order to secure those international loans,
The crocodile changed his spots to free speech.
Lightning sentences them at birth to life without parole
With no time off for good behavior.
At that point in the voyage the ocean turns deeper.

People actually suffered severe optical damage from the blinding effects
Of the white roads in full sunlight.
It is the island roads so white you can't see,
Made of crushed limestone snow.
It is the tropical rain the color of grapefruit
Hovering in the figure of the goddess Niscah
Above the tile roof of the plantation house.
She dangles her baited lines.
It is the black of the orchids in a vase.
The goddess overpowers the uprising
And *I* is the first one hacked to pieces.
The asteroid is coming to the local cinema.
It is a moonlit night with the smell of rain in the air.
Thump thump, speed-bump.

The most expensive hotel in the world ignites
As many orgasms as there are virgins in paradise.
These epileptic foaming fits dehydrate one,
But justify the cost of a honeymoon.

The Caribbean is room-temperature,
Rippling over sand as rich as cream.
The beach chair has the thighs of a convertible with the top down.
You wave a paddle and the boy
Runs to take your order.
Many things are still done barefoot.
Others have the breakout colors of a parrot.
In paradise it never rains, but smells as if it could.
Two who could catapulted themselves overboard into the equator.
I die of thirst and drown in chains, in love.

Into the coconut grove they go. *Into the coconut grove they go.*
The car in the parking lot is theirs. *The car in the parking lot is theirs.*
The groves of lemon trees give light. *Ooga-booga!*
The hotel sheds light. *Ooga-booga!*
The long pink-shell sky of meaning wanted it to be, but really,
The precious thing is that they voted. *Ooga-booga!* And there we were,
The cane toads and the smell of rain about to fall.
The crocodiles and spiders are
The hippos and their friends who shot them dead.
The xylophone is playing too loud
Under the coconut palms, which go to the end of the world.
The slave is screaming too loud and we
Can't help hearing
Our tribal chant and getting up to dance under the mushroom cloud.

The Road Not Taken
By Robert Frost

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth;

Then took the other, as just as fair,
And having perhaps the better claim,
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;
Though as for that the passing there
Had worn them really about the same,

And both that morning equally lay
In leaves no step had trodden black.
Oh, I kept the first for another day!
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,
I doubted if I should ever come back.

I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.

Muchness
By Tony Hoagland

I saw you in the rainy morning
from the window of the hotel room,
running down the gangplank to board the boat.

You were wearing your famous orange pants,
which are really apricot
and the boat rocked a little
as you stepped on its edge.

You were going to work
with your backpack and sketchbook
and your bushy gray hair
which bursts out in weather
like a steel wool bouquet.

That's how my heart is, I thought—
It lies coiled up inside of me, asleep,
then springs out and shocks me
with all of its muchness.

But as I was dreaming, your boat pulled away.
Then there was just the gray sheen
of the harbor left behind, like unpolished steel
and the steep green woods that grow down to the shore,
and the gauze of mist on the hills.

It was your vanished boat
which gave the scene shape,
with its suggestion of journey and destination.

And the narrative then, having done its work,
it vanished too,
leaving just its affectionate cousin description behind;

—Description, which lingers,
and loves for no reason.

Work Song
By Mark Levine

My name is Henri. Listen. It's morning.
I pull my head from my scissors, I pull
the light bulb from my mouth—Boss comes at me
while I'm still blinking.
Pastes the pink slip on my collarbone.
It's O.K., I say, I was a lazy worker, and I stole.
I wipe my feet on his skullcap on the way out.
I am Henri, mouth full of soda crackers.
I live in Toulouse, which is a piece of cardboard.
Summers the mayors paint it blue, we fish in it.
Winters we skate on it. Children are always
drowning or falling in the cracks. Parents are distraught
but get over it. It's easy to replace a child.
Like my parents' child, Henri.

I stuff my hands into my shoes
and I crawl through the snow on all fours.
Animals fear me. I smell so good.
I have two sets of footprints, I confuse the police.
When I reach the highway I unzip my head.

I am a zipper. A paper cut.
I fed myself so many times
through the shredder I am confetti,
I am a ticker-tape parade, I am an astronaut
waving from my convertible at Henri.

Henri from Toulouse, is that you?
Why the unhappy face? I should shoot you
for spoiling my parade. Come on, man,
glue yourself together! You want so much to die
that you don't want to die.

My name is Henri. I am Toulouse. I am scraps
of bleached parchment, I am the standing militia,
I am a quill, the Red Cross, I am the feather
in my cap, the Hebrew Testament, I am the World Court.
An electric fan blows
beneath my black robe. I am dignity itself.

I am an ice machine.
I am an alp.
I stuff myself in the refrigerator
wrapped in newsprint. With salt in my heart
I stay good for days.

Autobiography
By Michael Palmer

All clocks are clouds.
Parts are greater than the whole.
A philosopher is starving in a rooming house, while it rains outside.
He regards the self as just another sign.
Winter roses are invisible.
Late ice sometimes sings.

A and *Not-A* are the same.
My dog does not know me.
Violins, like dreams, are suspect.
I come from Kolophon, or perhaps some small island.
The strait has frozen, and people are walking—a few skating—across it.
On the crescent beach, a drowned deer.

A woman with one hand, her thighs around your neck.
The world is all that is displaced.
Apples in a stall at the streetcorner by the Bahnhof, pale yellow to blackish red.
Memory does not speak.
Shortness of breath, accompanied by tinnitus.
The poet's stutter and the philosopher's.

The self is assigned to others.
A room for which, at all times, the moon remains visible.
Leningrad cafe: a man missing the left side of his face.
Disappearance of the sun from the sky above Odessa.
True description of that sun.
A philosopher lies in a doorway, discussing the theory of colors

with himself
the theory of self with himself, the concept of number, eternal return, the sidereal pulse
logic of types, Buridan sentences, the *lekton*.
Why now that smoke off the lake?
Word and things are the same.
Many times white ravens have I seen.

That all planes are infinite, by extension.
She asks, Is there a map of these gates?
She asks, Is this one called Passages, or is that one to the west?
Thus released, the dark angels converse with the angels of light.
They are not angels.
Something else.

The Ballad of Ferguson, Missouri
By Frederick Seidel

A man unzipping his fly is vulnerable to attack.
Then the zipper got stuck.
An angel flies in the window to unstick it.
A drone was monitoring all this
In real time
And it appears on a monitor on Mars,
Though of course with a relay delay.
One of the monitors at the Mars base drone station
Is carefully considering all your moves for terror output.
But not to worry. Forget about about about it.

The body of the man you were
Has disappeared inside the one you wear.

Reminds me of the story of the man who had nipples
Where his elbows should be and whose skeleton
Was on the outside of his body.
The guy walks into a shop on Madison to buy some clothes
And buys some and walks out wearing them
Wearing them and into the Carlyle bar.
One of the waiters, originally from Algeria of all places,
Recognizes him and says with the strong accent
He has despite many years of living in the United States:
Your usual?

A man has disappeared inside his corpse.
His corpse has disappeared inside a cause.

Reminds me of the video of Robert Kennedy
Announcing to a largely black audience at an outdoor campaign rally
At night in Indianapolis
That Martin Luther King had been shot
And killed and by a white man.
Martin Luther King is dead.

Skin color is the name.
Skin color is the game.
Skin color is to blame for Ferguson, Missouri.

The body of the man you were
Has disappeared inside the one you wear.

I wouldn't want to be a black man in St. Louis County.

A man unzipping his fly is vulnerable to attack.
Then the zipper got stuck.
An angel flies in the window to unstick it.
Here comes light-skinned Billie Holiday, Lady Day, no angel!

A drone was monitoring all this,
Which appears on a monitor on Mars,
Though of course with a relay delay.
One of the monitors at the Mars base drone station
Is carefully considering all your moves for terror output.
But not to worry.
Fuhgeddaboudit.

Reminds me of the story of the man whose smile
Shot out flames and whose skin
Was on the outside of his body.
The guy walks naked into a shop on Madison Avenue to buy some clothes
And buys some and walks out on fire wearing them and goes straight
Across the street in flames to the Carlyle bar.
One of the waiters looks as if he's having a stroke
And raises his hands in Arabic,
Palms in, and murmurs a prayer,
And brings God a glass of humble water.

You can change
From chasing Communists
And chasing Jimmy Hoffa, the mobster union president
Who however supported civil rights,

And change to blessing and being blessed.

Some victims change from a corpse to a cause.
You can change

Reminds me of the video of Robert Kennedy
Announcing to a largely black audience at an outdoor campaign rally
At night in Indianapolis
That Martin Luther King had been shot
And killed and by a white man.
Martin Luther King is dead.

Ballad of Birmingham

(On the bombing of a church in Birmingham, Alabama, 1963)

By Dudley Randall

"Mother dear, may I go downtown
Instead of out to play,
And march the streets of Birmingham
In a Freedom March today?"

"No, baby, no, you may not go,
For the dogs are fierce and wild,
And clubs and hoses, guns and jails
Aren't good for a little child."

"But, mother, I won't be alone.
Other children will go with me,
And march the streets of Birmingham
To make our country free."

"No, baby, no, you may not go,
For I fear those guns will fire.
But you may go to church instead
And sing in the children's choir."

She has combed and brushed her night-dark hair,
And bathed rose petal sweet,
And drawn white gloves on her small brown hands,
And white shoes on her feet.

The mother smiled to know her child
Was in the sacred place,
But that smile was the last smile
To come upon her face.

For when she heard the explosion,
Her eyes grew wet and wild.
She raced through the streets of Birmingham
Calling for her child.

She clawed through bits of glass and brick,
Then lifted out a shoe.
"O, here's the shoe my baby wore,
But, baby, where are you?"

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The Night We Ate the Baby

A poetry manuscript presented in partial fulfilment

of the

requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

English

at Massey University, Manawatū,

New Zealand

Timothy Lawrence Upperton

2019

Table of Contents

Avoid

For Oscar

Life is not a dream. Careful! Careful! Careful!

- Federico García Lorca, 'The city that does not sleep'

New Age mystics.
Wave-particle physics.
Federico García Lorca,
that all-night talker.
The law.
The rot inside the apple core.
All dawdlers.
Power walkers.
Tattoo parlours.
Poetry readings that go on for hours.
Cigarettes. Death metal concerts.
White-singleted men in bedsits.
Responsibilities.
Provincial cities.
Representation on committees.
Bad sex.
Rainforest decks.
Sunday best. Waste of breath.
At all costs, avoid death.
Other people's crises.
Lychees.
Too much sun. Too much of one thing.
Wagner's *Ring*.
Paintings of cows at eventide.
Cows in formaldehyde.
Sentimentality and cynicism.
Literary criticism.
Anyone with a knife.
The good life.

§

Valediction

Goodbye, bagel,
table for one.
Coffee, cigarette.
Warmth of the sun.

Goodbye, sparrow.
Goodbye, speckled hen.
Goodbye, tomorrow.
Goodbye, remember when.

Goodbye pepper,
goodbye, salt.
Goodbye, sour and bitter things.
And honey. Malt.

Goodbye whiskey,
cabernet, beer.
Goodbye, Christmas.
Goodbye, New Year.

Goodbye mortgage,
taxes, and bills,
renovator's makeover,
rotten windowsills,

lovers, hatreds,
kid pen-pal from Mumbai.
Old body that I've come to know.
Goodbye, goodbye, goodbye.

The truth about Palmerston North

I come from Palmerston North.

- James Brown, "I come from Palmerston North"

People like to mock my town, they mock it
for being too provincial and too boring
and it's true not much of import happens here
but I like it. Some people say when they are asked
what they like about Palmerston North
that you can always find a park and that's true,
too, you can always find a park just a short walk
from where you want to go, sometimes right outside,
you don't have to walk at all, you're right there.
Of course it's mostly people who live in New Zealand
who mock Palmerston North, as people who live
outside New Zealand know nothing about it.
People who don't live in New Zealand mock
our entire little country as a 1950s
throwback with honest, rural folk and unspoilt
scenery which isn't quite true, our scenery
is spoilt from being looked at too often
and freedom campers, they say, are a problem
but me, I blame dairy cows. When I lived
in the UK people there thought New Zealand
was a state of Australia, and they would
ask me what was coming up on *Neighbours*,
thinking I had some kind of inside knowledge,
but the truth is I don't even watch *Neighbours*
or indeed any soap operas. Actually
the whole Southern Hemisphere is more or less
written off by people who don't live in this
part of the world, as somewhere insignificant,
like Palmerston North, where as I said nothing
much happens. And it's an undeniable
fact that the magazines I subscribe to
come from exotic places that they flaunt
in their titles, magazines like *The New Yorker*
and *London Review of Books* and *The Paris Review*
but not *The Palmerston Northerner*.
It's another fact that *The Paris Review*
isn't even published in Paris
and has nothing to say about that city

but it has insightful interviews with famous
writers some of whom I have read. I have been
to Paris and apart from the architecture
and the food and some very fine cemeteries
and of course the language it's quite like Palmerston
North, though parking is a nightmare. I never
visited the Louvre but one fine afternoon
I went to the Musée d'Orsay which in the opinion
of many educated people really
is just as good if you like Impressionist
and Post-Impressionist art, which I do.
Still it was nice to come home again, home
to Palmerston North, New Zealand, and to see
the good brown Manawatū River moving
sluggishly under the bridge. It's not the Seine,
but water is water. Paul Celan threw himself—
odd phrase, as if he were both baseball and pitcher—
into the Seine. John Cleese said Palmerston North
is the suicide capital of New Zealand,
yet you don't hear of people throwing themselves
into the Manawatū, which would be a risky
business, but only because of the effluent
from those dairy cows leaching into the river.
We live on a floodplain, and the river is ever
in our thoughts and sometimes our houses.
At such times we are downcast but we raise
our eyes unto the hills and the windmills
perched on them that turn and turn. Only once
I saw a middle-aged woman in the Plaza,
our shopping mall, with her head tilted
to where the sky would have been, but for the ceiling
and the mood lighting, a stout middle-aged woman
with black mascara, elegantly dressed,
her wet mouth a dark, soundless O, and the crowd
not unsympathetically parting
and reforming around her, rock in the river,
noticing and not noticing, which is our way.

Spring

is coming. This is a poem about spring,
which is too much. Everything is too much.
This is a poem about everything.
I ruin everything I touch.

I ruin the jonquils, the daffodils.
I ruin the I love you.
I ruin the blue remembered hills.
The apple-trees vomit blossom. I ruin the morning dew.

Mine is a peculiar badness.
You are reduced to the smell of your hair.
Mine is a peculiar sadness.
You are almost not quite there.

Which is to say, I am terrified.
Meanwhile the grassy goodness, the lengthening day.
It's not as if you died.
You come closer and closer away.

The night we ate the baby

We both got home late,
the night we ate the baby,
and the girl from the agency
was out the door as fast
as she could pocket fifty dollars.
You were tired. I was tired.
I cracked open a beer
and the television howled
at the wall and I grew a slow rage.
It was the night we ate the baby,
and you were doing something
in the kitchen, but it didn't sound
like food preparation.
It didn't sound like anything much,
and I got another beer from the fridge
without looking up
because I got the feeling
you didn't want me to look up.
Neither of us even checked the baby.
And I said, Do you want a beer?
But you didn't, that much was plain,
thank you, you had that set
to your shoulders that meant trouble,
not now but later for sure,
and then the baby Christ the baby
started crying and you waited for me
to do something about it and I waited
for you to do something about it
and the baby, it just wouldn't stop
and you said, Why won't it just stop?
And you were crying, too,
the night we ate the baby,
crying hard, from inside a sorrow
so deep I couldn't reach you if I tried,
so I didn't try because bad things
never stop, it's not in their nature
to stop, they maybe rest for a while
and catch their breath and go on,
like the baby, like you crying,
the world's howling.
This was the night we ate the baby.

A nice day

She says it as she hands me a parking infringement notice. At Hammer Hardware he says it, even though I don't buy the cordless drill. The chemist says it like it's part of the prescription. At the supermarket I wait in the queue, swipe my card, enter my PIN, push my trolley forward. Then I turn back, and I look her in the eye. 'You didn't say it,' I say. 'Say what?' She looks at me and smiles. A front tooth slightly overlaps the other in a way I think of as winsome. From the complicated arrangement of clasps and ties holding her hair up, a strand has come loose and straggles past her ear—that has, I see now, an earring in the shape of a tiny, arched, silver dolphin, perched on its pink lobe—and it breaks my heart. It's careless rather than artful. My sister collected dolphins. Glass, porcelain, 'made entirely from recycled native timber,' even a bedside lamp dolphin. The lamp, naturally, was in its bottlenose. The checkout girl has a face not beautiful but kind. There is the possibility of an exchange here. This hasn't happened in a while. You didn't say, Have a nice day, I say. Her steady gaze seems to stop just short of my face. It's on the receipt, she says, and her unaccountable smile I had begun to return is withdrawn, settling now on the guy next in line. The dolphins all posed the same: smiling, their backs humped as if they were having stomach cramps. Look at them! my sister would say. 'They're the friendliest, smartest creatures on God's earth. Look at them! But it's her I looked at, smiling in the company of dolphins.

Dreams of the river

The river twists like an eel that twists
within the twist that is the river,
and the eel is a tube that carries the river
within it, like the pipe that carries
within it what it pours into the river,
and what pours all day into the river
becomes the river, as the child
who swims all day in the river
becomes a river-child,
and goes home in the evening
smelling of the river.

The child who swims in the river
drinks a glass of milk and goes
to the toilet, and at night dreams
of the river, brown,
flowing to the sea
with a burden it must disgorge,
and in that flow the flash
of the eel's upturned belly,
and the child, and everyone
the child has ever known,
faces upturned too and pale
in the moonlight, in the river,
so many heads, always more,
bobbing down the river forever.

All my dear ones

Maybe it was the lone trout fisherman
I saw yesterday, as I drove over
the bridge, his fly-rod a thin wand, almost
invisible at dusk—all night I dreamed
of mayflies, swarming bright around my head
like a saint's inconvenient halo.
The mayfly has no functioning mouthparts—
its plans are necessarily short-term.
From my bed I can make out my mother's
old highback chair, the dim bookshelves, faceless
framed photographs, window, starlight. No moon.
Where did all my dear ones go, where are they
now. I'm not sure about the mouthparts, could
check it out online, but I feel better
not knowing. In the sleeping house I creep
downstairs and in the kitchen I thank God,
as I gulp down some cereal, I have
functioning mouthparts, and for my other
excellent parts I am also grateful,
and isn't the mayfly's dance, like this poem
I'm writing in the dark, a spell against
death? Not a very good spell, obviously.
Least profitable enterprise ever,
after poetry: mayfly life insurance.
Does the mayfly think like this? You can bet
as it swarms, as it mates, lays eggs and dies,
it's thinking, How the fuck did I get here?
Why didn't I just stay in the cool stream?
Nymph-life was so good! To eat and grow fat—
God, what I'd give to do that all again!
And now dawn comes, with its rosy fingers,
the house creaks and wakes, but I'm not finished!
Maybe the fallen mayfly thinks that, too,
its body a scribble writ in water.
I'm not finished! Its wings heavier now,
tiny, swaddled Ophelia. I'm finished.

On the eve of my 53rd birthday

after Gregory Corso

Once I was very small but then I grew up
and other things were small and nothing hurt
like it did when I was sixteen, and again
at twenty-one. Fifty-fucking-three!
The poems I wrote and the poems I shouldn't
have written but they're done now and in books
nobody, absolutely nobody,
ever reads. There was some craziness,
and sometimes I was alone and other times
I was not alone, and alone was better
but I was lonely. To be honest,
the craziness didn't amount to much.
The confessional stopped working about
the time I had things to confess, and now —
now I'd have to spend the rest of my life
in there and still never get to the end
of it, fuck it, I may as well carry on.
My hair was long and straight but went springy
in my thirties then straight again but not
as straight as before. Now it's mostly grey
but I don't really care about it.
I let it grow and grow and then I cut
it all off. I imagine it growing
when I'm lifeless in my coffin, masses
of it, which is unpleasant to think of
and anyway not yet. I want more life
in front of me than I have behind me,
but that's not about to happen. I want
a bell down there, in the wormy darkness,
like in the Edgar Allan Poe story,
or a buzzer, a buzzer I can press
and somebody to listen just in case.

When lovers leave

When lovers leave, are none, or few,
ask not what cunt can do for you.
Don’t tell me whether you spit or swallow.
I take my waking blow by blow.
I ask my crotch
what it would rather watch:
a doco on the Ebola virus
or a leaked sex-tape of Miley Cyrus.
I think therefore I am
forgetting my Citalopram.
Oh, do not ask, what is it?
Nobody really gives a shit.
God loves sinners and sinners love evil.
It’s dog eat dog in Doggerelville.

True story

for Ruth Upperton
1931 - 2013

It was 1936, my mother was five years old.
Her mother had given her a china doll.
Her sister, aged four, had been given one too.
The dolls were beautiful, with print cotton dresses
and chubby arms and legs and clear faces
and such blue eyes and fine, golden hair.
Story goes my mother dropped hers
on the cracked path that led from the gate
to the old bungalow—
new then, the only house on the street
that still had a chimney after the earthquake
the year my mother was born—
and anyway the doll broke and that was that.
My mother turned to her sister, my aunt,
and stared at her in pain. My aunt stared back.
The blazing sun poured down.
And then my mother snatched her sister's doll
from her hands and smashed it on the ground.
I am the only one who knows this story.

In Topeka, Kansas

Well, after all, you want to be free.
You want to wear a faded tee shirt
with a hole in the armpit, of a weekend,
to fetch up in Topeka, Kansas,
and to have a wife who is pleasant in her ways
and some rowdy kids, a tipped-over
bicycle in the yard and a rose garden—
big, blowsy yellow roses—
out front that your venerable neighbours
admire, in their courtly fashion, as they pass.
That's how it is in Topeka, you imagine,
that's how it is, but already you're fretful,
the yellow roses a step too far, and besides,
the old threads are looping around again,
tying you into the wicker chair on the porch
where you sit and swat the flies away,
the flies being bothersome in summer,
in Topeka, Kansas, all the livelong day.

Meeting Katherine Mansfield

Long ago, there was an artist so skilful
that when he painted a bowl of peaches,
hungry birds flew down to his canvas
and pecked at the fruit.

I am not a bird, but I remember,
when I was young,
standing on the fifth floor of Te Papa
in front of a picture of Katherine Mansfield.
We looked at each other for a while
and then—although she was behind glass
and it was against the rules—
I reached out to touch
her face with my fingers.

Sizewell A and B

In the photo of the beach at Aldeburgh,
the brightly painted fishing boats
are pulled up high on the shingle,
beneath a leaden sky. I had turned
to exclude the nuclear power stations,
Sizewell A and B, from the frame.
I can still see their cooling towers
looming above the land behind them,
but today I see in a magazine
that the towers aren't there at all—
                they are out to sea.
You, of course,
are also outside the frame,
striding and stumbling along
the beach, your green coat
flapping around your legs.
If I could return
I would take the picture differently,
and invite in the power stations,
and their towers, as belonging
to that place, even if the towers
were not quite where I remember them,
and you, your face flushed with effort.
All I ever turned my back on,
I'd welcome in—
                and here you are, at last,
struggling through loose shingle
towards me, forgetful me,
improbably in the picture too.

At the end of the driveway

After Edith Amituanai

At the end of the driveway the world begins.
At the end of the driveway the world is going.

Kids drift past trees and recycling bins.
Kids wander by, their faces glowing.

In summer sun and winter storms,
kids walk to school in their uniforms.

Inside their uniforms, their itching skins.
Inside their skins, the kids are growing.

This girl frowns, this boy ducks his head and grins:
not yet seeing, not yet knowing

that what's gone is just beginning,
that what begins is already going

fast then faster. Adults, with their set faces,
whoosh by in cars to adult places.

You want the truth?

There is no truth. But OK,
you don't look good in that.
Not good at all.
It makes your waist—
well, thicker.

Your mother's taste—I'm sorry—
is just embarrassing.
Velluto Rosso is not a wine.

Whenever I see a Monet
print on a wall,
just so you know,
I want to punch a hole in it.
The wall, too.

The heart is a forest
in which the trees are felled,
one by one.

Mary Poppins is a terrible movie.
So is *The Sound of Music*.
In fact anything
with Julie Andrews in it,
forget it.

I didn't sleep with her,
but there are others
you don't know about.

I love you conditionally.
The conditions haven't been met.
I know I drink too much.
There are reasons.
God knows, there are reasons.

The heart is a dark forest.
You know what?
I think we're done here.

When we watched movies

I want to listen to Europop—
no, country music,
I want to listen to Europop

and country music
and the entire back-catalogue
of Celine Dion.

I want to watch one bad movie
after another,
while I eat

triple cheeseburgers,
grease running down my chin.
I want to grow fat

and to start smoking.
I want to stub out my cigarette
in a fried egg,

I want to live
in that Hitchcock movie,
which isn't a bad movie at all,

but more like the ones we watched
when we watched movies,
not art-house exactly,

but VistaVision kitsch—
how we loved the beautiful actors,
their quick, brittle voices,

their antique brio.
We grasped their warm hands.
The room filled with snow.

The cat on the fence

In the evening my wife and I used to go for walks. It was quiet where we lived. There were few cars, and on either side of the road there were fenced paddocks that were empty or dotted with dairy cows. We were both quite short-sighted, and one time in the dim light I saw a white cat sitting on top of a strainer-post. Almost straight away I realized it wasn't a cat at all, but an upturned bucket that someone had left there. What's that cat doing on the fence? I asked my wife. She looked and smiled, and then her smile became uncertain, and then it returned as she saw she'd been fooled. We laughed, and often afterwards, I had only to say, What's that cat doing there? and she would start to laugh. But after a while I noticed that she didn't laugh, she only smiled, and then that she didn't smile, but waited with her mouth set in a line until I stopped laughing, and so I got out of the habit of saying it, and things seemed different after that, when the cat-on-the-fence joke wasn't funny anymore.

All the things I never knew

In ’67 there was *Ode to Billie Joe*
and big-haired Bobbie Gentry.
In my town that was 1970.
Bobbie on my transistor radio:

she was Mississippi Delta sultry.
Bobbie put the cunt in country.
The first record I ever owned,
and I wore out its little groove.

Bobbie watches headlights move
across the wall.
A little rain begins to fall—
a little rain to end the day.

It falls differently in L.A.
Choctaw Ridge is far away.
Bobbie’s bouffant hair’s gone white.
She sits out on her porch tonight

with her guitar. Her voice is scratchy,
and she’s feeling kind of low.
She’s singing *Ode to Billie Joe*.
I’d like to phone her, just to know

whatever it was the lovers threw
from off the Tallahatchie
Bridge. The bridge collapsed in ’72.
All the things I never knew.

Drive

I’ve got a new car.
It goes better than my old one.

The places it takes me to
aren’t better.

It just gets me to them
in a better way.

The places are the same,
only worse

for being looked at again.
The people

are definitely worse.
I want whole new people.

I want people
like my new car,

which is new,
and smells sweet

and artificial inside.
It’s not possible,

but I want that.
I want you to be new.

I want to be inside new you
and to drive you insane.

Insane would be better.
Let’s go there.

Just get in the car
now, please.

Everything is possible

I was watching this film
by Quentin Tarantino.
It starred Robert De Niro
and Al Pacino.

I don't know, maybe
it was by Martin Scorcese.
Anyway, it was that predictable
kind of crazy.

The women were beautiful,
but didn't have much to do.
Mostly they got emotional
with Robert or Al.

They weren't treated
particularly well.
They took their clothes off,
their bras and panties too.

It was Michael Mann!
Mann's the man
you want if you want manly.
Al and Robert are manly,

though not so very tall.
Al's hardly there at all.
At the end, everyone's
shooting insanely.

Women take off their clothes
more than they put them on.
It's the movies,
where this is possible.

I'm thinking of buying
a convertible.
I'll cruise fashionable streets
with the top down.

Beside me is a beautiful woman
in a blue dress.
Her beautiful head
nods yes, yes.

Everything is possible.
We are so alive.
It goes on and on
as long as we drive.

Small coffins

As I watch the small coffin being carried out, I wonder whether a child's coffin costs less than a standard adult-sized one. Surely they would cost about the same, especially when people have opted for one of the less expensive woods. That being so, it would make sense to use the adult size for all funerals, as a tiny coffin is a pitiful thing. Perhaps combined funerals could be held for young children, as their deaths are a frequent occurrence in this country. A standard coffin could easily accommodate two children, or even three, if they were very small, and the cost defrayed among the bereaved families. I think, too, that these grieving families would provide some measure of comfort to each other at what is a very distressing time for all concerned.

At the cemetery

You have two dogs
that are hounds from hell.
They scuffle and slobber.
I don’t do dogs very well.

Your lower lip is full,
your upper lip is thin.
I simply am not thinking.
This is the saddest place
I’ve ever been in.

I am not simply thinking.
Your big horse carries you away.
Your dogs bark and bark.
Everything carries you away.

At the cemetery the gravestones
are hilarious. This woman died
aged one hundred and two.
We sit on her tomb for an hour.
You kiss me. I kiss you.

Sonnet

I flay her skin so I can wear it.
I say her name so I can hear it.
I can’t bear it.
Just so, I kill my life so I can live it.
These are public words best said in private.
I don’t like knowing how it ends.
I don’t like how it ends not knowing.
In Nebraska it is snowing.
I remember lovers, a friend, some trees.
I remember a poem by Weldon Kees.
It is snowing in Nebraska.
I remember the question I didn’t ask her.
I pretend I love her. She pretends to care.
I watch her watching me disappear.

Fonnet

Fuck your simile. Fuck your elegy for.
Fuck your homily, your extended metaphor.
Fuck your metonymy.
Fuck your exquisite language economy.
Fuck your metre, your keeping time.
Fuck your free verse. Fuck your rhyme.
Fuck your Elizabethan men in doublets.
Fuck their witty come-to-bed couplets.
Fuck your turn after the octave.
Fuck whoever poetry's meant to save.
Fuck the avant-garde. Fuck tradition.
Fuck your slightly foxed first edition.
Fuck your sonnet about wanting to fuck Tiffany.
Fuck your totally unexpected epiphany.

The trouble with poetry

In the poem
which is like a house
the poet is looking
out a window.

Sometimes he doesn't see
anything out the window
at all, it's so reflective,
and that's one kind of poem.

Sometimes he sees something
you wouldn't notice but—
because he's sensitive—
he gets worked up about it.

Not too much. A thrush
on the lawn, for example, yes,
a lyric thrush pecking at the soil,
its bright, hard eye,

a light rain falling,
and it reminds the poet somehow
of his friend's last days
at the hospital,

and what he said to his friend,
or didn't say,
and meanwhile his hands
are doing nothing in particular

and so he's now peeling fruit,
maybe a pear, the flesh gleaming
wetly under the knife.
So there's the pear,

the speckled rind spooling
naturally into a self-deprecating,
slightly goofy anecdote
to offset the gloominess

about his friend.
He’s sensitive, not morbid.
His glass of chilled sauvignon blanc—
there it is, in his hand—

catches the yellowy light.
And he’s a poet, not a novelist,
so after a page
he’s winding it all up,

the friend, the pear, his wine
the colour almost of grass,
the rain, and evening coming on,
finishing, of course,

with the thrush on the lawn,
its head cocked, bent to the ground,
acutely listening to the unseen
thing tunnelling there.

Clean

No secret, I like to be clean. I like it. *Mens sana in corpore sano*. OK, it means healthy, but healthy is clean. Of course I shower regularly, but let's talk about hands. A little soap never hurt anyone. A quick lather-up, a rinse, another lather, another rinse, a paper towel, and you're done. You just build it into your routine—once or twice every couple of hours, and you're good. I use an unscented, organic soap, it's a little expensive, but think of it as an investment. It's up to you—you can go too far with these things. I know that. Use whatever soap you want. Nails need a bit of care. I like them flush with the fingertips. Too long and all kinds of crud lodge under there. Too short, and you get a little bleeding, first thing you know, you've got an infection. You know those Teflon frypans, how little flakes of Teflon start coming off? You have flakes on the bottom of the pan, and bits of food stick to them, and then you have a situation. You don't want that. You look after your nails like you look after your frypan, that's all I'm saying. I carry a file—you can get them at any chemist. The German ones are best. Superior metal. You'd be surprised how much nails will grow in a single day, but with your file, you stay on top of them, no trouble. A little vigilance, it's all you need. I try to stay current with the literature, I follow a few blogs, contribute to a few forums in the hygiene community, but look out, there are some wackos out there. You know, hands aren't really your problem, it's what your hands touch. Where are your hands right now? Maybe resting on a table, or a desk? There's a lot of stuff on that desk you really don't even want to know about, stuff you can't see. They say when you look at things close up, at the subatomic level, everything gets fuzzy—there's no sharp separation between the surface of your desk and your fingertips, they kind of mingle. You're part desk, and the desk is part you, if you follow me. Well, if you're going to mingle, you want that desk to be clean. I keep a disinfectant spray and disposable wipes within reach—a few around the house, for convenience. Of course some bacteria are resistant to most disinfectants now. There are places online you can order the effective ones from. Just ask, OK? I know what you're going to say, and you're right—hands are just the start. There's the rest of the body to consider. It's easy. Shower often—I don't count how many times a day, but plenty. Again, I use the unscented, organic soap, but same goes as for hands—totally up to you. No baths. Baths are disgusting. Dry yourself with a fresh towel. Deodorant? Don't get me started. Deodorant's not a sign you're clean. It's a sign that you're unclean,

and trying to hide the fact. You keep yourself clean, you don't need some lying deodorant. I smell like the sea. Smell. See what I mean? *Mens sana in corpore sano*. When you're clean, you're good to go.

I forget the sex

I forget the sex but I remember the bed.
I forget the taste but I remember the smell.
I forget your voice, but I remember the catch of your breath.

I forget the wound but I remember the knife.
I forget certainty but I remember belief.
I forget too much but I remember enough.

I forget the fire, but I remember chopping pine.
I have forgotten everything about that night
except the moon, a vacant yellow eye.

I forget the time but I remember the place.
I forget the calculation but I remember the lucky guess.
I forget your face, I forget your face.

Hey! Schapelle Corby attempts suicide

Russian troops are in the Ukraine.
Our antivirus software has expired.
The screen-door sings its old refrain.

Check your Twitter account again:
‘Says here Vladimir Putin has denied
Russian troops are in the Ukraine.’

A fly crawls up the window pane.
As the wind lifts and drops the leaves outside,
the screen-door sings its old refrain.

A ceaseless clamour in the brain.
It’s all over the news that Putin lied:
Russian troops are in the Ukraine.

I’ve got a headache. Still no rain.
‘Hey! “Schapelle Corby attempts suicide.”’
The screen-door sings its old refrain.

The big, the small, the loud, the vain:
‘It says there was a knife. She could have died.’
Russian troops are in the Ukraine.
The screen-door sings its old refrain.

The colour of birds

He wrote the field, but the field was burning.
He wrote the valley, but in the valley was a coalmine.
He wrote the river, but the river was a black canal.

The sky was grey, and the colour of birds was grey.
The snouts of factories breathed the air.
On the train he read Orwell and Baudelaire.

He wrote up to his armpits in the black water.
He wrote from the bottom of the mine.
He wrote in the burning field.

And rhubarb grew in suburban gardens,
and in the dirt beneath, every slow,
invertebrate creature glowed its wire.

My lazy eye

It’s true, what friends say to me:
You’ve got a lazy eye. I do.
It wasn’t always so. I am
for the most part hardworking.
I look at it critically in the mirror.
Hey you! I’m watching you, eye!
Get busy! But my eye just stares back,
insolently, vacantly, with a vacancy
that looks like insolence,
beneath its drooping lid.
If my eye were a labourer,
it would be leaning on its shovel
while all the other eyes
worked up a sweat
and dug holes in the ground.
If my lazy eye had its way,
it would stay in bed
until eleven in the morning,
while the rest of me made coffee.
It would look at me stonily
and never say thank you.
It would look at me
as it is right now, as if to say,
who do you think you’re looking at,
who the fuck do you think you are.

Would you eat your family?

Let's assume they're already dead. Let's assume that—it's a given, right? No one would eat live people. Some people have done that, I know, but not you. It's a given. It's a plane crash, and only you survived, and there's no other available food. You're starving. Would you eat them then? No? What if the family bonds were—let's say—weak? Your father, who never liked you, who had gone out of his way to show you he didn't like you, who had only come with you on this trip because your grandmother, his mother, was dying, and he was worried that if you went to see her by yourself you'd convince her to cut him out of her will—would you eat him? What if scavenging birds would eat your family if you didn't? You're on a desert island, of course—there are still some left, though the sea will soon cover them all, and there will be nowhere to make existential choices any more. You'd eat the birds, maybe, wouldn't you, but what if they were too quick? What difference does it make, if the birds eat your family, or you do? No? There are the birds, tearing happily at their flesh, and you're starving because ... because why, exactly? What if, what if the situation were reversed? What if you were dead, and your father—who loved you, you loved him, wind it all back, totally different scenario—was the only one alive? Wouldn't you want him to live? Wouldn't you want to help him? Of course you would. So why not let him help you? He'd want that, right? Eat me! is what he'd say, if he were alive, which he completely isn't. He's dead, beyond all pain. But you're suffering, you're suffering a lot, because you won't do what you know he'd want you to do. Isn't that a kind of selfishness? Doesn't what he'd want matter at all to you? Imagine, then, a truly amazing coincidence—that there are certain pharmaceuticals, certain mind-altering drugs in the plane's cargo that would enable you to forget, absolutely blank out what you'd done. You eat, you bury the remains in the sand, you take the drugs, and well hey—you're alive, and your belly is full, and is that the shine of a rescue plane in the sky? You don't remember a thing—it wasn't you, it was that other you, the you you don't remember, who ate them, who had that knowledge, made that call. The new you would never do that. Would you? You are alive now. I want you to live.

Take care,

I say, as I sign off,
meaning what, exactly?
It's better than best wishes,
I guess,

though you have those,
my best wish being
that you take care—
when, for instance,

you run up Mount Victoria
or along Oriental Parade,
that you are mindful
of the inattentive motorist

who changes CDs or answers a text
or who just drives crazy fast
and I know,
he hasn't got murder

on his mind,
but he would crush you
and his life
would be changed like yours

for the worse
and he would be very sorry
but what's the use of being sorry?
Take care as you ride

certain Wellington streets,
your face scrunched,
set into the wind
that at any moment could catch

the loose flap of your jacket
and cartwheel you
and your frail bike into the sea,
and as you crested each swell

it would catch you
again and blow you
further and further out.
Take care when unwrapping

yourself at night,
because you have sharp edges
and many times
I have cut my hands on them

in the darkness
through not taking care.
Yours is the way of carelessness.
Yours is the way of near misses,

of prangs, falls, of *That was close*
and *Phew*!
You should finely regard
what you disregard.

You should be marked fragile,
this way up,
and you should be handled,
if you are handled at all,

with care.
You are precious,
so carry yourself carefully
through this day,

don't drop yourself because
you will smash
and fly apart in every direction,
and then,

and when that happens—
who will gather you,
who will pick you all up
I'd like to know?

Lady with a pet dog

One evening we'll drink
sweet yellow wine,
while, in the west,
the sun drops behind
orange poplars,
and we won't at all mind
the passing cars
raising the gilded dust,
which floats for a time,
and sinks, as it must.

The bare hook

Don’t ask what this is all about.
At the end of the row, you start over.
The way in is the way out.

From Toulouse, France, you wrote
what you say to hush each new lover:
don’t ask what this is all about.

Joan Jett and the Blackhearts on high-rotate—
Bad Reputation, *Crimson and Clover*.
The way in is the way out.

The bare hook where you hung your coat
is a question mark. The answer’s never.
Don’t ask what this is all about.

You thought you knew, but you only thought.
It took years and a marriage to discover
the way in is the way out.

You read each clause, each tiny footnote.
Still you miss the contract’s waiver:
don’t ask what this is all about.
The way in is the way out.

A cup of tea

After lunch my wife asked her if she would like a cup of tea, and my mother said yes, she would, if my wife was having one. No, my wife said, I'm asking if you want a cup of tea. Only if you're having one! said my mother, brightly. It's not a question of whether I'm having one, my wife said. The question is whether you want a cup of tea. Do you want one, or not? My mother, who was old, assumed a frightened look. I don't want to be any trouble, she said. I looked at my wife, but she and my mother were eyeing each other, a young woman in her own kitchen and another woman, much older. Do you want a cup of tea? my wife asked, carefully. My mother said nothing. Suddenly I felt pure hatred for my mother, and her self-negating ways. For Christ's sake, do you want a cup of tea! I shouted at her. She made no answer, but joined her hands together and looked heavenward, like the martyrs in the framed pictures we had in our family home when I was growing up: Saint Sebastian full of arrows.

The mid-morning phone call

Sometimes the phone rings
mid-morning,
but when I answer it,
nobody's there.
I know it's my mother.
That was her time.
It must frustrate her,
a garrulous woman,
to be so far away
and bereft of speech,
or to have something
important, at last,
to tell me
that's too difficult now
to say.

A fact about the douroucouli

The douroucouli
is the world's only
nocturnal monkey.
Imagine, separated
from its tribe,
how lonely
and frightened
it must be
in the dark.
How it must long
for the dawn to come
so it can close its eyes.

Obituary ghazal

I want to die like Vallejo, in Paris or New York or
Tokyo in the rain. But first I want a poem in *The New Yorker*.

We scan the menu. Beef, pork or chicken on rye.
We've become a bad cartoon in *The New Yorker*.

I consume films like wine. Cork or screwtop?
I sound like Anthony Lane in *The New Yorker*.

We don't go to work. Or get out of bed. Instead,
we reread 'Shouts & Murmurs' in *The New Yorker*.

Jane's afraid of online stalkers. Me too, I say.
Jane's not from around here. She's a born New Yorker.

I call and call. I talk or leave my name on answerphones.
It's Upperton, after Updike in the index to *The New Yorker*.

That way only

That right. That OK?
That'll do.

That's that then.
I'll leave that to you.

That's not what I said.
That's enough.

No, not that.
That's the stuff.

That your suitcase, sir?
That what you think?

Fancy that.
Call that a drink?

That sour look.
That remembered stain.

That sad song we play again.
I do this, I do that.

That's Frank O'Hara.
That way only pity and terror.

That's a fact.
That's one for the jury.

Amen to that.
That old story.

Late Valentine

I don’t sleep with you anymore,
and this makes the rain come
in the open window

and wet the hardwood floor.
The bed keeps growing and growing.
I don’t hear you

calling me for the six o’clock news,
and this makes the thrush stop
singing its three-note song.

I don’t rush to take in
your forgotten T-shirt from the line,
the one with the red wine stain

that a hundred washes couldn’t remove,
and this makes the sun
shine until midnight.

I don’t cook you breakfast
on Saturday morning,
and this makes me perpetually hungry.

I don’t run out of patience,
or shampoo, and this makes me wait
for you with clean hair.

I don’t argue with you
about the right way
to get to our daughter’s flat

in the city,
and though my way
was fastest and best,

this makes me always late
and always lost
no matter where I’m going.

§

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