# Madness through Poetry: Voice, Autobiography, Sources and Survival in the poetry of Frank Bidart & The Sensational Nellie Bly and Other Stories

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by
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All the poems in 'Frames: Poems to be read aloud to photographs' (except for 'Pilgrim') in Part 2 were written in response to work by photographer, AJ Wilkinson. This work was supported, in part, by a public engagement grant from the University of Liverpool and Thomas Dukes and Jacob Bolton at Open Eye Gallery. These poems were also included in the exhibition 'Sleeping in the Middle' at Open Eye Gallery, Liverpool on 18th May 2018 when AJ's photographs were displayed on screens alongside sound recordings of the poems.

**Illustrations**

Figure 1, page 35, cover illustration: Frank Bidart, *In The Western Night Collected Poems* 1965-90 (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1990).

Figure 2, page 46, cover illustration: Dr Michael M. Gilbert with Robert S. Tralins *21 Abnormal Sex Cases* (New York: Paperback Library, 1966).

Figure 3, page 88: photograph of woman known as 'Ellen West' from original case file.

Figure 4, page 110: photograph of Vaslav Nijinsky as Petruschka.

Figure 5, page 116: photograph of Fatova Mingus as 'The Chosen One' in Joffrey Ballet's resurrected version of 'The Rite of Spring,' 1987.

**Abstract**

Frank Bidart's poetic strategy is rooted in an existential-phenomenological engagement with lived experience. It is built on four central pillars - of 'autobiography', 'voice', 'sources' and 'survival'. Autobiography provides material from his own life-story and the stories of others. Voice in soliloquy and poetic drama, in its shaping and uniqueness, is the means for carrying the psychology and language of these stories; it also denotes his style and tone. Source - through his endless and helpless research of 'pre-existing forms' through psychology, philosophy, cinema, literature, history and other epistemes - is the foundation of his authenticity as an artist (in that his work is rooted in the world and the human quest to understand the world or 'being in the world,' – what the philosopher Heidegger would call *dasein*). The fourth pillar is survival – the ambition to live, to refuse suicidality; survival has been both his motivation and attainment through writing poetry.

Part 1 offers close readings of Bidart's poems 'Herbert White', 'Ellen West' and 'The War of Vaslav Nijinsky' in the context of lyric theory, narrative, dramatic techniques, concepts of embodiment and existential phenomenology. Bidart demonstrates a meticulous use and transformation of source materials (including stories from his own life) to explore three versions of madness: criminal insanity, suicidality through anorexia and the madness of the artist denied his bodily artistic identity and practice.

Part 2 is an original collection of poetry that reflects on subjectivity and madness and includes a series of poems about the life and biography of Nellie Bly. My reasons for choosing Bly as a subject are various: she invented herself through writing at a time in America when there were few women journalists and she practiced an early form of investigative journalism. Her first 'scoop' – *Ten Days in a Madhouse* (1887) – documented her stay in the asylum (following her presentation as an insane woman) on New York's Blackwell Island. Her purpose, in part, was to test the expertise of those charged with the care of Blackwell's inhabitants. Nellie Bly also interests me as she tells newsworthy stories, yet few documents exist relating to her biography other than her journalism – so she offers a rich source of imaginative possibilities both through voice and the pre-twentieth century moment in which she found her fame. She also offers a strong subject through which experiment with poetry and form seems appropriate in reflecting on narrative, autobiography and poetics through the other stories, including poems about the 'Thud' experiment, told in this collection of poems.

# Contents

Page No.

Part 1:

Madness through Poetry: Voice, Auto/biography, Sources and Survival in the poetry of Frank Bidart

Contents continued Page No.

Part 2:

The Sensational Nellie Bly and Other Stories

1

Other Stories



2

Frames: Poems to be read aloud to photographs

Contents continued Page No.

3

The Sensational Nellie Bly



4

And

Contents continued Page No.

**Bibliography**

# Madness through Poetry:
# Voice, Auto/biography, Sources and Survival
# in the poetry of Frank Bidart

**Introduction**

Frank Bidart is a significant and singular figure in contemporary American poetics. His work provides an in-depth engagement with subjectivity – as well as with the wider world – through both autobiographical and psychological approaches. His poetics negotiate survival, madness and human experience (*in extremis*) through dramatised portrayals of the lives of historical characters, from the Church Fathers to the Hollywood of Ava Gardner, as well as lyric explorations of his own life as son, lover, gay man, friend and artist. His strategies and methods have influenced my creative thinking especially in considering facticity and imagination. I focus on his early dramatic monologue poems as they navigate subjectivity by combining the directness of confessional modes with what Bidart himself describes as his 'poetics of embodiment'.[1]

There is an increasing range of critical material that agrees about Bidart's seriousness, accomplishments and the difficulty of his poetics. He can be considered a tragedian who makes an interesting contribution to debates around confessional poetics. He is also a revered gay poet with an admiring fan base, a critic, a widely consulted voice in Lowell and Bishop studies and an active commentator on his own work.[2] Since the publication of his first collection, *Golden State*, in 1973, many critics have accepted him as a stylistic innovator in the use of punctuation and the poetic

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[1] Christopher Hennessy, *Outside the Lines: Talking with Contemporary Gay Poets* (Ann Arbour: University of Michigan Press, 2010), p.37. ProQuest ebook. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

[2] See, for example, William Giraldi, 'Sufficient Density: An Interview with Frank Bidart,' *Poets & Writers,* 5 January 2013 < https://www.pw.org/content/sufficient_density_an_interview_with_frank_bidart > [accessed 23 June 2015]

line. He has been read as a lyric poet devoted to voice, and as a classicist.[3] Through his poems of gay identity he becomes a socially engaged poet of the public sphere and yet his family poems suggest he is more psychologically focussed and confessional. He writes poetry concerned with existential suffering through fragment and collage. He also uses more formal methods and simpler registers when required. There is, at the time of writing, no study that evaluates his body of work.

Bidart is a poet of paradox. His writing combines the seemingly opposite values of romanticism and classicism to produce poems that embody human suffering and also speak of alienation from familial and traditional concepts of love and faith. In his first three collections, published in 1973, 1977, and 1983 he considers madness, in various manifestations, in relation to individual human experience, passion and pain. This study takes a close look at the significant poems of madness in his first three collections while acknowledging that his poetry offers a deep consideration of subjectivity and questions of self in the context of human history.

In offering this new approach to Bidart's poetics I show how his writing is built on four central pillars of autobiography, voice, sources and survival. Autobiography provides material both from his own personal story and the stories of others (so that when characters speak in these poems they recount significant aspects of their own lives). Voice, in soliloquy, in its shaping and uniqueness, is the means for carrying both the psychology and language of these stories. It also denotes Bidart's style and tone. Source, through his endless and helpless research through psychology, philosophy, cinema, history, and other epistemes and media, is the foundation of his

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[3] Garth Greenwell, 'Frank Bidart, Lyric Poet', *Parnassus; Poetry in Review,* 29, 1/2 (May 2005), 330 – 347: Rosanna Warren, 'Contradictory Classicists: Frank Bidart and Louise Glück,' *The Academy of American Poets* (Feb 2008) <https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/text/contradictory-classicists-frank-bidart-and-louise-glück> [accessed 28 June 2015]

authenticity as an artist in that his work is rooted in the world, in 'being in the world' and the human quest to understand the world. This study contains new research about Bidart's sources, especially through a detailed reading of the source materials for his early dramatic monologue poems. It also interrogates the autoethnographic Bidart, the poet-researcher, as well as providing a serious consideration of Bidart's formation as a Catholic and its relevance to his experiences of personal crisis that fuel his autobiographical poems. The final pillar of Bidart's work is survival, the quest to remain alive, as we see him continually exploring identity through lived experience and refusing suicidality; survival has been both his motivation and attainment through writing eight volumes of poetry over fifty years as he acknowledged in his recent acceptance speech for the National Book Award for Poetry:

> Writing the poems was how I survived […] One premise of art is that anything personal, seen deeply enough, becomes general, becomes impersonal. I hope the journeys these poems go on will help others to survive, as well.[4]

In Bidart's world, madness is an emotional, bodily and unavoidable part of the human condition and his engagement with it enables him to consider what it means to suffer and to experience the self as divided. Subjectivity remains a central theme; his representations of the lyric "I" are masked in lives that embody the disenchantments of our times. He also reveals vulnerabilities of the human psyche *in extremis* in the context of bodily experience. Bidart's claim of an aesthetics of embodiment calls for an art of lived experience which can be understood in the context of existential

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[4] Jacqueline Sanchez 'Professor Frank Bidart Announced as Winner of National Book Award for Poetry,' *The Wellesley News,* 29 Nov 2017 <http://thewellesleynews.com/2017/11/29/professor-frank-bidart-announced-as-winner-of-national-book-award-for-poetry/> [accessed 20 December 2017]

phenomenology and in relation to what R.D. Laing describes as the 'embodied person' who:

> has a sense of being flesh and blood and bones, of being biologically alive and real […] He will experience himself as subject to the dangers that threaten his body, the dangers of attack, mutilation, disease, decay, and death. He is implicated in bodily desire, and the gratifications and frustrations of the body. The individual thus has as his starting-point an experience of his body as a base from which he can be a person with other human beings.[5]

As we come to see, Bidart's poetry offers a new dimension to confessional poetries as he explores the particularities of madness as lived bodily experience, placing emphasis on the human voice in its multiplicities as the primary and unifying means of interrogating the purposes and motivations of living: he dramatises biographical memory and emotion through the centrality of voice, the unit of line and his unique approach to punctuation as a means of choreographing voice and the making of lyric as event. The voices in his poetry are varied and multiple, set in his subjective drama of duality, interwoven with other texts and autobiography. Bidart's poetics acknowledge the modernist concept that the world and human subjectivity can never be fully known, yet he cannot help but seek to search for both. He transforms source texts into new bodies (poems) and creates new work in experimental voices. He does not rewrite extant texts but rather innovates, experiments and creates – paying close attention to the frailties and vulnerabilities of human psychology. Bidart's poem 'Confessional' is an extraordinary acknowledgement of the Oedipal dilemma in self-formation.

> THERE WAS NO PLACE IN NATURE WE COULD MEET.
> I've never let anyone else
> *in* so deeply.

[5] R.D. Laing, *The Divided Self* (London: Penguin Modern Classics, 2010), p.67.

But when the predatory complicit co-conspirator
child

was about twenty, he of course wanted his "freedom," –

and then found

that what had made his life
possible, what he found so deeply

inside him, had its hands around his neck
strangling him:–

and that therefore, if he were
to survive,

he must in turn strangle, murder,
*kill it* inside him…

TO SURVIVE, I HAD TO KILL HER INSIDE ME.[6]

In his drive to destroy the parent ('inside him') his poems tell us that the human drive for separateness, for selfhood, is premised in the Oedipal struggle. 'Confessional' also expresses a self-preserving refusal to forgive, which itself is an interesting reflection on the limits of confession once the need to survive through emotional expressiveness is recognised:

Her plea, her need for forgiveness
seemed the attempt to obliterate
the *actions, angers, decisions*

[6] Frank Bidart, *Half-light Collected Poems 1965 – 2016* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2017), p.78. Further references to the Collected Poems are given after quotations in the text.

that MADE ME what I am…
To obliterate the *crises, furies, refusals*
that are how I
came to understand her, me, my life –.

Truly to feel "forgiveness,"
to forgive her *IN MY HEART,*

meant erasing ME…
(*Collected Poems,* p. 80.)

This reinvents Oedipus's refusal to forget (when forgetfulness is encouraged by Jocasta), but in Bidart's Christian rehearsal, which uses the relationship of St. Augustine and his mother, Monica as a model, there is a self-preserving necessity in the poem's refusal to forgive. Christopher Bollas writes about the stage at which the child moves through the Oedipal dilemma to become the Oedipal Complex in terms of development of mind:

> As a child comes into the presence of his own mind he is launched in my view on a most disturbing journey… [7]

Bollas also discusses this journey of the psyche as a means through which the person moves away from psychological childhood structures into unknowable realms – when the 'child discovers his own realms and the solitude of subjectivity.' Bollas further speculates:

> Some people, and perhaps they are amongst our artists and philosophers, sense this psycho-devolution as a fact of human life and aim to stay with it, to see if it can be accounted for or narrated, perhaps celebrated: but the risks to such adventurers are high. Most people, in my view, find consciousness of this

[7] Christopher Bollas, *Being a Character Psychoanalysis and Self Experience* (New York:Hill and Wand, 1992), p.241.

> aspect of the human condition – the complexity born of having a mind to oneself – simply too hard to bear.[8]

Bidart is one such risk-taking artist; he abides with the complexity of 'having a mind to oneself' throughout his work. It is this risk, combined with his ambition to embody lived experience that enables him to make poetry of deep human pain. As he himself states in an interview with Christopher Hennessey:

> I think the poetics that underlies everything I've done is the poetics of embodiment. I think that writing the poem is a question of embodying that thing that one is the vessel of, that one becomes the vessel of as a writer. To read it properly is to find a way to embody it aloud, and to do that properly, to do that well, is not just slavishly to follow the notation of the poem at every second. Callas said in an interview that to sing an aria properly [is] not merely to reproduce the note values and time indications, but if you enlarge a phrase here, you've got to take something away there; that is, there has to be a kind of total shape, [a] total economy that is respected. If you don't respect it, you lose a sense of shape and proportion which is utterly crucial.
>
> (Hennessy, p.37).

Bidart's judgement of embodiment in operatic terms, not just in how the song is heard but how it is scored (through 'notation') and weighted ('a kind of total shape') shows his equal attention to both sound and writing. The drive to embody 'that thing that one is a vessel of' is a call for creation, for the making of a new body, or reincarnation.

The critical element of this thesis will concentrate on reading Bidart's ambitious early dramatic monologue poems 'Herbert White', 'Ellen West' and 'The War of Vaslav Nijinsky.' In these poems Bidart demonstrates a meticulous use and transformation of source materials, including his own life, to explore the existential experience of three versions of madness: criminal insanity, suicidality through anorexia and the madness of the artist (the dancer Vaslav Nijinsky). Chapter 1 considers the issues of voice and embodiment through Bidart's Californian roots and biography, including his Catholic faith and cultural influences of 1940s and 1950s

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[8] ibid., p.241.

America. Chapter 2 considers sources in 'Writing "Ellen West." ' It evaluates Bidart's dedication to research as an essential element of his poetic practice and considers autoethnography as a relevant methodology. Chapter 3 looks closely at 'Herbert White' and Bidart's engagement with source material, in particular *21 Abnormal Sex Cases* written by psychiatrist, Michael S. Gilbert with journalist, Robert S. Tralins in1963; this source text for 'Herbert White' offered a sensationalist view of so-called deviant sexuality and criminality. The relationship between source material, autobiography, and poetic strategies including embodiment is explored through a close reading of the poem 'Herbert White', a reading that considers Julia Kristeva's concept of abjection and Yeats's theory of the antithetical self (*A Vision*, 1937). Chapter 4 explores embodiment through the case study of 'Ellen West' where the persona of the poem enables a consideration of gendered identity and explores the importance of action in Bidart's work and interrogates the narrative strategies in 'Ellen West'; it also questions Arthur Frank's thesis of *The Wounded Storyteller* and its application to understanding the experience of mental illness in contrast to Ricoeur's concept of narrative identity and Bidart's argument for 'ghost narratives' in all poetry.[9] It reconsiders Galen Strawson's essay *Against Narrativity* and argues that his idea of the 'episodic person' contributes to an understanding of the practice of making poetry.[10] Chapter 4 also explores Bidart's ethics of representation through his technique of collage and layering autobiography, literary texts and the original case

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[9] Arthur W Frank, *The Wounded Storyteller* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995): Paul Ricoeur, 'Narrative Identity,' *Philosophy Today,* 35: (1991: Spring), p.73.

[10] Galen Strawson, 'Against Narrativity', in *Narrative, Philosophy and Life,* part of the Boston Studies in Philosophy, Religion and Public Life book series (BSPR, volume 2), ed. by Allen Speight (Heidelberg, New York, London: Springer Dordrecht, 2015), pp. 11 – 31. Springer Link ebook:
see also, Galen Strawson, 'The Subject of Experience' in *Oxford Scholarship online,* <http://www.oxfordscholarship.com.liverpool.idm.oclc.org/view/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198777885.001.0001/acprof-9780198777885-chapter-6? >
[accessed 16 August 2018]

study by Ludwig Binswanger via a close reading of 'Ellen West' in conjunction with a close reading of 'Writing "Ellen West."' Chapter 5 offers a close reading of 'The War of Vaslav Nijinsky' and reflects on the poem as a parable of exclusion and modernism through Nijinsky's exile from dance and resulting madness, as well as considering Nijinsky's influence on modernism in dance and the relationship this has with modernism in poetry. Here I also consider the interrogatives of voice, autobiography, sources and survival in *Half-Light – Collected Poems 1965-2016*.

Part II of this thesis starts with an exploration of the lessons learned about my own approach to writing poetry from studying the work of Frank Bidart (Chapter 6). It is followed by fifty-five pages of original poetry, *The Sensational Nellie Bly and Other Stories,* a collection that reflects on subjectivity and madness through the life and biography of the 19th century journalist Nellie Bly. My reasons for choosing Bly as a subject are various: she invented herself through writing, through journalism, at a time in America when there were few women journalists; she practiced an early form of investigative, undercover journalism (more sensationalist than investigative). This is nowhere better shown than her first 'scoop,' *Ten Days in a Madhouse* which documents her stay in the asylum (following her presentation as an insane woman) on New York's Blackwell Island.[11] Her purpose, in part, was to test the expertise of those charged with the care of Blackwell's inhabitants. Her concerns were always to learn from those experiencing the phenomenon she was investigating, such as incarceration, factory work, world travel or the social conditions of Mexico. Nellie Bly also interests me as she tells newsworthy stories yet few documents exist relating to her biography so she offers a rich source of imaginative possibilities both through voice and the pre-twentieth century moment in which she found her fame. She also offers a strong

[11] Nellie Bly, *10 Days in a Madhouse* (Seattle: Createspace Independent Publishing Platform, 2015).

subject through which experiment with poetry, and experiment with prose and form, seems appropriate in reflecting on narrative, story, autobiography and poetics. The final section of poetry, 'Other Stories', consists of more personal or autobiographical poems including a sequence of poems written in response to *Sleeping in the Middle,* a series by photographic artist A.J. Wilkinson. This work was written at the same time as the Nellie Bly poems.

Throughout the study I include illustrations, some of which are cover images of Bidart's individual collections. The illustrative and graphic designs of his books are carefully chosen and important in demonstrating the themes of Bidart's work. This imaging and design has caused me to reflect deeply about the use of illustrations alongside poems and has influenced my thinking about the use of illustrations and photographs as a new aspect of my writing.

**Chapter 1: Voice and Embodiment**

Bidart's poetry exemplifies the constraints of knowing the inner life. His negotiations with subjectivity show how the nature of being and individuality can be expressed through different levels, layers and structures of language where words find particular relevance through complex explorations of the aesthetics of embodiment. Many of Bidart's dramatised poetic subjects experience existential crises in which the body and mind are in conflict. His negotiations with subjectivity deliberately challenge the Descartian sense of the body as the prison of the soul and also engage with the Foucauldian idea of the body as the subject of the gaze, in particular through the mirror's reflection. In short, the trope of embodiment is used in many ways throughout Bidart's work; the subjects of his poetry live in their bodies and through the bodily experiences of hunger, desire, pain, thirst, the loss of dance, disfigurement, the contemplation of death and ultimately, the loss of the body. Bidart's explorations of embodiment and voice become dramatised through the cultural context in which he grew up. Bidart's ambition to be an artist began in his provincial Californian childhood in the 1940s where his two main cultural influences were the Catholic Church and cinema. A Catholic sense of the division between spirit and body has remained with Bidart from childhood and is reflected in his work in spite of his rejection of religious faith.[1] Although independent film was not accessible to Bidart as a child, his love of popular cinema motivated him to search for information about art film. Although he went often to the cinema, Bidart speaks of cinematic influence in the context of what was unattainable to him growing up:

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[1] Ashley Hatcher, 'An interview with Frank Bidart', *The University of Arizona Poetry Centre*, (17 Nov 2015) < http://poetry.arizona.edu/blog/interview-frank-bidart> [accessed 17 January 2017]

> When I was a kid, I was crazy about movies. In Bakersfield, I think movies were the most accessible art form […] I thought a lot, read a lot about movies; I graduated from fan magazines to reviews of contemporary films, to books […] in Bakersfield in high school I could actually *see* almost none of the "serious," "art" films I was reading about […]
>
> (*Collected Poems,* p.683 – 684.)

Bidart pursued cultural interests through the social and collective experience of popular cinema (an interest shared by both his parents) and through hearing recorded voices perform texts, hearing Shakespeare through an actor's disembodied voice on vinyl in his own childhood home. This influenced how he learned to make sense of the spoken word and perhaps is why his poetry places particular emphasis on the human voice, through drama, as the primary and unifying means of questioning the purposes and motivations of living. His exploration of cinematic themes is demonstrated in techniques of cutting from scene to scene in poems such as 'Ellen West.' When discussing Kurosawa's adaptations of Shakespeare, in his 1983 interview with Mark Halliday (*Collected Poems* p.683), for example, Bidart shows he understands film as a different kind of *language* to poetry. In this interview Bidart describes a turning point in his writing life:

> If what fills your attention are the great works that have been written […] nothing is *left* to be done. You couldn't possibly make anything as inventive or sophisticated or complex. But if you turn from them, and what you look at is your *life*: NOTHING is figured out; NOTHING is understood […] *Ulysses* doesn't describe your life. It doesn't teach you how to lead your life. You don't know what *love* is; or *hate;* or *birth*; or *death*; or *good*; or *evil*. If what you look at is your *life,* EVERYTHING remains to be figured out, ordered; EVERYTHING remains to be done…
>
> (*Collected Poems,* p.691.)

This is a plea for art and poetry not only as a vital aid and guide to living for the poet; the implication of Bidart's ambition is that the practice of poetry is (for him)

life itself. What Bidart engages with and acknowledges is *dasein*[2] (one's – *his* - own being-in-the-world). In this respect, his poems of autobiography can be read as a form of daseinsanalysis. For example, he shows his interest in existential psychotherapy through his choice of Binswanger as a source, as Binswanger's work was deeply influenced by Heidegger. Indeed, the central concept of *Dasein* in the existential philosophy of Heidegger shaped the development of existential psychology in the first half of the twentieth century. Bidart chooses Ellen West as a form of self-representation as well as a focus for psychological study. When his family poems are placed and read alongside his other works of biographical, historical and philosophical poetry, this compression of autobiography with case-study, for example, creates a wider psychoanalytical sense of subjectivity and the struggles of self.

Perhaps his most distinctive innovation is his conceptualising of individual poems as bodies. This is particularly noticeable when reading 'Ellen West' and 'Writing "Ellen West." '

> Out of the thousand myriad voices, thousand myriad stories in
> each human head, when his mother died, there was Ellen West.
>
> *
>
> This is the body that you can draw out of you to expel from you
> the desire to die.
>
> *
>
> Give it a voice, give each scene of her life a particularity and ne-
> cessity that in Binswanger's recital are absent.

[2] The literal meaning of 'dasein' is 'there being' and denotes the existential sense of 'being-in-the-world': this ontological concept, developed by Heidegger, is a fundamental challenge to Cartesian ideas of human beings as mere thinking subjects.

*

Enter her skin so that you can then make her other and expel her.

*

Survive her.

(‘Writing “Ellen West,” ’ *Collected Poems,* pp.489 – 490.)

The poems are bodies he constructs through the use of carefully chosen sources (for example, he conjures Nijinsky in ‘The War of Vaslav Nijinsky’ through a collage of his ‘mad’ diaries, Romola Nijinsky’s biography of her husband and various accounts of his performances in Paris). The poems become places for the incarnational enactment of memory (for example, ‘Half-light,’ *Collected Poems,* pp. 603 - 4), experience (for example, ‘History,’ *Collected Poems,* pp.502-505), grief (for example, ‘To the Dead, *Collected Poems*, pp.5-7) what can be seen and heard (for example, ‘Name the Bed,’ *Collected Poems,* p.499), as well as reincarnations of those who have lost their bodies in death. These dramas of survival are, in his earlier collections, spoken through intimate soliloquy, as different models of confession including psychoanalytical, forensic and religious models. ‘Ellen West’ can be read as a psychoanalytical confession, ‘Herbert White’ can be read as a forensic or criminal confession and ‘The War of Vaslav Nijinsky’ and ‘Confessional’ follow more closely the religious mode of confession, without priestly absolution. Confession, when relevant to Bidart’s work, becomes part of the dramatisation of the subjective elements being examined. Bidart’s decision to use various manifestations of madness in his first three collections, as the psychological landscape for his development of voice, is also a strategy in defence of lyric subjectivity in the context on the one hand of critical attacks on confessional poetics, and his own realisation, on the other, that,

biography is not enough. Bidart's distinctive strategy enables him to consider key elements of self-hood (such as formation, love, self-expression, self-control, self-alienation, ambivalence, identity, character, decision-making) yet escape what Gillian White has recently called 'the embarrassments of the Confessional lyric.'[3] The centrality of voice also signifies the body, as the voice is an instrument of the body, and Bidart seeks to articulate the voice on the page through line, shape, pace and punctuation to form the poetic voice that will come to be heard internally through the body and mind of the reader. 'Embodiment' is how Bidart designates his aesthetics but it is also a metaphor for how he holds and carries human bodily experience through voice in his poetry. He describes his own writing process in the following way:

> When I write I always hear a "voice" in my head; and I always write in lines. […] The voice only embodies itself in words as the words break themselves in lines. (This movement is felt physically in my body.) […] The final punctuation is *not* an attempt to make the poem look the way I read it aloud; rather the way I read it aloud tries to reproduce what I hear in my head. But once I finally get the typed page to the point where it does seem "right" – where it does seem to reproduce the voice I hear – something very odd happens: the "being" of the poem suddenly becomes the poem on paper, and no longer the "voice" in my head. I've learned to trust this when it happens – at that point the entire process is finished.
>
> (*Collected Poems,* p.695 – 696.)

This provokes questions about the way poets hear their poems being formed and the physical experience of words, the phenomenology of hearing voices, the internal voice in the reader's mind as well as questions about the relationship between writing and the role of voice; it also recalls Kneale's contention against Culler's interpretation of apostrophe:

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[3] Gillian White, *Lyric Shame* (Cambridge, Ma & London: Harvard University Press, 2014), p.99.

> Voice, as Jacques Derrida has shown, has always been privileged in Western culture as a guarantor of truth, consciousness, and being – while writing has been repressed as secondary and derivative.[4]

Yet we discern in Bidart's method an attempt to privilege voice through writing as a way of claiming authenticity for poetic expression over rhetoric. His articulation of voice explores absence and, through apostrophe intimates the *other*, the silent one who is addressed. 'To the Dead,' first published in 1987,[5] and the first poem in his *Collected Poems* (p.5) begins with the lines:

> What I hope (when I hope) is that we'll
> see each other again, --
>
> . . . and again reach the VEIN
>
> in which we loved each other . . .
> It existed. *It existed.*

His endeavour to use language as a means of making the absent (the dead) present is a recurring ambition that exemplifies not only the poem itself as the thing that happens, but also acknowledges that the object of desire is inherently irrecoverable either through language or the body, yet the pursuit of it is unavoidable in human subjective experience. 'To The Dead' reveals a sense of love for, and grief about, those who no longer live (and therefore are without bodies), addressed to those who can no longer hear; it is an articulation of bodily desire: "that we'll/ see each other again, " "…and again reach the VEIN/ in which we loved…" The use of capitalisation - as well as the various meanings linked to essence, vitality and animation – emphasises the centrality of the body as an agent of desire and love; the pronoun *we,* a counter to the solipsistic, isolated 'I', (or soliloquy overheard).

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[4] J. Douglas Kneale 'Romantic Aversions: Apostrophe Reconsidered,' *ELH*, 58, (Spring, 1991), 1, 141 – 65 (p.141).
[5] Dia Art Foundation: Readings in Contemporary Poetry, 1987: Frank Bidart, 'To the Dead,' < http://awp.diaart.org/poetry/index.html>
[accessed 16 March 2018]

In a development of Culler's argument that apostrophe and thus voice, as mode of address, is lyric's exemplary trope, Keniston argues that a particular kind of apostrophe, concerned with loss, is evident in 1990s American lyric poetry. She states:

> Apostrophe in the lyric of the last ten years downplays the optimism (or perhaps the delusion) of traditional apostrophe – the faith that the other *is* there and *can* hear – by foregrounding the absence of its addressee. Yet while this insistence on absence seems to remove these poems from the realm of desire articulated by traditional apostrophe, nineties lyric ultimately not only affirms the desire central to all lyric invocation but radically extends it: what apostrophe in these poems ultimately exposes is a desire not only for an embodied other but also for lyric itself.[6]

The 'desire for the embodied other' is evident throughout Bidart's work through its engagement with voice, and it also demonstrates the desire for lyric itself in contrast to prevalent approaches of distrust and shame in post-modern American criticism and practice. It may be that Bidart's work demonstrates what Culler refers to as 'voicing' and so makes itself inimical to certain modes of contemporary critical discourse.[7] This 'voicing' may not only be considered an embarrassment but is a means of dramatising (enacting) the mind of the poet through voice. Culler argues:

> If we think of what the vocative represents in this process, we can see why apostrophe should be embarrassing. It is the pure embodiment of poetic pretension: of the subject's claim that in his verse he is not merely an empirical poet, a writer of verse, but the embodiment of poetic tradition and of the spirit of poesy. Apostrophe is perhaps always an invocation of the muse. Devoid of semantic reference, the *O* of apostrophe refers to other apostrophes and thus to the lineage and conventions of sublime poetry. [8]

Culler maintains systematic exclusion of apostrophe in the history of lyric theory, claiming that apostrophe is something 'critical discourse cannot comfortably assimilate' (because of hostility towards voice). Kneale challenges Culler arguing that

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[6] Ann Keniston, ' "The Fluidity of Damaged Form": Apostrophe and Desire in Nineties Lyric,' *Contemporary Literature* 42 (Summer 2001), 2, 294 – 324 (pp.298-9).
[7] Jonathon Culler, *The Pursuit of Signs* (London: Routledge, 1981).
[8] ibid., p.143.

what he presents as apostrophe (address) in *The Pursuit of Signs* (1981) is in fact prosopopeia (speaking with another voice) or more particularly is movement of voice – in the sense of moving from one thing to another as a response to rhetoric – rather than voicing.[9] In *Theory of the Lyric* (2015) Culler returns to affirm the crucial difference from other lyric tropes found in the use of apostrophe:

> …apostrophe is different because it makes its point by troping not on the meaning of a word but on the circuit of communication itself, foregrounding the fact that this is utterance of a special kind, marked as voicing (the gratuitous "O" that accompanies many apostrophes gives us pure voicing) but not as mundane communication. In foregrounding the lyric as act of address, lifting it out of ordinary communicational contexts, apostrophes give us a ritualistic, hortatory act, a special sort of linguistic event in a lyric present.[10]

The poem as 'a special sort of linguistic event' (hortatory, ritualistic, perhaps a form of prayer) is a means of containment for Bidart, whether as apostrophe, dramatic monologue, prosopopeia, simple lyric or other mode. It is a vessel that holds the paradoxes of human life (psyche and body) in precarious suspension. In Bidart's poetry voicing fractures narrative in the sense that the poem itself is what happens in the constant presence of its reading, rather than a linearity of story.

Contradictions of love and hate, of pity, hunger and desire, of making and unmaking, of body and soul, of thirst, and sexuality are all recurring Bidartian themes. In 'Herbert White,' 'Ellen West,' and 'The War of Vaslav Nijinsky' we find distinctive stories of divided selves that exemplify both Bollas's concept of risk in the artist's psycho-devolution and a psychologically informed aesthetics of embodiment. In 'The Arc,' 'Adolescence,' 'Phenomenology of the Prick,' 'Those Nights,' 'Queer,' and other poems Bidart also explores homosexuality as a recurrent area of autobiographical and poetic reflection through which he questions hetero-normative

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[9] J. Douglas Kneale, '*Romantic Aversions: Apostrophe Reconsidered'* ELH, Vol. 58, No. 1 (Spring, 1991), pp. 141 – 165.
[10] Jonathon Culler, *Theory of Lyric* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), p. 213.

assumptions and values; this enables a distinctive exploration of embodiment and places his work in the evolving history of gay literary and cultural theory. It can be argued that this also connects to Bidart's interest in cinema. As Lee Edelman argues:

> …both cinema and homosexuality question, and by doing so effectively transform, the culturally determined meanings and relations of looking and being looked at, arousing, for a social order that distributes unequally the authority of subject status and the access to political power, an always potentially paranoid anxiety about the reversibility of those activities, especially insofar as they put into play an erotics of the gaze that the dominant order remains eager in each case to control.[11]

Also, Bidart's interest in cinema coincided with his own troubling awareness of his sexuality. Although the application of Queer theory to a critical appraisal of Bidart's poetry is outside the scope of this study, there are elements of Lee Edelman's work that assist in exploring Bidart's poetics. Edelman argues for an awareness of hetero-normative modes of reading (i.e. the legibility of) the gay body, through texts both as a way of reading the gay body and to contrast that reading with the self-presence of homosexuality within writing. As Culler notes:

> In his essay 'Homographesis' Lee Edelman argues: "[Derived from] Derrida's post-Saussurean characterization (*sic*) of writing as a system of "difference" that operates without positive terms and endlessly defers the achievement of identity as self-presence, the "graphesis," the entry into writing, that "homographesis" would hope to specify is not only one in which "homosexual identity" is differentially conceptualized by a heterosexual culture as something legibly written on the body but also one in which the meaning of "homosexual identity" itself is determined through its assimilation to the position of writing within the tradition of Western metaphysics. [12]

What is interesting in Edleman's approach is that he uses writing as a metaphor for gay identity and phonocentrism as a metaphor for the predominant heterosexual culture. In contrast, Bidart's poetry privileges voicing as a way of interrogating subjectivity and gay identity rather than using the voice as a symbol of hetero-

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11 Lee Edelman, p. 200.

12 *Deconstruction: Critical Concepts in Literary and Cultural Studies Volume 2* ed. by Jonathon Culler (New York: CRC Press, 2002*),* p.303.

normativity. Further, Edelman's study *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* insists that what is 'queer' must always remain radically 'other' in relation to the dominant culture.[13] This is summarised by Bateman as follows: "Edelman argues queers should consent to their figuration as parasites upon the social order and embody the death drive for which they have come to stand."[14] Again, in contrast, Bidart's embodiment of the death drive most often signifies heterosexual destructiveness; this is especially vivid in 'Herbert White' and in the poems about the parents' inabilities to sustain a relationship in *Golden State.* Bidart's work challenges Edelman's 'anti-futurist' position. It can be seen, instead, as poetry that explores and dramatises the Lacanian approach to subjectivity, that is, the lack that sustains desire, the divide between language and the body.

This theme of the divide between language and the body is relevant to the lives Bidart explores through his poetry: when Nijinsky loses his ability to dance because of his broken mind and spirit he endeavours to keep a sense of himself through a compulsion to write; as Ellen West feels driven to starve her body to death she laments her failure to write poetry; Herbert White, in the wake of his violence and murders, is unable to hold any concept of self yet struggles to find meaning through memory of his mother's sayings, something further considered in my close reading of the poem.

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13 Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).

14 R. Benjamin Bateman, 'The Future of Queer Theory - on Lee Edelman, "No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive" book review,' *The Minnesota Review* (1 Sept 2006), 171 – 175 (p.171).

Bidart's religious instruction, based on the Baltimore catechism, included the following questions:

> **What is man?**
> Man is a creature composed of body and soul, and made to the image and likeness of God.
> *And God created man to his own image. (Genesis 2, 7)*
>
> **Is this likeness to God in the body or in the soul?**
> This likeness to God is chiefly in the soul.
>
> **How is the soul like God?**
> The soul is like God because it is a spirit having understanding and free will, and is destined to live forever.
>
> *And the dust returns into its earth, from whence it was, and the spirit returns to God, who gave it.* (*Ecclesiastes* 12,7). [15]

This dogma, part of his educational and spiritual formation, impacts on Bidart's use of voice and questions of embodiment. He frequently uses the word 'soul': if our likeness to God is in the soul, this may offer a clue to understanding Bidart's obsession with both soul and the body, that which makes us dust, mortal, flawed, also linked to desire. In his 2013 collection, *Metaphysical Dog* we find a poem called 'As You Crave Soul' (*Collected Poems* p.554) and in the poem 'Mouth' we find the lines:

> But he's sure he'll learn something
> once he sees
> *La Notte* again. He's placed *Duino Elegies*
> next to his bed. He craves the cold
> catechism Joyce mastered writing "Ithaca"….
>
> (*Collected Poems* p. 571.)

"He craves the cold/ catechism Joyce mastered…" Bidart, in contrast to Joyce, has not mastered the catechism as a literary device or source; it has some other power in his

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[15] Revised Baltimore Catechism, 1941, Section 5, *The Creation and the Fall of Man.*
< http://www.cmri.org/baltimore-catechism-no2.shtml >
[accessed 18 January 2017]

imagination. As a young man he was influenced by the writings of priest and mystic Thomas Merton, a Cistercian monk and convert who became one of the best-selling Catholic authors of the twentieth century. Bidart's thoughts of religious vocation are expressed, in an address to his father, in his poem 'History':

> …I told him that I
> wanted to be a priest, a Trappist.
>
> (*Collected Poems* p. 502)

In part, his ideas of priesthood were motivated by fear of intimacy and anxiety about his homosexuality, which persisted until the death of his parents. But perhaps in this idea of religious vocation he found something appealing about being away from the world, free from the difficulties of intimacy and the body.

Bidart's rejection of his youthful religious faith energised an all-consuming commitment to art, of which he says: "It is something that gives me perspective: in which I have experience of transcendence…" [16] Transcendence suggests motivation to search beyond the confines of one's own limited experience of the world for meaning; it also implies a stepping outside of the body and the corollary of embodiment (in the poem). There is a sense in which we can understand the young poet putting all his previously understood religious impulses into his writing practice and quest to make poetry. This is an acknowledgement and a rejection of the Catholicism that was part of his formation:

> We long for the Absolute, Royce
> said. Voices you once
>
> heard that you can never *not hear again, --*
>
> …spoiled priest, liar, if you want something
> enough, sometimes you think it's there.
>
> ('Defrocked,' *Collected Poems,* p.510.)

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[16] Ron Charles, *Interview with Frank Bidart*, online video recording, Library of Congress: Life of a Poet series, (19 Feb, 2015)
< https://www.loc.gov/today/cyberlc/feature_wdesc.php?rec=6672 >
[accessed 2 June 2015]

## Chapter 2: The Sources of 'Writing "Ellen West" ' – Frank Bidart's Poetry of Research

Bidart's interest in embodiment and voice, his adherence to existential phenomenology as a way of mining and exploring subjectivity and human psychology, offers a philosophical underpinning, reflected in Bidart's writing practice and research. Explaining his unusual starting point with poetics, Bidart says: "I'm a very bad observer of the world." [1] It isn't an object or landscape or phrase that sparks the making of a poem for Bidart, but philosophy and ideas. As he elaborates:

> I need an intellectual framework that allows me to move down from the large categories to specifics.[2]

Bidart moves from this intellectual framework or idea, such as love as a tyranny, until he has the sense of the theme as an emotional and psychological reality; he works painstakingly with his material, usually a source text, to re-experience and rediscover it through the making of the poem. He takes external material including biographical resources – such as Romola Nijinsky's account of her husband's art and illness [3] – letters, essays, paintings and films through which he finds his own tradition of making and authority that are distinct from fiction, linear narrative or fantastical imaginary realms. Bidart demonstrates an interest in hermeneutics through the use of a wide range of texts and sources in his own poetry, including Catullus, Genesis, Virgil, George Herbert, Augustine, Robert Lowell and Heath Ledger etc. His poems can also be seen as exercises in phenomenology as he reflects on the meaning, rather than the facts, of his own existence throughout his work, although his re-evaluation over and over of the same experiences (particularly autobiographical events concerning his

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1 H.L.Hix,'In Conversation with Frank Bidart' *Literary Review: an International Journal of Contemporary Writing* 53:1 (Fall 2009), 191 – 198, (p.193).
2 ibid., p.193.
3 Romola Nijinsky, *Nijinsky* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1933).

parents) reminds us of traumagenic dynamics and emotional torment. That Bidart is a philosophical poet concerned with psychology and *dasein* can also be evidenced in his decision to study literature as it was influenced, in part, by a rejection of logical positivism. He says:

> I thought at first, that I might become a philosophy major; but in the desolation of positivism and analytic linguistic skepticism that dominated American academic philosophy in the fifties, it seemed that the moral and metaphysical issues that had traditionally been the world, the province of philosophy, had been taken over by literature. *Ulysses* and *Absalom, Absalom!* and Yeats' "The Tower" seemed closer to Plato and Aristotle than what Academic philosophers then were doing.
>
> (*Collected Poems,* p. 684.)

Bidart tells us, in the cover of his first *Collected Poems – In the Western Night* (1990) through the associations that can be made with its illustration (fig 1) that he is a poet concerned with philosophy and the nature of being not only in his own life but also in the wider world of history and knowledge. Seamus Heaney acknowledged Bidart's distinctiveness as follows:

> Bidart's way of speaking is a way of knowing. It is a measure of the seriousness of the endeavor [sic] that a title like *In the Western Night* can evoke the balm and romance of the Pacific Coast of California and at the same time intimate the burnt-out categories of European civilization in the late twentieth century. Neither desolation nor desire are sold short in these poems.[4]

Bidart explores philosophies and faiths as well as historical documents and events. Throughout his work, and as a developing and increasingly self-reflexive methodology, he documents and questions his own life alongside the lives of others, both fictional and historical, to study aspects of human experience including desire, death, grief, hunger, the drive to make art, filial disappointment and madness.

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[4] Seamus Heaney, 'Frank Bidart: A Salute' in *On Frank Bidart Fastening the Voice to the Page* ed. Liam Rector & Tree Swenson (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2007), 5 – 6 (p.6).

This ability to resolve the personal and historical is something Elizabeth Bishop acknowledged in her endorsement for Bidart's first collection, *Golden State* (1973) when she stated that his work has "an uncanny power of illuminating the poet's personal history and History itself." This power is rooted in his research and study of source materials whether they relate to his own biography or the lives of saints and sinners. This interest in the meeting of history and the personal also leads him to take the figure of Wilhelm Dilthey (1833 – 1911) as a subject in his poem 'The First Hour of the Night' (1990). Dilthey, philosopher, sociologist and psychologist, challenged the prevalence of the natural sciences and argued that "lived experience" is connected to social-historical contexts and he contributed greatly to the methodological development of the humanities. His work was an influence on Heidegger and Ricoeur, amongst others. Dilthey is also significant in the development of autobiography, as his work emphasised the importance of subjective lived experience both to science and to history. Laura Marcus gives a detailed account of Dilthey's role in transforming awareness and understanding about the importance of autobiography when she acknowledges:

> The concepts of 'life', 'lived experience' (*Erlebnis*) and the understanding (*Verstehen*) of life-expressions are the central elements in his model.[5]

'The First Hour of the Night' is the first of Bidart's 'Hour of the Night' poems, all four of which use Egyptian mythology as a metaphorical foundation. In the *Book of Gates* twelve gates separate each hour of the night and the sun god Ra (or Re) must travel through each gate to face and overcome dangers and perils to re-emerge each day. Bidart's poem 'Book of Night' (*Collected Poems* p.214) serves as an introduction:

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[5] Laura Marcus, *Auto/biographical discourses Theory-Criticism-Practice* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994), p.136.

> After the sun
> fell below the horizon of the west,
>
> THE SUN-GOD
>
> (according to words carved
> on the sarcophagus of the pharaoh Seti I)
>
> each night, during the twelve hours of the night, must
> journey through
> THE WORLD THAT IS BENEATH THE WORLD, --
> …must
>
> meet, once again, the dead.

This is what Bidart himself says about the first poem in his series:

> The "First Hour" is about the collapse of Western metaphysics, the attempt to make a single conceptual system that orders the crucial intellectual issues and dilemmas in our lives. At the end of the poem there is a dream that suggests the birth of something like phenomenology, the phenomenological ground out of which art springs, that survives the death of metaphysical certainty.[6]

Egyptian myth is the perfect metaphorical terrain for Bidart. It provides a pre-Christian framework of death, creation, and renewal through the allegory of the sun's journey through night in which he encounters the realm of the dead in many guises; it also recalls the poet's abiding desire – expressed in the opening poem of his collected works, 'To the Dead' –

> What I hope (when I hope) is that we'll
> see each other again, –

The way in which Bidart's collections are structured demonstrates his wide interest in making poetry through reflections about other texts and sources. This interest, including his focus on metaphysics, or the death of metaphysics, is represented through the cover illustration of *In the Western Night,* in a detail from Giovanni Volpato's etching of 'The School of Athens' by Raphael.

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[6] Adam Travis 'An Interview with Frank Bidart,' *Bookslut*, Features, (June 2005) < http://www.bookslut.com/features/2005_06_005720.php > [accessed 12 December 2016]

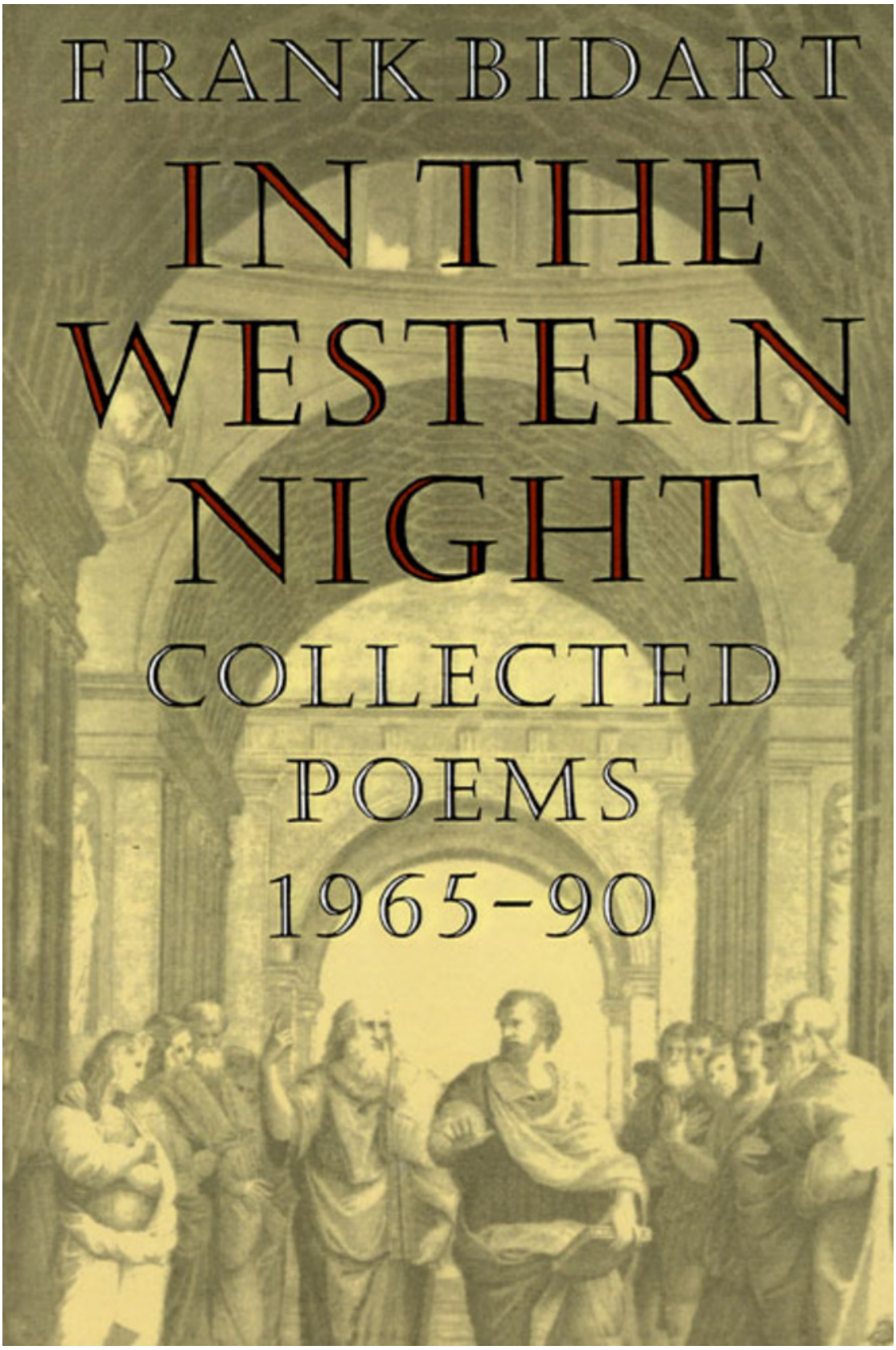


fig 1.

The book cover focuses on Plato pointing to the heavens and Aristotle pointing to the earth. This was the scene encountered by Dilthey in his famous dream dramatised by Bidart in the 'First Hour of the Night.' This illustration serves a number of purposes. It is literally an image on the book cover of a *copy* of Raphael's great painting. This illustration serves to demonstrate conceptions of mimesis as well as reminding us of the place of poetry in ancient philosophy, a reminder of Plato's rejection of poetry's imitation of appearance, as something below truth and encouraging unphilosophical thought: yet Aristotle is beside him in the image, a reminder of the conception of tragedy as an imitation of action, of the importance of human emotion, of the power of drama through catharsis to purge through pity and fear.

Bidart's great poem of existential crisis, 'Ellen West' (1977), can be read as a discourse on pity and fear. It takes as its source an essay concerned with the famous historical case history (of Ellen West) by Ludwig Binswanger, the psychotherapist who treated her. 'Ellen West' examines her crisis of identity and body in part by considering the clinical opinions of her doctors alongside Ellen's own account of psychological anguish. Bidart offers an examination of this process so we come to understand the impossible psychological choices Ellen faces. This does not necessarily lead to an understanding of Ellen as an historical person, however, as the context of her Jewish identity is not explored by Bidart. Given that one of her doctors, who has a voice in the poem, was Alfred Hoche – co-author of the foundation Nazi text *The Destruction of Human Life Devoid of Human Value* [7] – this points to

[7] Karl Binding and Alfred Hoche, *Die Freigabe der Vernichtung lebensunwerten Lebens,* (Leipzig: Felix Meiner Verlag, 1920): online version: translated by Cristina Modak < https://www.amazon.co.uk/Permitting-Destruction-Life-Unworthy-ebook/dp/B00ARPYMFC > [accessed 29 August 2018]

possible alternative treatments of this material in both polemic and poetry. It also raises some questions about representational ethics in Bidart's approach.

Close consideration of the poem 'Writing "Ellen West" ' (*Collected Poems* pp. 486 – 492) demonstrates the autoethnographic mode of Bidart's poetics. 'Writing "Ellen West" '(2013) – described by John James as 'a meta-textual elegy for Bidart's mother' – is both a poem about poetics, writing about writing, writing as a method of enquiry and a reconsideration of autobiographical experience.[8] Richard Furman reviewed his own poetry about his father's death (written ten years earlier) as part of his autoethnographic study of grief.[9] Similarly, Bidart's poem can be considered a study about the circumstances surrounding the making of a poem of grief (that is, 'Ellen West', published in 1977) and the art of making poetry. The second Ellen West poem, considered in relation to the first, demonstrates elements of autoethnography. It serves the same function, in part, as Furman's 'narrative reflections' about his previous poems. Bidart has other forms of writing, through his interviews and articles, about his poetics that also serve the function of narrative contemplation and reflection. For example, the following note on 'Writing "Ellen West" ' not only explains the context of the poem but further develops the idea of sacrament and writing that is expressed there:

> The gestures poems make are the same as the gestures of ritual injunction – curse; exorcism; prayer; underlying everything perhaps, the attempt to make someone or something live again. Both poet and shaman make a model that stands for the whole. Substitution, symbolic substitution. The mind conceives that something lived, or might live. Implicit is the demand to understand. The memorial that is ward and warning. Without these ancient springs poems are

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[8] John James, 'On Canine Dasein: Frank Bidart's Metaphysical Dog,' *Boston Review*, 20 Nov 2013
< http://bostonreview.net/poetry/james-frank-bidart-metaphysical-dog-heidegger > [accessed 12 December 2016]

[9] Richard Furman, 'Using poetry and narrative as qualitative data: Exploring a father's cancer through poetry.' *Family, Systems & Health*, 22 (2004), pp. 162 –170.

> merely more words.[10]

This is a considered statement about the power of poetics to resurrect the dead and a reflection on the role of poet as priest or shaman. "Implicit is the demand to understand" he states, as an explication of poetry's process of enquiry.

Furman uses poetry written ten years earlier alongside current reflections on these previous poems as material for qualitative research about his own development as a psychologist-practitioner. In short he considers his earlier poems as representative of a process of healing. It may be argued that Bidart's earlier family and autobiographical poems in *Golden State* served a similar healing function for the poet, although it is acknowledged that their primary purpose at the time of publication was to serve aesthetic and artistic aims both of the author and publisher. 'Writing "Ellen West" ' also details the earlier suicidality of the voice that speaks the poem (the character 'Frank Bidart') and tells of his resisting the death wish through the process of writing his earlier poem 'Ellen West.' The writing process is invested here with sacramental powers, not only to expel something dark, but also to enable the poet to live. This makes the process of writing not only one of enquiry but also survival, the poet being both endangered and yet deliverer. As stated in the poem, the writing process is described as 'exorcism':

> Exorcism of that thing within Frank that wanted, after his
> mother's death, to die.

There are other references to suicidality both in the original poem, and its subject matter and in 'Writing "Ellen West" ' 'Ellen West' is summarised as follows:

> Ellen lived out the war between the mind and the body, lived out
> in her body each stage of the war, its journey and progress, in
> which compromise, reconciliation is attempted then rejected
> then mourned, till she reaches at last, in an ecstasy costing not less
> than everything, death.

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[10] Frank Bidart, *Metaphysical Dog* (New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013), p.111.

(*Collected Poems* p. 487.)

Although we learn that the writing process enabled him (the poet) to survive he nevertheless states:

> By the time she died he had so thoroughly betrayed the ground of intimacy on which his life was founded he had no right to live.

'Writing "Ellen West" '(published thirty-six years after 'Ellen West'*)* is interesting in its form, in the way it is set out on the page. It consists of thirty-seven statements that have an aphoristic quality, each one separated by a single asterisk. Only one of these statements, the nineteenth, appears poetic in form:

> *It must be lifted from the mind*
>
> *must be lifted and placed elsewhere*
> *must not remain in the mind alone*
>
> (*Collected Poems* p.489.)

This can be understood as a statement of injunction, that to write is to lift matters from the mind that would otherwise be stuck; it is writing as a bodily process of transformation that protects the mind. This reminds us of Bollas's observation about artists retaining the post-Oedipal complexities of mind and self-awareness that so many of us cannot sustain. Here Bidart tells us that the body (and bodily feeling or emotion) is the means and locus for uprooting those matters that torment the mind. These lines also appear in the body of a later poem in the same collection, 'Three Tattoos' (*Collected Poems* p.553), the second poem being about specific forms of writing on or marking the body while the earlier poem is about the writing process of the poet. These lines serve to support the idea that, for Bidart, writing poetry is a necessity. Furman also states of his own work:

> The purpose…is to contribute to this growing body of work through an exploration of autobiographical poems and narrative reflections as vehicles of inquiry into existentialism.[11]

[11] Richard Furman, 'Poetry and Narrative as Qualitative Data: Explorations into Existential

Bidart's whole project is about the making and exploration of autobiographical poems (exploring the boundaries of subjectivity) or poems of lived experience, all of which serve as 'vehicles of inquiry into existentialism' as part of their aesthetic ambition. This is why it is worth considering his poetry as evidence relevant to understanding human psychology in extremis. His poetry stands as research into the human psyche as well as art. The existential themes considered in 'Writing "Ellen West" ' include, as in Furman's work, death, meaning and identity, nothingness and existential resolve as well as the issues of anorexia, betrayal, mind-body conflict, grief and memory. Furman's idea of 'existential resolve' is applicable to Bidart's work. Furman describes it thus:

> That existentialism is often considered a dark philosophy is a reflection of where it starts (death, dread, for example), not where it ends. We start with death, and end with life. The ultimate purpose of grappling with death, nothingness and dread is that to do so means to face life and live authentically. To seek, to know, and live out one's own special meaning is to develop a deep sense of satisfaction with life, and to learn to live fully in the moment of the unfolding drama that is our existence. The following poems are those that express movement beyond struggle to resolve. It is understood that struggling with existential issues is a lifetime process, not an event to be "worked through" in the classical Freudian sense of the word. However, there are moments when having bravely encountered life on life's terms leads to an inner sense of satisfaction and wholeness. These poems reflect varying degrees and aspects of such sentiments.[12]

Bidart's poems stand as works of art but Furman's autoethnographic studies also help us to think about and understand them as documents of survival. It is also instructive to consider Shapiro's expression of distaste:

> […] returning to Furman's assertion that poetry is data, there is something vaguely jarring about the juxtaposition of these two words. Finding them together in the same sentence may seem bold to some, oxymoronic to others […] Furman's article begs the question. How can we approach the concept of poetry-as-data in a way that retains both literary and scientific

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Theory,' *Indo-Pacific Journal of Phenomenology*, Volume 7, Edition 1 (May 2007), 1-9 (p.1).

[12] Furman (2007), p.6.

integrity and somehow enhances each?[13]

This same caveat must extend to the concept of poetry and a poet's writing as indistinguishable from qualitative research. Rather the aim in this chapter has been to question Bidart's methods of research and suggest elements compatible with autoethnography, especially as this provides an additional way of considering Bidart's poetics of subjectivity.

Bidart's skill at combining reflexive recitals with personal narrative and layers of literary sources and historical evidence enables a consideration of his poetry as methodology, data and product, as well as art. In short, poetry is Bidart's method of autoethnographic enquiry as well as his means of literary articulation. What Ellis, Adams and Bochner say of autoethnographers is pertinent to Bidart's poetics:

> Many of these scholars turned to auto-ethnography because they were seeking a positive response to critiques of canonical ideas about what research [*poetry*] is and how research [*poetry*] should be done. In particular, they wanted to concentrate on ways of producing meaningful, accessible, and evocative research [*poetry*] grounded in personal experience, research [*poetry*] that would sensitize [sic] readers to issues of identity politics, to experiences shrouded in silence, and to forms of representation that deepen our capacity to empathize [sic] with people who are different from us…[14,]

Bidart exemplifies the poet as thinker, his poetry, praxis as well as a means of dramatising thought, in sharp contrast to the current vogue for documentary poetry that includes the work of poets such as C.D.Wright, Carolyn Forché, Mark Nowak and Juliana Spahr; documentary poetry often connects with the real world outside of the poem in a political way – in contrast, Bidart's use of fact, history and biography

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[13] Johanna Shapiro, 'Can poetry be *data*? Potential relationships between poetry and research.' *Families, Systems, & Health,* (2004), 22, 178-179, p.178.

[14] Carolyn Ellis, Tony E. Adams & Arthur P. Bochner 'Autoethnography: An Overview,' *FQS* vol 12, No 1, Art.10, section 1, para 3, January 2011 [*Note*: 'poetry' is my insertion and emphasis]
< http://www.qualitative-research.net/index.php/fqs/article/view/1589/3095 >
[accessed 16 January 2017]

develops a philosophically and psychologically informed study of human subjectivity. In this he demonstrates an ethics of empathy, or to reiterate and slightly adapt Ellis, Adams and Bochner's statement, Bidart creates meaningful and evocative poetry grounded in his own and others lived experiences that sensitises readers to issues of identity and experiences (such as anorexia, murder, madness) shrouded in silence and to forms of representation that deepen our capacity to empathise with people who are different. He interrogates his subjects and concerns not simply in single poems but in themes and through repeated examinations of the same autobiographical materials (including his writing processes). For example, the autobiographical ground of his first (1973) collection, concerned with his parents' difficult marriage and his father's drunkenness, fecklessness and death, is revisited in *Metaphysical Dog* (2013) in poems about his mother and about the impossibility of romantic love. His methods are not only literary but show the process of writing poetry as a method of enquiry that shares many qualities with autoethnographic research. As Shapiro notes:

> In some respects, poetry is like instant anthropology. The power and immediacy of its language take us in short order to places we never thought we would be and into lives perhaps we did not initially wish to know.[15]

That Bidart considers his art as a means of social and historical enquiry is unquestionable. That it is about subjectivity and often autobiographical is a given. That both his art and critical expositions are in writing is also accepted. The ethnographic element is more controversial but it is suggested that the culture Bidart interrogates is that of literary or poetic practice. To adapt what has been said in relation to Maso's definition of ethnography, Bidart is an ethnographer by being a participant observer in the culture and history of poetics, he studies poetry's

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[15] Johanna Shapiro, 'Can Poetry Be Data? Potential Relationships Between Poetry and Research.' p.174.

'relational practices, common values and beliefs, and shared experiences for the purpose of helping insiders' (poets) and outsiders (non-poets and readers) better understand the literary culture.[16]

The question of ethical representation is central not only to Bidart's choice of materials and subjects and his use of other lives, but to our reading and understanding of the way in which they have been assimilated or embodied within his poetry.

The role of the subject-scientist and autobiographical poet-self is distrusted both in traditional scientific epistemology and in contemporary American poetry. While reflexivity is tolerated, subjectivity is both feared and marginalised in the myth of the invisible (or objective) researcher-self and the critical aversion to confessionalism in poetry. Gillian White's sense of reading through and with 'lyric shame' offers a new negotiation of subjectivity in contemporary poetics away from the binary opposition of lyric and experiment.

Do Bidart's reincarnations present any ethical problems of identity, especially in relation to speaking through women's voices or through the voices of madness? Or does his own experience of psychotherapy and mental distress validate this aspect of his practice? Can he, for example, simply adopt and ignore the Jewish identity of Ellen West without censure or does the demand of authenticity in poetry of testimony introduce new ways of thinking about fictionalising the experiences of others in poetry?[17] That Bidart's representational ethics do not extend to wider polemical considerations (especially in relation to ethnicity and gender) is an area of possible further study. It is suggested that he seeks to root his authority in his sources combined

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16 Carolyn Ellis, Tony E. Adams & Arthur P. Bochner 'Autoethnography: An Overview' *FQS* vol 12, No 1, 10 January 2011 – a summary of Maso's definition is included here.
17 Daniel Morris, 'Frank Bidart's voice and the erasure of Jewish difference in Ellen West,' *Studies in American Jewish Literature* (33:2) 2014, 202 – 28.

with his own lived experience as the evidential, researched foundations for his poetry. Can such research itself represent a system of ethics or is it mere historicism? The struggle to know and understand persists, as shown in the final lines of ‘Writing “Ellen West” ’ when the muse accompanies Bidart in the form of a single magpie:

> Phonograph voices among them, phonograph voices, their mag-
> pie beauty.
>
> *
>
> Sweet din.
>
> *
>
> Magpie beauty.
>
> *
>
> One more poem, one more book in which you figure out how to
> make something of not knowing enough.

(*Collected Poems,* p.492.)

**Chapter 3: 'Herbert White' – Sources, Voice, Subjectivity and Biography**

Bidart's original source document, *21 Abnormal Sex Cases* is assessed to understand in what way it contributed to the making of the poem, 'Herbert White' (*Collected Poems* pp. 153 – 158). [1] As the illustration of the book cover shows (fig.2) *21 Abnormal Sex Cases* is a sensationalist 95-cent paperback that claims authorship by a "distinguished" psychiatrist. The preface states:

> Every thinking adult will find this comprehensive and authoritative work to be of immense value to his understanding of the sexually aberrant and their position in the changing American culture.

The book purports to be a psychologically informed scientific study but is in fact a series of graphic accounts of various sexual practices and perverse human behaviour. In the introduction the *raison d'être* is explained as follows:

> we wish to emphasize the premise of this work –-- which is that the book was undertaken because *a vital and urgent need for it exists!* We sincerely believe that it will help serve some social utility by bringing about a better, more concise understanding of the sex offender and his problems. Despite the risk of being labeled [sic] "sensationalists," we have found it necessary to present the material in this study in detail *without* omitting the sometimes necessarily sordid essentials or direct quotations.
>
> (Gilbert and Tralins, p.10.)

Here is the original case study of Herbert White; Bidart transforms the 'sordid essentials' of Herbert White's life into an enduring tale of origins and original sin.

The actor-director, James Franco, in his own poem, 'Directing Herbert White' describes Bidart's source as follows:

> Herbert came out of a cheap, dime store, medical case study called *21 Abnormal Sex Cases,* cases that included "The Homosexual" and "The Transvestite." Herbert was "The Necrophiliac." In that book he did horrible things, like fuck dogs' stomachs while they were still alive. In Frank's poem Herbert fucks a goat.[2]

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1 Dr Michael M. Gilbert with Robert S. Tralins, *21 Abnormal Sex Cases* (New York: Paperback Library, 1966).

2 James Franco, *Directing Herbert White* (Minnesota: Graywolf Press, 2014), p.74.

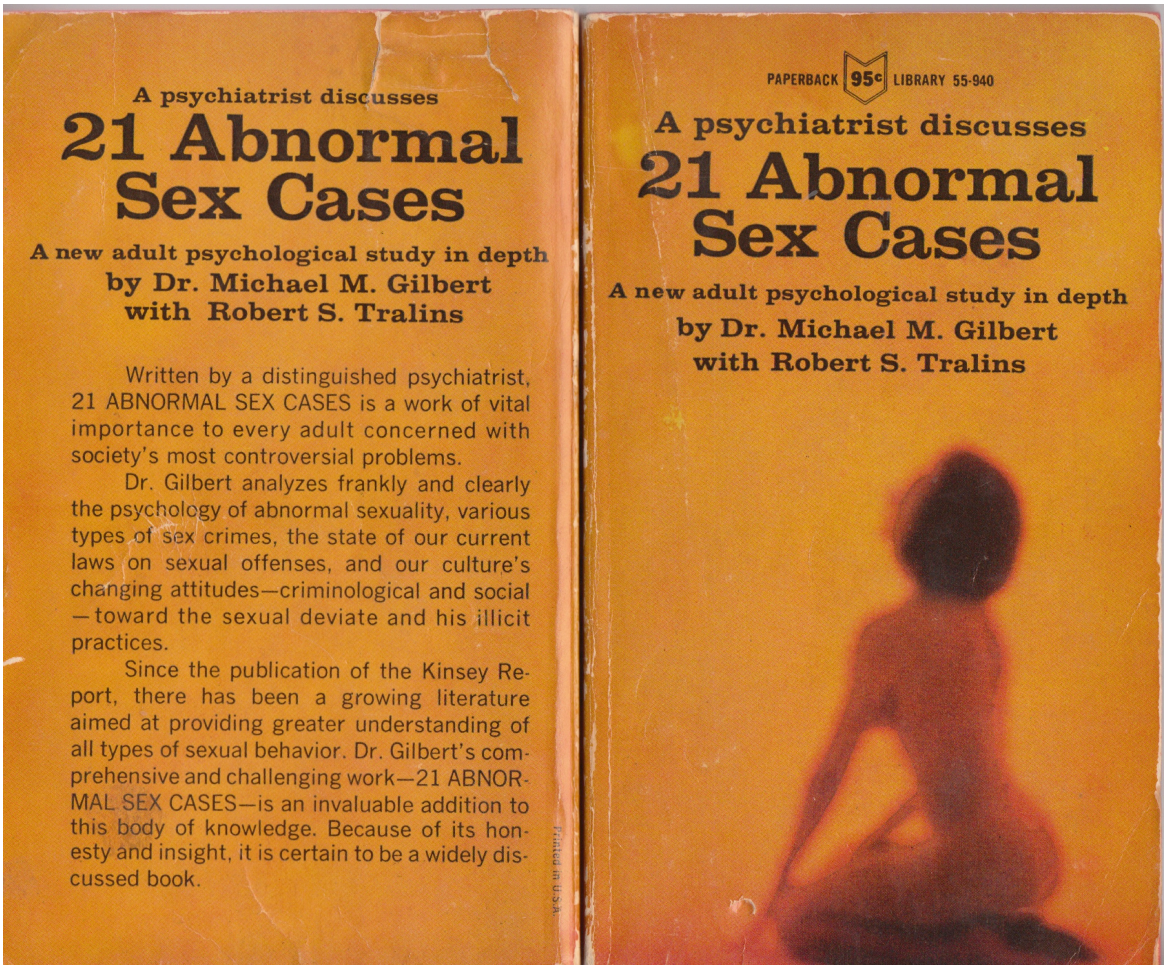

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fig 2

'Herbert White,' in the oral demotic, a register that here denotes parental abandonment, inarticulacy and child-like ignorance, is a violent, disturbing account comparable, on first reading, to a detailed police or court confession. Of its 127 lines, 26 are taken from *21 Abnormal Sex Cases,* its original source, which states:

> Since the introduction of new and better sex offender reforms will *not* take place until the issue becomes "popular," only through the presentation of studies such as this will the public start to understand the complexities of the sex offender problem and learn what has to be done in order to resolve it.
>
> (Gilbert and Tralins, p.8.)

Chapter Nine is entitled 'The Necrophiliac' and in its introduction states:

> […] little has been known about the psychological life of necrophiliacs. The psychiatrist rarely has the opportunity to delve into the background and motivating factors of the life of a necrophiliac, and hence, little has been learned of the relationships between the individual with such tendencies and other sex deviates. On the following pages is the history of one such necrophiliac. This is somewhat of a classic in the archives of psychiatric literature and criminal psychodynamics […]
>
> (Gilbert and Tralins, p.193.)

The case is then listed as:

> *CASE 141*
> Herbert L.E. White. Male 30. Common-law marriage. Two children.
>
> *OCCUPATION:*
> Gas station attendant. Lawn sprayer.
>
> *PREVIOUS PSYCHIATRIC TREATMENT*:
> None.
>
> *OFFENSE:*
> First degree murder of a 10-year-old girl. First degree murder of a 19-year-old retarded girl.

This case study source (excepting the factual case-notes summary) is recorded, in the original text, in the merciless yet self-pitying voice of a murderer who is being held in a psychiatric institution. All the case studies in the book are allocated the surname White. Under 'Family History' we find the following:

> I never gave much thought to anybody because I was always a poor bastard and we never did have nothing we were so poor. When the old man wasn't drunk, he was either on relief or working on some paperhanging job once in awhile […]
> My mother was a no good bitch. She drank like a fish and she was always laying round the dumpy house we lived in reading them confession magazines […]

'Herbert L.E. White' the pseudonymous criminal, the actual murderer, was born in 1934, in the small town of Crockett, Texas, the county seat of Houston County, described by him in the case-study as "a small town of about 2,000 nosy bastards." He enlisted in the army at the age of 17 having "one helluva time" in Japan being "discharged as an undesirable" and later tried and arrested for armed robbery in Mississippi at the age of 19. His deviant sexual behaviour began in childhood.

Why does Bidart select this criminal as a focus for study as a way of exploring autobiography, extreme alienation and the nature of being? For Bidart, coping with loss of faith and a fear of his own sexuality, it must have exacerbated this fear and isolation to read Chapter Five of *21 Abnormal Sex Cases* – 'The Homosexual,' alongside accounts of criminality and depravity such as the Herbert White case. In 1966, the year *21 Abnormal Sex Cases* was published, homosexuality was classified as a mental disorder by the American Psychiatric Association. Although 'Homosexuality' was removed as a distinct 'disease' from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorder (DSM) in 1973 it was transferred to the new diagnosis of 'sexual orientation disturbance', which remained in the DSM until 1987, and this classification remains as 'ego-dystonic sexual orientation' in the World Health Organisation's *International Classification of Diseases.* To grow up gay in 1950s America meant being categorised as deviant, disordered, excluded and potentially criminal. Bidart's later poem 'Queer' (*Collected Poems* pp.500-501)

reflects a necessary candour and self-acceptance about his sexuality as well as the prevailing prejudice against gay people that surrounded him growing up:

> *Lie to yourself about this and you will*
> *forever lie about everything.*

However, in the late 1960s his sexuality was a source of anxiety:

> For each gay kid whose adolescence
>
> was America in the forties or fifties
> the primary, the crucial
>
> scenario
>
> forever is coming out –
> or not. Or not. Or not. Or not. Or not.

Bidart, wrestling with his own sexuality, did not come out until after both his parents had died and even then he experienced considerable concern about the reaction of his friends. In a recent interview with Kaveh Akbar he talks about his anxieties:

> All my friends knew I was gay. I have no idea what people who didn't know me thought, but it was not a revelation to my colleagues in school or my friends. I mean, much earlier when I was working with Lowell, he had invited—this was after he had began his relationship with Caroline Blackwood and they were living together in England—he invited me to come over and help him with revising his books and the sonnets. I was staying with Caroline and Lowell and after maybe a week or week and a half, the friendship had very much solidified and I liked both of them so much. I said to them one night after dinner, "Look, there is something I must bring up." This was about 1971. "There is something I must tell you about and this is going to disturb you and in some ways limit our friendship and I will have to accept that, but I have to tell you…" And I told them I was gay. Their reaction was to sort of smile and say, "Well, we just assumed you were." It was really not an issue with them.[3]

The anti-gay hostility in America that prevailed in the sixties, is evidenced in a *Time* magazine edition dedicated to the issue of homosexuality, in an article that concludes:

> Even in purely nonreligious terms, homosexuality represents a misuse of the sexual faculty and, in the words of one Catholic educator, of "human

[3] Kaveh Akbar, 'One craves what can never be returned to.' Frank Bidart Interview: *Dive dapper* 22, (4 May 2015) < https://www.divedapper.com/interview/frank-bidart/> [accessed 24 October 2016]

> construction." It is a pathetic little second-rate substitute for reality, a pitiable flight from life. As such it deserves fairness, compassion, understanding and, when possible, treatment. But it deserves no encouragement, no glamorization, no rationalization, no fake status as minority martyrdom, no sophistry about simple differences in taste—and, above all, no pretense that it is anything but a pernicious sickness.[4]

This general antipathy, and social disapproval, compounded by the abjecting of homosexuality ('a pernicious sickness') alongside necrophilia (and other 'deviate' practices) is included as a case-study and proclaimed as a means of educating the public (by Gilbert and Tralins); this may have prompted Bidart to use Herbert L.E. White as the model for his poetic anti-self. If his own sexuality was to be presented and discussed as in some way equivalent to the depravity of child murder and necrophilia why not use this 'case' – of Herbert White – in his first poem as a startling way to present a monster? The shock about his own abjection (as a gay man) that we may surmise in Bidart's reaction to *21 Abnormal Sex Cases* finds its way into his poem, as he embodies it in in the figure of an anti-self – an opposite – through the voice and language of a child murderer. However, Bidart's language also conveys humanity and compassion and enables the reader to see that monstrousness is an aspect of human behaviour, that Herbert White may be a murderer, necrophiliac, paedophile but he remains human.

It is useful to consider the information Bidart takes from the case study for his poem and how he transforms it, as this offers insight into his approach to lineation, his technique of using sources and also his method of combining this with his making of an antithetical-self. 'Herbert White' opens with inverted commas as a mark of fictionality, of another voice speaking, with the line:

"When I hit her on the head, it was good,

---

[4] 'The Homosexual in America,' *Time magazine*, Vol 87, No 3, (21st January 1966) < http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,835069,00.html > [accessed 25 October 2016]

which is stated in the prose of the source text as:

> then I wanted a new kick so I got a wrench and let her have it on the head...
>
> (Gilbert and Tralins, p.199.)

Line 2 of the poem is:

> and then I did it to her a couple of times, –

and in the source text:

> I did it to her a couple more times…

The gap between the first and second line tells us that the phrase "did it to her" refers to something other than the original murderous act of violence, "it" referring to sexual intercourse: it also shows that the murderer can only act with his body and is unable to articulate his desires, through language. Line 3 and 4 of the poem read:

> But it was funny, –afterwards,
> it was as if somebody else did it…

And in the source text:

> I kind of get the feeling when I think about it that I didn't do it, but I guess nobody else except me did it. I must be guilty, although I never really wanted to kill anybody.

The first (rephrased) line of the poem "When I hit her on the head it was good" - is a shock; it is a thumping, violent line that punches out the sounds of "hit" and "head" and "good" and also pauses at "good," the iamb, the stopped heartbeat; this pause, a questioning. 'It was good' is Bidart's choice of language (to replace the banal: *I wanted a new kick)* as this subverts yet echoes the creation story in Genesis:

> And God saw the light that *it was good*; and he divided the light from the darkness..[5]

So we begin with universal issues of light and darkness, good and evil, the voice of a human being who takes upon himself the powers of God, to destroy what the creator

[5] Genesis, 1:4 Douay-Rheims Bible < http://www.drbo.org > [accessed 1 Nov 2016]

has created; an echoing of Man's first disobedience in Adam, to remind us that we are "Guilty of dust and sin"; this line is from George Herbert's sonnet *Love III*, with its opening lines based on the Old Testament *Song of Songs*: 'Love bade me welcome. Yet my soul drew back. | Guilty of dust and sin.' Herbert is one of Bidart's favourite poets. In his interview with Ron Charles, Bidart says of this line:

> it comes from, it's a phrase in, in Herbert, "Guilty of dust and sin." And you think about "guilty of dust," I mean, you know sin we're sort of, we're trained to think of that as a source of guilt. But the fact, is, it's saying that we are guilty of being, of manifestation itself, of having a body.[6]

To be implicated in guilt because of *being* gives motivation to the existential approach to lived experience and embodiment in Bidart's work. The impetus for Herbert White's murderous enterprise is his failed relationship with his absent, drunken father. While White is seeking meaning in what in the moment feels good to him we know immediately through the alignment of "hit" and "good" that this is the voice of someone disturbed, for whom evil becomes good as it gives him a 'kick.' The line ends with a pause, (a comma) and then a double space akin to a stanza break in traditional verse, so it denotes more than a pause. Bidart here shows that lineation is of central importance in his prosody. As noted by a number of commentators Bidart creates his effects of sound and voice most often through his lineation, rather than rhyme and traditional metre.[7] The first line in the poem that makes no reference to the source, reads:

> Everything flat, without sharpness, richness or line.
>
> (*Collected Poems,* p.153.)

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[6] Ron Charles, 'Interview with Frank Bidart' *Library of Congress: Life of a Poet series,* 19 Feb, 2015 < https://www.loc.gov/today/cyberlc/feature_wdesc.php?rec=6672 > [accessed 2 June 2015] - the quoted extract is taken from p.10 of the transcript of this interview.

[7] Carl Phillips, 'Some of What's In a Line,' in *A Broken Thing: Poets on the Line*, ed. Emily Rosko and Anton Vander-Lee (Iowa: University of Iowa Press, 2011), (p.188).

Langdon Hammer states that this line expresses the murderer's cyclical "sensation of de-realization he experiences when he rapes and kills a girl" and also argues that 'Herbert White' embodies Bidart's poetic ambition: 'To make an object world, experienced as "dead," "come alive"…' [8] This speaks also of the poet's work in considering the deadness of the subject (as found in the source text, where there is little affect) and animating him.

What can it mean to live only in a flat world without sharpness? This implies dissonance, an absence of musicality, only discordance. It also suggests that in order for there to be animation there is a necessity for sharps (in sound), and sharpness (in wit and perception). If one sees without definition and in only two dimensions one sees only width and length, only blurred, indistinguishable flat shapes; one cannot perceive the depths or layers of the world, or other people or meanings. The use of abstract nouns "sharpness," "richness" is in itself an attempt through voice to articulate the meaninglessness that he, Herbert White, experiences. Being 'without line' is both suggestive of prose and an absence of lineation (thus failed poetry in terms of Bidart's prosody as it is based on the unit of the line), a lack of family or heritage, and an absence of definition or self-realisation. Being 'without line' also suggests abjection, as a lack of differentiation between what is inside and out.

The murderous action, the explication of *modus operandi*, continues in line six to eight of the poem:

> Still, I liked to drive past the woods where she lay,
> tell the old lady and the kids I had to take a piss,
> hop out and do it to her…

These lines reiterate the following lines from the case study:

---

[8] Langdon Hammer 'Frank Bidart and the Tone of Contemporary Poetry,' in *On Frank Bidart: Fastening the Voice to the Page*, ed. Liam Rector and Tree Swenson, (p.15).

> A lot of times when I had the old lady and the kids in the car and we were going for a drive I'd stop and tell them I had to take a pee and I'd stop there and do it to her body, …

What Bidart adds to this action is the affect of "I liked," just as he includes the judgement 'it was good': the Herbert White of the poem is able to articulate the experience of being damned in a way unavailable to Herbert L.E. White. There is ellipsis in the poem 'do it to her'… which implies the unspeakable detail of his actions. Lines 9 to 12 (which are not taken from the case record) slow the pace of the poem as the lines split and move across the page:

> The whole buggy of them waiting for me
> made me feel good;
> but still, just like I knew all along,
> she didn't move.

This is the subject contemplating the power he has over his wife and children as well as the power he used to destroy the girl – the murderer returning to the scene of the crime. The drama is in the anticipation, the excitement expressed in the hurried first part of both these lines, and the slow horror in the second broken lines with their gaps and air and brokenness between the waiting family and the murderer's "feel good" and sure knowledge that "she didn't move." Between that expression of knowledge and lack of movement is the suggestion of a desire for the power or magic of animation. Lines 13 and 14 are almost verbatim, the lines from the case-study that finish the paragraph about the old lady and kids in the car:

> but when she got too decomposed I would jerk off and let my stuff hit her body.

In the poem these lines read:

> When the body got too discomposed
> I'd just jack off, letting it fall on her…

This is the first time the dead girl – who has been described as ‘her’ (three times) and ‘she’ (twice) becomes “the body”: the implications of this distancing is also made through the change from ‘decompose’ in the source text to ‘discompose’ in the poem. Decomposition is the process of rotting and decay, whereas discomposition is to become disturbed or agitated, which carries the sense of the body being treated as prey by other creatures, as well as transferring a sense of disturbance from the killer to the corpse. It's a disturbance that returns the narcissist to onanism.

There are only two more sections in the poem that directly reference the ‘case study’ and the first of these is:

> *The salt of the earth*;
> Mom once said, ‘Man’s spunk is the salt of the earth. . .’
>
> (*Collected Poems,* p.155)

These lines correspond with the following in the case record:

> I heard my old lady say once that a man’s stuff is the salt of the earth and it is what grows kids, and if she was right, goddamn it I was out to prove it.
>
> (Gilbert and Tralins, p.199.)

The final section in the poem that references the case study is:

> --Once, on the farm, when I was a kid,
> I was screwing a goat; and the rope around his neck
> when he tried to get away
> pulled tight;--and just when I came,
> he *died* . . .
> I came back the next day; jacked off over his body;
> but it didn’t do any good . . .
>
> Mom once said:
> ‘Man’s spunk is the salt of the earth, and grows kids.’
>
> (*Collected Poems,* p.156.)

This corresponds with the following in the case record:

> One time I snuck up on this goat and pushed its head between a fence and the gate and accidentally made the rope goddamn tight and the damn thing went and died right when I was doing it […] when the thing died I was sorry

> because it was good and I had decided that I'd like to have that goat around more often [. . .] I went away afterward, leaving the dead goat there and the next day when I came back I was still thinking about it so I stood there over the thing's carcass and jacked off squirting my stuff all over it. Maybe my stuff was magic and it would make it come to life and get up again […]
>
> (Gilbert and Tralins, pp.198 – 199.)

It is of significance that Bidart focuses on and develops the metaphor found in the source – 'the salt of the earth' is attributed to the language (words, saying) of Herbert L. E. White's mother, corrupted in its meaning as she uses it as a synonym for human seminal fluid (an abjected substance, in Kristeva's theory [9]). In contrast to this misunderstanding is the sense of 'the salt of the earth' as a metaphor that echoes the New Testament fulfilment of the Creation story from Genesis: God created Man and Heaven and Earth, and Jesus sent out his disciples to spread the word of God through the Gospel, as expressed in Matthew 5:13 (*King James Version*)

> Ye are the salt of the earth: but if the salt have lost
> his savour, wherewith shall it be salted? it is thenceforth good
> for nothing, but to be cast out, and to be trodden under foot of men.

Salt is a purifying and preserving agent. This section in Matthew's Gospel follows the Beatitudes, and the Sermon on the Mount, which contain the central teachings of Christian discipleship. The scriptural metaphor of salt of the earth has moved into common usage to mean people who are reliable and authentic or 'down to earth.'

Following on from the debased language of lines 13 and 14 ('When the body got too discomposed, | I'd just jack off, letting it fall on her') is the first transformational moment in the poem; at this moment Bidart introduces the concept of the 'beautiful,' something found nowhere in the experiences of Herbert L.E. White. This is the opening of a long section of the poem (37 lines), not taken directly from

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[9] Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror - An Essay of Abjection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982).

the source text and worthy of close consideration to understand Bidart's methods. It opens:

> -- It sounds crazy, but I tell you
> sometimes it was *beautiful*--; I don't know how
> to say it, but for a minute, *everything* was possible--;
> and then,
> then,-- (*Collected Poems,* p. 153.)

This contrasts with the first pure Bidart lines in the poem:

> Everything flat, without sharpness, richness or line.

Herbert White's necrophiliac onanism is claimed as 'sometimes…*beautiful'* when "*everything* was possible" even if '"just for a minute." In this dark moment of transformation there is an echoing of the first existentialist philosopher, Kierkegaard, whose dialectic argument in *The Sickness Unto Death* considers sin to arise from a perverse pursuit of freedom. It includes the following statement about the state of despair:

> now if possibility outstrips necessity, the self runs away with itself in possibility, so that it has no necessity to return to. This then is possibility's despair. Here the self becomes an abstract possibility; it exhausts itself in floundering about in possibility, yet it never moves from where it is nor gets anywhere, for necessity is just that 'where'[…] thus possibility seems greater and greater to the self; more and more becomes possible because nothing becomes actual. In the end it seems as though everything were possible, but that is the very moment that the self is swallowed up in the abyss.[10]

While the complexities of Kierkegaard's existentialism are outside the scope of this study, what is relevant here, to Bidart's poetics and the echo in the voice of Herbert White, is the question of subjectivity and the actions that may lead to damnation. What Bidart finds in the abject and 'sordid' figure of Herbert L.E. White is the anti-self (in contrast with his poetry of family autobiography) through which he presents

[10] S. Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death* (London: Penguin, 1989), p.66.

the mystery of human subjectivity as a development of his own concerns with existential psychology and phenomenology.

'Herbert White' is Bidart's dramatisation of the human subject in hell and it is a metaphor for the torment of the unexamined life where action is repeated without meaning; it is an extreme metaphor about the destructive power of human origins both through family, place and original sin. It also serves to reflect different interpretations and possible readings of other poems in *Golden State*: for example the poem that immediately follows 'Herbert White' is 'Self-Portrait, 1969' – a sonnet in the third person inspired by Rilke that ends with the couplet:

> Sick of being decent, he craves another
> crash. What *reaches* him except disaster?

Part 1 of *Golden State* opens with two completely contrasting poems, the dramatic monologue that presents a morally deformed anti-self who speaks from hell, and a lyric that considers existential torment of a son who has betrayed his mother. There is also reference in 'Another Life' (*Collected Poems,* pp.202 –206), the final poem of *Golden State,* to 'Herbert White' as it offers a surreal parable about de Gaulle and Kennedy in which the speaker of the poem is also being pursued by a monstrous double from whom he recoils through the repeated lines:

> There was *no part* of us the same:
> we were just watching a parade together:

And then he realises ("when I saw")

> Grief, avenging Care, pale
> Disease, Insanity, Age, and Fear,
>
> --all the raging desolations
>
> which I had come to learn were my patrimony;
> the true progeny of my parents' marriage;
> the gifts hidden within the mirror
>
> (*Collected Poems,* p.206.)

Between this beginning and ending are the family poems, the documents of origin and sorrow. Bidart sets up a pattern of reference, themes and conversations between poems that goes on to establish links between and through his collections so that some of his earlier poems serve as sources and references for his later ones; his poems also provide evidence of his mind and memory, his intellect and knowledge, his loyalties and his profound faith in art as a means of truth-telling. His work is always concerned with the nature and limits of subjectivity and the self as a character and theme that is both intimately challenged through his prosody yet given an historical or personal context. His methods combine a range of modernist methods from fragmentation, collage, dramatic monologue, autobiography, love poetry, protest, translation, intertextuality, the testing of lyric to its extremes, cinematic cutting, confessionalism combined with an insistence on idiosyncratic punctuation and the line as the essential unit of voice. As Bidart's own 'Prufrock', 'Herbert White' is an attempt at contemplating meaninglessness derived from self-alienation and fragmentation. The word 'myself' (capitalised) occurs only once in the poem, in the acknowledgement of guilt – 'I hope I fry' (*Collected Poems,* p.158); self-hood, in the realisation of his monstrousness, is then equated with the desire for death. Bidart pursues through poetics what it means to understand the human predicament from madness to death, from darkness to love, continuing his concern and faithfulness to his particular witness of "all the raging desolations."

* * *

'Herbert White' is a dramatisation of problematised lyric subjectivity and hyberbolic representation of the unexamined life Bidart associates with his own familial and

environmental origins. His use of a source text allows him to channel his own experiences and feelings through a hidden biographical portrait as he returns to the human need to make sense of confusion and alienation. As he explains in a recent interview with Ron Charles:

> **FB:** And I think that wanting to feel things makes sense, is a, is a profound and really universal human desire.
> **RC:** Yes.
> **FB**: And he has no means to do that except through violence and enacting a, something that momentarily feels good. And then, of course, the, the, what's terrible is not only what he does, but in fact he can't even sustain the fiction. He cannot then continue to believe someone else did it.
> **RC**: He looks and thinks, who did this? It couldn't have been me.
> **FB**: Who did this? Exactly. And when he has to face the fact that he did it, it's intolerable to him. He is in hell.
> **RC**: Right he is.
> **FB:** And I think that constellation of feelings, the desire to resolve something by doing something that you don't even understand why it feels, but it feels good, and then discovering that it doesn't feel good and resolves nothing. I think that is a, well to me is very much connected to the world I'm from. [11]

'Herbert White' can also be read as a study in Kristevan abjection, a response to confessionalism in American poetry and a clear point of departure for Bidart from the artistic influence of his poetic mentors, Robert Lowell and Elizabeth Bishop. 'Herbert White' can be considered through the prism of mad shame and ghost narratives; 'mad shame' is a short hand term for what I consider a species of Gillian White's "lyric shame" associated with the confessional voice and themes of madness. While White's concept of shame is a theory of reading lyric poetry it also contains a wider socio-political acknowledgement of the prevailing social stigma against madness and mental illness that has also had an impact on the critical reception and definitions of confessionalism in poetics.

The idea of "mad shame" is an interpretative approach to Bidart's world of 'mad' personae or selves in various stages of disintegration, through whose struggles

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11 Ron Charles, 'Interview with Frank Bidart' *Library of Congress: Life of a Poet series*: the quoted extract is taken from p.7 of the transcript.

of knowledge and identity the reader can reflect on the range of ideas about subjectivity and poetry or the lyric. Bidart does two things through 'mad shame' – he removes the risk of narrow 'confessional' interpretations and allows the reader to think about what we can make of a poem when we seek to unshame it.

Frank Bidart's autobiographical explorations and negotiations with lyrical subjectivity allow me to read him as neo-modernist[12] rather than post-confessional poet, but also as a poet whose work can continue to be framed through a sense of Catholic imagination and the relationship of body and soul. In a recent interview with Ashley Hatcher, Bidart speaks about Catholicism:

> I grew up a Catholic. I'm no longer a Catholic. Something very fundamental to the Catholicism that at least I grew up in was the notion that there is a kind of war between the mind and the body, between the spirit and the body. Though I'm no longer a Catholic, I do perceive the world and experience this way. Not to say that there's never a kind of harmony, but I think there is certainly a war. There is tremendous disparity between the demands of the spirit and the demands of the body, between what the body can offer the spirit and what the spirit wants or needs. These dramas or narratives, as "Ellen West" is, are arenas for the war to be enacted, and for the issues to be embodied.[13]

As argued by Chiasson, many of Frank Bidart's poems are shifting and changing literary bodies within which he places aspects of his own life.[14] I interpret this as a form of incarnation (the flesh becoming word and the word – through voice – becoming flesh) and, in relation to other sources and texts, reincarnation where, for example, Ellen West is resurrected as a new text and reformed, and yet – inevitably – dies again. Incarnational 'awareness' can also be understood as an element of

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[12] Bidart's influences are, in the main, modernist and his experiments in autobiography add new dimensions to the modernism that influenced his work through Eliot, Pound, Yeats etc

[13] Ashley Hatcher, 'An interview with Frank Bidart', *The University of Arizona Poetry Centre,* Nov 17th 2015 < http://poetry.arizona.edu/blog/interview-frank-bidart > [accessed 17 January 2017]

[14] Dan Chiasson, 'Presence: Frank Bidart' in *On Frank Bidart Fastening the Voice to the Page* editors Liam Rector and Tree Swenson, pp.48 – 67.

Catholic imagination explained in relation to poetry in a recent study by Alaimo O'Donnell:

> Catholic art depicts transcendent truth made manifest in the material reality of the world, especially through the body – so much so that even the vision of heaven and hell offered by that most Catholic of poets, Dante, is a three-dimensional flesh and blood depiction of the spirit world as physically present to us as any scene from a film by Martin Scorcese.[15]

There is an echo of Bidart's cinematic imagination here and a wider aesthetic interpretation of what Catholic poetic imagination might embrace in Alaimo O'Donnell's further statement:

> Catholic poetry cannot be readily summed up in terms of content or technique; instead Catholic poetry reflects and embodies a particular disposition towards the world. It is corporeal, perhaps even bloody-minded in its insistence upon an embodied, incarnate faith; it is grim in its acknowledgment of the presence and power of real evil in the world; and it is ultimately hopeful in its assertion of the meaning of suffering and in its persistent search for God even when God seems to be absent. [16,]

Bidart's poetry examines the nature of suffering and favours acknowledgment of the presence and power of evil, the shadow, and the dark-side. His pursuit of God can be better understood in its transposition to a dedication to making, embodying human pain in many forms and griefs, through language. While Bidart rejects his childhood faith he persists in witnessing the world as a suffering world, one of passion, sin and, ultimately, redemption through art rather than God. Fragments of Bidart's autobiography are found interwoven with the lives and experiences of others through a strategy of intertextuality – itself a kind of embodiment which both marks him as a neo-modernist in his awareness of literary precedence through voice in poetics and

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[15] Angela Alaimo O'Donnell, 'Seeing Catholicly Poetry and the Catholic Imagination' in *The Catholic Studies Reader*, ed. Margaret M. McGuinness, and James Fisher (New York, Fordham University Press, 2011), *Chapter 15,* pp.331 - 351 <https://muse.jhu.edu/book/14718 > [accessed 18 January 2017]

[16] Ibid., pp.337 – 338.

enables him to explore the human condition through the existential crises of the literature and varied lives his poems inhabit.

Intertextuality is a means by which Bidart acknowledges literary tradition and his own sources and inspirations many of which are cinematic – such as his following of Kurosawa – and it also works as a kind of embodiment through which he revisits and re-examines his own poetry. As Bidart says:

> I think my work is more indebted to Akira Kurosawa than it is to [Robert] Browning, but people who write about poetry never talk about Kurosawa […] There's something transgressive about a filmmaker being so central to what a poet is doing, and therefore drama, dramatic structures, structures larger than the structure of the lyric – that's something that contemporary poetry criticism, for the most part, is not very comfortable with. [17]

The central motivating action in the poem, in Herbert White's life, is the drive to murder and destroy (illustrative of original sin) which concludes with the voice of the murderer condemning himself to hell - a final pronouncement on the consequences of the subject's inability to repent or even make sense of atonement and forgiveness. I take this material and use as a theoretical lens both Kristeva's concept of abjection and Yeats' theory of the anti-self to which Bidart makes explicit reference.[18]

'Herbert White' is the first poem in Bidart's first collection, *Golden State* (1973) published by Richard Howard in the Brazilier poetry series. In his interview with Ron Charles, Bidart describes his decision to open his first poetry collection in the voice of a depraved murderer as "very conscious an act." Critical response to Bidart, and to the poem, has varied; it has been described, by Langdon Hammer as:

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[17] Christopher Hennessy, p.23.

[18] *Ron Charles* interview: Bidart says, "I had been reading Yeats. Yeats has wonderful passages about the anti-self and about discovering what you can do as an artist through the anti-self. The anti-self is a character, or a story, a narrative in which someone like you, but unlike you in profound ways, is embodied. And that you can see yourself and discover yourself in the difference."

> a strange and […] important embodiment of Bidart's earliest and continuing ambition as a poet, which is to make an object world, experienced as 'dead,' 'come alive.' [19]

In short, Bidart's ambition is to animate the world through language, which can also be seen as an attempt to dramatise the essential unresolvable divide between language and the body, or the symbolic and the real. As Bidart has said elsewhere:

> The issue is making works of art that are alive and that bite off something that matters, pursue it at the depth that the subject justifies… [20]

This has also been described as a means of exploring what is most difficult to express in human nature and experience. As novelist and teacher Alice Mattison explains: "he is describing the perhaps universal discovery that one's own nature is, somehow unspeakable." [21] Mark Doty also discusses the idea of poetry coming out of what is unspeakable when he says:

> We need to respond; yet speech seems to fail in the face of events of such gravity and scale. In a way, that's what poetry is for, those occasions when speech is inadequate. If we could say anything readily, then we would just do so. It's the unsayable that calls for a poem.[22]

Dan Chiasson interprets Bidart's preoccupation with extreme subjects and the mode of dramatic monologue as a way of avoiding the "chauvinisms of the self" while a recent study argues that 'Herbert White' heralds a break with confessionalism towards a preoccupation with abnormal psychology and "fictive displays of experience" delineated through 'disordered' punctuation and syntax.[23] This is in marked contrast to Hammer's preferred interpretation that "Bidart's characters are neither disguised

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[19] Hammer in Rector and Swenson, pp. 15 – 16.
[20] Christopher Hennessy, p.25.
[21] Alice Mattison,'The Tumult in the Heart Keeps asking Questions' in Rector and Swenson pp. 38 – 47 (p.42).
[22] Hennessy, p.79.
[23] Crystal L. Anderson "To feel things make senses": Typography as a Component of the Psychotic Voice in Frank Bidart's 'Herbert White' *Literary Imagination*, volume 18, number 2 (1 July 2016), pp.180 – 196.

representations of the poet nor dramatic fictions wholly separable from him." [24] Another recent study by Hannah Baker Saltmarsh analyses Bidart's poem 'Confessional' (*Collected Poems* pp.64 – 91) from his third collection, *The Sacrifice.*[25] Baker Saltmarsh asserts Bidart is a post-confessional poet and argues that his projection of his own dilemmas with his mother, intermingled with the story of Saint Augustine – the creator of autobiography in Western literature – and his mother Saint Monica, finds a way to balance feeling, lived experience and philosophical contemplation while avoiding both the sins of confessionalism ('poetry of crisis') and the poetry of 'trite creed.' While assuming the limitations of both worldly and sacramental confession, Baker Saltmarsh fails to acknowledge how relevant the metaphors of confession are to the sense and interrogative form of the poem, or how the failure to forgive drives its sense of torment.

Certainly, to begin his first collection with a dramatic monologue that also incorporates the impossibility of forgiveness is to make a declaration about aesthetics as well as human nature; that in the mask, in the drama of opposites, through the shadow-self, life is transformed into art, for what purpose can confessionalism serve if forgiveness is unattainable? Bidart is influenced by Yeats' ideas about mystical creativity propounded in his commitment to the necessary engagement with an antithetical self. Bidart explains his concept of the anti-self in his interview with Ashley Hatcher as follows:

> To me, Herbert White is an anti-self in the Yeatsian sense: the inverse of me, the mirror-reverse of my being in the world. Herbert White is someone who attempts to deal with dilemmas and what for him are intolerable tensions, not by understanding or analyzing, but by acting on them and then feeling a kind

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[24] Hammer in Rector and Swenson, p.17.

[25] Hannah Baker Saltmarsh, "Beyond Creed and Crisis: Mother-Son Dilemma in Frank Bidart's 'Confessional' " *Forum for Modern Language Studies* Volume 52, No 3 pp. 257 – 273 < https://doi.org/10.1093/fmls/cqw024 > [accessed 19 October 2016]

> of coherence or order or pleasure, which later, because it involves destructiveness, he can never live with. I think that's a very common pattern.

In poetic practice this means engaging with what is oppositional in order to create and make new work.[26] The anti-self is also similar to the shadow (or dark side) as propounded by Jung as an essential part of the psyche that must be reintegrated into the consciousness. In contrast to the Aristotelian concept of antithesis as a rhetorical device deployed to reinforce opposing ideas, Yeats proposed the antithetical self as a necessary element in making drama and poetry. Further, it is a refutation of the autobiographical "I", the acquisition of an opposing character, the taking of a mask of anti-self in order to become a contrary and opposite self, to provide an escape from personality to the impersonal. Bidart says:

> I put 'Herbert White' at the beginning because I felt the book had to begin 'at the bottom' – in the mind of someone for whom the issues in the book were in the deepest disorder. He is the chaos everything else in the book struggles to get out of.
>
> (*Collected Poems,* p.681.)

This place from which the protagonist speaks is, arguably, hell itself, both a figurative place of darkness and spiritual negation. Its opposite can only be the light, the grace of forgiveness. If Yeats' concept of the anti-self on which Bidart directly drew in writing 'Herbert White' gives us insight into Bidart's methods, the theoretical work of Kristeva also offers a useful way to read the poem as an explication of the poet's modernist aesthetic and interest in psychology as destiny. In the poem *The Fourth Hour of the Night* we find the lines:

> How each child finds that it must deal with
> the intolerable

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[26] Edward Butscher, 'Paul Bowles as Poet: Excursions of a Minimal Anti-Self' *Twentieth Century Literature***,** Paul Bowles issue, Vol. 32, No. 34, Autumn - Winter, (1986), pp. 350 – 372: "Yeats, whose main spiritual ancestor was Blake, envisioned the creative process as a means for limning the lineaments of another self, the "anti-self" buried in every psyche, which necessarily implies myth and mystical extensions of the performing self beyond time, mortal bounds."

becomes its fate.

(*Collected Poems,* p.633.)

This dramatic (and psychological) idea of childhood experience and formation being a given, as essential, as the source of the inescapable fate or destiny of the adult, is a central concept in Bidart's body of work from 'Herbert White' onwards. What is central to both concepts of the shadow or the anti-self is the instability of the subject; as Kristeva states:

> In order to research this state of instability – the fact that the meaning is not simply a structure or process, or that the subject is not simply a unity but is constantly called into question – I proposed to take into account two modalities or conditions of meaning which I called the 'semiotic' and the 'symbolic'. What I call 'the semiotic' takes us back to the pre-linguistic states of childhood where the child babbles the sounds s/he hears, or where s/he articulates rhythms, alliterations, or stresses, trying to imitate her/his surroundings. In this state the child doesn't yet possess the necessary linguistic signs and thus there is no meaning in the strict sense of the term. It is only after the mirror phase or the experience of castration in the Oedipus complex that the individual becomes subjectively capable of taking on the signs of language, of articulation as it has been prescribed – and I call that 'the symbolic.[27]

This pre-linguistic human experience or the individual being constantly called into question is integral to Lacanian psychoanalysis. In Yeats' work subjective instability, as a literary concept, is evidenced in *Ego dominus tuus* through the argument between Hic and Ille in which the former argues that the poet must express himself sincerely, and the latter advocates the need of an anti-self:

> I call to the mysterious one who yet
> Shall walk the wet sands by the edge of the stream
> And look most like me, being indeed my double,
> And prove of all imaginable things
> The most unlike, being my anti-self
> And standing by these characters disclose

[27] Susan Sellers, 'Julia Kristeva - A Question of Subjectivity: An Interview,' in *Women's Review* in *Feminist Literary Theory A Reader,* second edition ed. Mary Eagleton (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1996), p.352.

All that I seek. [28]

To deploy the strategy of an anti-self to explore human extremes offers one method of resistance to the 'chauvinism of the self' but also necessitates an exploration of the difficulties of self-hood and problems of subjectivity through other texts, including fictional personae, through documented histories and the inescapable tragedies of others. Bidart is interested in the histories and biographies of a wide array of characters through which he explores the existential problems of being, rather than simply expressing his own biography. As he says about the instability of the subjective:

> I think I have a lot of skepticism about the "I." I think in my poems there's always a layer of remove from the "I." To my mind, in the poems about my family, I am very much a character. I am that person who has this past who, at a certain moment in time, can see certain things. But there is a consciousness that is separate from that, that is looking at all this from some distance. Or the "I" is extremely aware of how little it knows, how it's kind of a fly caught in a system, in a structure, in a surround. And the dramatic monologues communicate many issues that are central to me, and are as personal as the autobiographical poems. The self becomes a prior self at the very moment of speaking. You are not, at the next moment, the person you were when you spoke the moment before, and there's something false in pretending that you are.[29]

Kristeva's work on abjection is instructive as it theorises subjectivity as a process, always incomplete in which the sense of self at its most basic level is linked to 'le corps propre' or the clean body (perhaps also a link with the purgation of catharsis). That which is abjected lies somewhere between the object and subject, threatening identity, that which threatens the distinction between what is outside and inside, evidenced in bodily fluids, excreta etc., Kristeva particularly singles out the corpse as abjected:

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[28] W.B.Yeats, *The Wild Swans at Coole* (London, Macmillan, 1919) < https://www.bartleby.com/148/33.html > [accessed 21 October 2016]

[29] Ashley Hatcher interview.

> The corpse (or cadaver: *cadere,* to fall*),* that which has irremediably come a cropper, is cesspool, and death; it upsets even more violently the one who confronts it as fragile and fallacious chance. A wound with blood and pus, or the sickly, acrid smell of sweat, of decay, does not *signify* death. In the presence of signified death – a flat encephalograph, for instance – I would understand, react, or accept. No, as in true theater, without makeup or masks, refuse and corpses *show me* what I permanently thrust aside in order to live. These body fluids, this defilement, this shit are what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death. There, I am at the border of my condition as a living being. My body extricates itself, as being alive, from that border.[30]

Both at this border of the condition 'as a living being,' through the quest for language, and in the liminal space of difference between the anti-self and poet we find the poet's quest for embodiment, the drive to voice and understand human experience, to sound breath through language.

Langdon Hammer has argued that we find in Bidart "a return to the modernist poetics of voice memorably articulated by Frost": that poetics of voice being Frost's 'sound of sense' – that which makes the written voice alive, vital, dramatic.[31] In his famous essay, Frost said:

> A dramatic necessity goes deep into the nature of the sentence. Sentences are not different enough to hold the attention unless they are dramatic…All that can save them is the speaking tone of voice somehow entangled in the words and fastened to the page for the ear of the imagination.[32]

This ties sound and tone to the imagination, the *ear* of the imagination. The poem on the page becomes a body for the voice it holds. The reader's body hears the voice through its listening ear. Bidart's methods and strategies differ from Frost's as Frost sought tensions in the contrast between the voices held in his poems and the formal

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30 Julia Kristeva, p.3.

31 Hammer in Rector and Swenson, p.7.

32 *Cited by* Reuben Brower 'The Speaking Voice,' (1951) in *The Lyric Theory Reader A Critical Anthology* edited by Virgina Jackson and Yopie Prins (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2014), p.211: original source: Robert Frost from the Preface to *A Way Out* (New York: Harbour Press, 1929).

structure and metre of his poems. Frost's style is to capture the New England voice in iambics and he most often does this through conversations between two characters (as in 'Home Burial' or 'The Death of a Hired Man'). Bidart's voices are always singular, spoken by the human being in crisis, as in Shakespearean soliloquy or operatic aria. Also, in contrast to Frost's more traditional form and blank verse, Bidart has always made it clear that he has no interest in *verse*. In his first collection, part IV of the title poem opens with lines of entreaty to his father:

> Oh, Shank, don't turn into the lies
> Of mere, neat poetry…

If in his strategies he rejects verse but claims embodiment of voice as his method he is writing a kind of *theatre for the voice* to establish the drama and tone of the poem; he does this both in his simpler lyrics and his more famous dramatic monologues. This also links with voicing as a means of expressing bodily desire and as a mode of articulating the essential subjective paradox (or Lacanian maladapted subjectivity) through which the body and language, the real and symbolic are irreconcilable. Bidart speaks to us, or his characters speak to us, directly through voices expressing human pain, at once universal and intimate, conflicted and driven, desirous and repeatedly thwarted in their desires.

'Herbert White' dramatises the actions and life of a man who pursues the corpse as an object of desire; perhaps the work itself can be seen as a process of purification; Kristeva sees both religion and art, including literature, as ways of purifying the abject; literature containing and demonstrating human experience at the limits of language. It may also be considered an example of abject art in that it concerns itself with the transgressive and taboo.

For Kristeva there is a constantly moving, dialectical relationship between the semiotic, that is, the rhythms, tones, drives of language and the symbolic - grammar,

structure, meaning proper; it is this dynamic relationship that makes signification possible where the need to communicate is a bodily one. In Bidart's work dynamism is found in the breaking of lines – as the line is his main formal device – across layers of narrative, soliloquy, textual references, voice, character etc., Kristeva also contends that the pre-linguistic stage of human development (the "chora") is maternally focused, that primal abjection, the oscillation of feelings of love and destruction relate to maternal loss and separation: in our psychosexual development human beings abject the maternal body, and thus the mother, in order to be. Maternal loss and separation is a significant concern both in Bidart's earlier works and his most recent individual collection, *Metaphysical Dog.*[33]

This dramatic and psychological idea of childhood experience and formation being a given, as essential, as the source of the inescapable fate or psychological destiny of the adult, is a central concept in Bidart's body of work. Fate includes the concept of survival, surviving beyond the 'intolerable' while carrying it as guilt or as a psychic burden: that we cannot escape our own history and the more we try to do so the more bound to it we become; or, in the words of another Bidart poem, 'Overheard through the Walls of the Invisible City':

(we are the wheel to which we are bound)

(*Collected Poems,* p. 270.)

It is the universal human experience of guilt and psychic burden that influences psychological interpretations of confession and its cathartic qualities. Confession is an integral part of civil and religious human traditions that reflect different archetypes of good and evil; as argued by Elizabeth Todd: "The idea of confession and forgiveness is located in that place where psychology and religion

33 Frank Bidart, *Metaphysical Dog* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013).

meet – guilt." [34] Bidart's response to confession, and confessionalism in poetry acknowledges his Catholic formation as well as his commitment to catharsis in literature. As he states:

> There are very good, honorific meanings of confessional. Augustine's autobiography is called *The Confessions*. The notion of confession has to do with articulating the things that are most central to one and the attempt to tell the truth, to be honest even at personal cost. Often this involves discussing things that people find unpleasant to have discussed. It is to enter the arena of guilt, and my poems do that. They don't say, "Oh, I feel guilt, but I shouldn't feel guilt." They are talking about guilt that is mysterious in its power, but nonetheless is felt as very real, and about the guilt that does not result simply because there are laws that one has broken that are external to oneself. The guilt results from the need and the desire to be faithful to two criteria that are not compatible, that cannot coexist in the given situation. Therefore, one is in a dilemma: one must find a way to fulfill one's own life, destiny, needs, but on the other hand one does not want to disappoint, betray, or hurt those one loves and who love one. Those two things are often not compatible with each other. To be the son my mother wanted, I could not also be the human being I needed to be. Not to betray her would have been to betray myself; not to betray myself was to betray her. Betrayal is an overheated word, but that's the felt emotional resonance in some situations of one's actions.[35]

This is a process of inevitable suffering in pursuit of individual integrity that, for Bidart, meant a rejection of Catholicism and also an acceptance of his own sexuality. Nevertheless it is Bidart's appreciation of the sacramental ritual of confession and power of literary confession and catharsis that leads to his inevitable rejection of the narrow, pejorative meaning of confessionalism attributed to M.L. Rosenthal. Rosenthal chooses the term 'confessional' to speak of the therapeutic intent in Lowell's *Life Studies* (in respect of him regarding publication as "soul's therapy") and of the poet writing autobiographically ("Lowell removes the mask.") He also states:

> 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. [36]

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[34] Elizabeth Todd, 'The Value of Confession and Forgiveness According to Jung,' *Journal of Religion and Health*, Volume 24, No.1, Spring (1985), 39 – 48, (p.39).
[35] Ashley Hatcher interview.
[36] M.L.Rosenthal, *Our Life in Poetry: Selected Essays and Reviews* (New York: Persea Books, 1991) pp. 109 – 112, p.109.

It is this last comment that seems to remain in the critical understanding of confessional poetry as something shameful, egotistical and dishonourable – writing that is received as a form of unmediated, raw misery memoir in poetic form. This critical dishonouring is also be considered a reflection of 'mad shame' - of the shame-inducing social rejection of those who are diagnosed or labelled as mentally ill. However, this is not something I would attribute to M.L. Rosenthal who also said the following about Robert Lowell:

> he is not wrong in looking at the culture through the window of psychological breakdown. Too many other American poets, no matter what their social class and family history, have reached the same point in recent years. Lowell is foremost among them in the energy of his uncompromising honesty.
>
> Furthermore, *Life Studies* is not merely a collection of small moment-by-moment victories over hysteria and self-concealment. It is also a beautifully articulated poetic sequence…[37]

Further, it is only in relation to this narrow and arguably ill-judged categorisation of confessionalism in poetry that Bidart is defined as *post*-confessional. Such a simplistic and chronologically-based term cannot account for the complexities associated with cultural, literary and religious antecedents – Lowell, Berryman, W.D. Snodgrass, Sexton and Plath, nor does it adequately account for the artistic ambition and ideas of these poets or their literary descendants. It is my contention that the term post-confessional, generally used as a chronological marker, does not illuminate or engage with understanding nor use of confessional strategies and for this reason I do not find it an appropriate epithet for Bidart's poetics. Also, when considering his strategies, confessionalism is understood in relation to three main archetypes of confession; the psychoanalytical where the subject engages with suffering and the hearer is a therapist, the sacramental in which the subject is seeking forgiveness for sin through the priest-confessor as a mediator with God, and the forensic (police or

[37] Ibid., p.110.

court-room evidence) where the subject confesses a crime. These archetypes are of use as psychological settings in Bidart's work and interesting in what may be inferred in relation to Bidart's aesthetic; that in claiming the mask of the anti-self he is able to present difficult materials in forms that cannot be dismissed as merely personal. It is also of use to note the cultural shift in poetics away from proclaimed guilt to testimony, from sin to accusation and yet a corresponding move in popular culture toward public confession.

In claiming the mask, Bidart pre-empts and confounds the accusation of being 'unequivocally himself'; through the instability of subjectivity contained in his poetic dramas, he is able to raise profound questions about human existence in extremis. In rejecting the 'confessional' or post-confessional silo, Bidart also acknowledges that the shame that attaches to madness seems particularly difficult to dissipate through public confession whether through poetry or politics.

Vendler is particularly helpful in suggesting that Bidart is far more influenced by Augustine than Freud:

> The torments of the flesh and spirit mimed in Bidart's erotic poems and dramatized philosophically in "The First Hour of the Night" find their origin in Bidart's early family poems, which can now be read, with the wisdom of hindsight, less as the "confessional" poems they once seemed than as the first examples of an obstinate and tenacious dissection of Western conceptuality. Freud was Bidart's original mentor in this anatomy of "reality," with reality, like charity, beginning at home. In the longer run, though, Bidart was after less corporeal game than the Oedipal riddle. His second mentor was Augustine, in whom the autobiographical (Oedipal, guilt-ridden) and the theological are inseparable. The theological is in fact the Augustinian "solution" to the Oedipal and the most tragic moment in Bidart's collected poems turns on him having been unable to find with his own mother what the converted Augustine found with his mother in their common Christianity.[38]

[38] Helen Vendler, *Soul Says: On Recent Poetry* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1995), pp. 71 – 77.

This is not to eschew the autobiographical but to recognise that the process of writing poetry can itself (and *must* in its highest form) transform life experience into art.

Bidart's own cultural influences include confession as a theological and autobiographical genre influential in western literature from Augustine to Rousseau. In addition, his knowledge of the sacrament of Confession, its promise of forgiveness and grace (and the inviolability of the sacramental seal), can also be deemed influential although he does not offer this as a formal structure in any of his poems. Indeed, the metaphors of confession in Bidart's work relate to psychoanalysis, medical examination or, in 'Herbert White', the courtroom or legal arena. Kristeva writes of confession:

> This marginal potentiality of spoken sin as fortunate sin provides an anchorage for the art that will be found, resplendent, under all the cupolas. Even during the most odious times of the Inquisition, art provided sinners with the opportunity to live, openly and inwardly apart, the joy of their dissipation set into signs: painting, music, words.

This notion of spoken sin or confession as 'fortunate' residing both in the sacramental promise of redemption, something that frames or holds art by allowing the artist 'to live openly and inwardly apart' can be considered in relation to those poets most often described as confessional including John Berryman, Anne Sexton and Robert Lowell. However, it is useful to think of the confessional mode itself as an abjected category, one that attracts derision and dismissal because of its close association with forms of madness and mental illness, addiction, and suicidality. In short, to name something as confessional is to equate it with sin, to deem it unspeakable because it induces fear and offers no filter or protection for the reader; it is disturbing in its rawness and directness. In addition, what early critics seemed unable to acknowledge was that the poetry deemed confessional was an artistic response to trauma, illness and social exclusion. The apparent consensus reaction against the intimacies revealed in

confessional poetry corresponds both with the social rejection of the mad and with the post-modern fragmentation of the subjective. It also corresponds today with the ubiquity of public confession on television and popular media. What has been shamed in poetry has become a most public – and often televised – entertainment.

* * *

When human evil is encountered in the act of murder we are accustomed to ascribing animal or non-human characteristics to the murderer as one who breaches the strongest social and judicial taboo; in Frank Bidart's poem 'Herbert White' we have an articulation rather than sublimation of the abject in the form of a dramatic monologue which begins in celebration of murder and ends in existential despair. The central character is a madman. The drama at the start of the poem (and Bidart's first poetry collection) is the chaos of a man trying to attain integration through fulfilling murderous desire. In the dramatic action of the poem we find an account of human depravity.

In 'Herbert White' the subject/self without place, limits or self-realisation calls out (lines 15 – 21):

> -- It sounds crazy, but I tell you
> sometimes it was *beautiful* – ; I don't know how
> to say it, but for a minute, *everything* was possible –;
> and then,
> then,--
>
> (*Collected Poems,* p.153.)

White seeks to be fulfilled through acts of abjection that involve murder, necrophilia, masturbation and ejaculation on the decaying body of his victim. This challenges the character's usual existential anomie when he is unable to perceive or feel or understand. He is not only corrupted and 'crazy' but trapped in a compulsive drive to

this moment of power connected *in his body* to the triumphal destruction of another innocent person (body), a moment of revelation held in the words "I tell you" for this is a wording, voicing of commitment to sex through murder, a corrupted eros and thanatos. It also reflects the link between the breakdown of meaning in abjection and the boundlessness of the sublime. As Kristeva states:

> The abject is edged with the sublime. It is not the same moment on the journey, but the same subject and speech brings them into being.[39]

Crystal Anderson argues that Bidart uses punctuation, ellipsis and fragmentation as a way to demonstrate dissociation and psychotic voice, as a way of withholding images and presenting Herbert White as avoiding responsibility for his actions: she states "Bidart's fragmentation is meant to compel the mentally ill White away from revelation" and further:

> Bidart's use of punctuation to control the pace and voicing of White's observations place emphasis in the potentiality of guilt (until Bidart suddenly foregrounds this emotion at the end). This is the guilt present in the poem that is not truly active; it is implied in white space until it springs forth in the closing lines.[40]

Rather than simply a way of dramatising denial or repression Bidart's punctuation can be understood as an approach to physical, bodily voice, that dramatises the humanity of Herbert White through added layers of affect and emotion, something distinctly lacking in the source text. Also, in White's voice, in his tone, in the poem, there is an exposition of this particular self-alienated subject. What Bidart invents (and includes from his own experience) is the detail of childhood adversity in Herbert White's life

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[39] Julia Kristeva, 'The Abject and the Sublime' *Tel Quel,* July 11, 2005 < https://telquel.wordpress.com/2005/07/11/the-abject-the-sublime/ > [accessed 10 November 2016]

[40] Crystal Anderson, "To Feel Things Make Sense": Typography As a Component of the Psychotic Voice in Frank Bidart's "Herbert White" *Literary Imagination* Vol 18, number 2, 180 – 196, p.184.

through which we can see him as someone neglected. The poet retains the demotic voice but speaks to us as human *and* monstrous at once in a seamless combination of his ventriloquising *his own* biographical experiences in combination with his creative imagination (which for Bidart reflects the *ear* of the imagination) to articulate the suffering of the monstrous murderer. Herbert White's madness is not in him being divided but, rather, through him holding both natures at once. This can be read as both (the poet's) reaction against the duplicity of the source text (as pornographic while claiming educational virtues) and a response through dramatic technique to the confessional mode (as a way of presenting it as a means of transforming fact into fiction). The ellipses in the first 12 lines of the poem correspond with sections from the case record that include more details about Herbert L.E. White's criminal actions. It is an acknowledgment of the source text and establishes the character through his actions. The remaining ellipses occur between moments of murderous action and attempts to experience emotion or memories about emotional events (at the extremes of the abject and sublime):

…letting it fall on her…

--It sounds crazy, but I tell you
sometimes it was *beautiful*

and

in those ordinary, shitty leaves…

--One time, I went to see Dad

and

in the garden of the motel…

--You see, ever since I was a kid I wanted
to *feel* things make sense

and

…….make it
somehow, come alive….

*The salt of the earth*

The remaining ellipses in the poem occur at points of remembered powerlessness and increasing rage.

Punctuation is also Bidart's way of defining lineation across sentences to change pace, express action, create tensions, evoke emotions and contain gesture as a means of choreographing voice, to dramatise the subject through something purely spoken. In the introduction to *Golden State* Richard Howard, Bidart's first editor, states:

> This is a poetry which is, as Heidegger calls it in his 1950 essay "Language," *purely spoken*; its roots are not in assent, which is silent, but in declaration, in contestation, which is the lesson of all speech. "The opposite of what is purely spoken, the opposite of the poem," Heidegger says, "is not prose. Pure prose is never 'prosaic.' It is as poetic and hence as rare as poetry."[41]

In Bidart's poem the ecstatic moment '*everything* was possible' is followed by a moment of anticipation:

> And then,
> then,--

as though animation might become possible. This is followed by the return to "she" and "her" – no longer "the body" and the victim's humanity becomes visible to him even though she is dead and her body decomposing:

> well, like I said, she didn't move: and I saw,
> under me, a little girl was just lying in the mud:

When he sees the humanity of his victim he cannot accept that he is responsible. This is Bidart's characterisation of conscience, for what has happened is so unspeakable that Herbert White reassures himself:

> and I knew I couldn't have done that,–
> somebody *else* had to have done that,–
>
> standing above her there,

[41] Frank Bidart, *Golden State* (New York: George Braziller, 1973), p.vii –viii.

in those ordinary, shitty leaves….

The poem moves to a memory of childhood rejection involving White's father with the implication that there *is* 'somebody *else*' who carries responsibility:

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

Through the setting of the motel (connected to other poems in *Golden State*) we know this is detail Bidart uses from his own life, merging his own alcoholic father with Herbert L.E. White's.

The moment of potential and impossible animation for Herbert White when his seed will bring the dead back to life is rooted in a misunderstanding of his mother's corrupted language. It also links with his formative juvenile sexual experience of bestiality that resulted in the animal's death that is also experientially entwined with his father's abandonment and him hearing his mother's voice:

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

We are within the psyche of a man for whom there are no boundaries, who causes death in order to pursue desire through the body of the corpse. There is no traumatic reminder within Herbert White of his own bodily materiality when encountering the corpse, he has escaped primal repression and so has no true sense of a separate identity. It is as though his behaviour resides permanently within what Kristeva calls the *Chora* (the stage of pre-linguistic human development when the human subject is dominated by feelings and needs, dominated by drives) akin to Lacan's concept of the Real. It is the reader of the poem who experiences horror; what we also experience is insight into the inescapable monstrousness of Herbert White. The poem is a demonstration of literature's role in purifying the abject, for it does not indulge in a

base story of depravity. Instead it shows us how a being deprived of parental love and care can render someone incapable of human feeling yet remain driven in constant pursuit of the desire for feeling and meaning:

> --You see, ever since I was a kid I wanted
> to feel things make sense; I remember
>
> looking out the window of my room back home,–
> and being almost suffocated by the asphalt;
> and grass; and trees; and glass;
> just *there,* just *there,* doing nothing!
> not saying anything! filling me up—
> but also being a wall; dead, and stopping me;
> – how I wanted to see beneath it, cut
>
> beneath it, and make it
> somehow, come alive …
>
> (*Collected Poems,* pp. 154 – 155.)

Again there is a cry of need for animation but it applies equally in the narrator's worldview to both living and inanimate things (grass, trees, glass, "not saying anything! filling me up –"). Again he cannot separate himself from the world, for the landscape and components of the exterior world, which he sees outside his window 'fill him up.' In spite of his longing for life and feeling, his compulsion, his drive is to kill and destroy, to confuse death and sex in action.

The poignancy of the poem is achieved through the combination of the abject with the autobiographical. This works to bring the life of the poet, Bidart, into the story of Herbert White, murderer. It is the first poem in a collection that explores Bidart's relationship with his parents so he offers the murderer a fragment of his own life. As Bidart explains:

> I imagined him as a voice coming from a circle in Hell. The fact he is an "anti-self" only has some meaning, I thought, if he shares something fundamental with me; I gave him a family history related to my own.

(*Collected Poems,* p. 698.)

Here we find (in Bidart's first editor Richard Howard's words)

> Not familiarity but recognition is the craving here, a thirst not for knowledge but acknowledgment, not likeness but identity.

(*Golden State,* p.vii.)

The character tells us without understanding himself how paternal (parental) abandonment contributed to his disintegration.

> ---There he was, a kid
> six months old on his lap, laughing
> and bouncing the kid, happy in his old age
> to play the papa after years of sleeping around,---
> it twisted me up . . .
> To think that what he wouldn't give me,
> He *wanted* to give them. . .
>
> I could have killed the bastard . . .

(*Collected Poems,* pp.156 – 157.)

His murderous feelings turn again towards another victim and away from his father. It is an inescapable drive that he cannot control:

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

It is a drive that cannot be constrained by language. Signification is perverted so that the bodily need to communicate remains in the realm of instinct. We know killing is inevitable when Herbert White tries to resist his compulsion to kill through the power of language:

> I saw her coming out of the movies,
> Saw she was alone, and
> Kept circling the blocks as she walked along them,
> Saying, You're going to leave her alone'
> 'You're going to leave her alone.'

In the immediate aftermath of killing and sex we find moments of denial:

> and I knew I couldn't have done that,–
> somebody *else* had to have done that,–

later:

> – But then, suddenly I knew
> somebody *else* did it, some bastard
> had hurt a little girl

The drama of the poem, the tragedy is realised when he can no longer pretend but comes to see what he is, what he has done:

> and I couldn't, *couldn't*
>
> get it to seem to me
> that somebody *else* did it . . .

In this moment also we realise that Herbert White can see himself (in a way that Herbert L.E. White never can); he has ceased his search for a place in the world because he has found it in acknowledgment of his murderous behaviour. Herbert White is then a deject, one who dwells in, rather than recoils from, the abject. As Kristeva (1982) argues:

> The one by whom the abject exists is thus a *deject* who places (himself), *separates* (himself), situates (himself), and therefore *strays* instead of getting his bearings, desiring, belonging, or refusing.[42]

This is why this murderer constantly seeks a place in which to be yet cannot find it, why he finds "Everything flat, without sharpness, richness or line," why he feels good when destroying life, defeated when he cannot reanimate it, why he looks through glass at the world, at his father, why he longs to make sense of the incomprehensibility of his life in place, "at that Twenty-nine Palms Motel", why he can dismiss his own family "the old lady and the kids" as simple supporting actors in his drama of killing. In Kristeva's words:

> Instead of sounding himself as to his "being," he does so concerning his place: *"Where* am I?" instead of *"Who* am I?" For the space that engrosses the deject,

[42] Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror,* p.8.

> the excluded, is never *one,* nor *homogeneous,* nor *totalizable,* but essentially divisible, fold-able, and catastrophic. A deviser of territories, languages, works, the *deject* never stops demarcating his universe whose fluid confines—for they are constituted of a non-object, the abject—constantly question his solidity and impel him to start afresh. A tireless builder, the deject is in short a *stray.* He is on a journey, during the night, the end of which keeps receding.[43]

* * *

The depth of human history and literary experience is built throughout Bidart's poetry through intertextual strategies or ghost texts that haunt his poems. In particular we find something here of his loyalty and debt to Lowell as well as his eschewal of Lowell's Freudian lyric for a more complex and baroque drama of confession and condemnation. The abject subject (child murder and rape) evinces repulsion and horror in the reader yet also, through Bidart's creation of voice and transformation of source material, a deep recognition of the guilt and humanity of the man, Herbert White. Bidart reiterates lines written by his mentor, Robert Lowell in 'Skunk Hour':

> I myself am hell,
> nobody's here—

Lowell wrote about this ending to his poem, as follows:

> Somewhere in my mind was a passage from Sartre or Camus about reaching some point of final darkness where the one free act is suicide. Out of this comes the march and affirmation, an ambiguous one, of my skunks in the last two stanzas.[44]

In Bidart's poem these sentiments are placed in the murderer's mouth:

> – Hell came when I saw
> MYSELF . . .
> And couldn't stand
> what I see. . .

---

[43] Ibid., p.8.

[44] Frank Bidart and David Gewanter, *Robert Lowell Collected Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 2003) see in particular note 6.5 to Skunk Hour, p.1047.

This is also not just an echoing of Lowell, but an echoing of Lowell's echoing of Milton in Satan's final exile from heaven from Paradise Lost:

> Me miserable! which way shall I fly
> Infinite wrauth and infinite despair?
>
> Which way I fly is Hell; myself am Hell. [45]

Lowell's poem represents a literary shift in his work and the metaphor of the skunk speaks of the confessional impulse and the outsider-ness of the poet as artist, of the tension and movement between the need to tell and the human desire for concealment of the self. 'Herbert White' as a poem of artistic intention speaks to those same divisions of self between the personal and impersonal, between life and art but it is a dramatised confession told through a mask. The use of the protagonist as an anti-self introduces classical ideas of tragedy so that, as a masked drama, 'Herbert White' becomes not a fiction but a re-enactment. What remains compelling in this work is its very *unspeakable* nature, it's a poem that resists being spoken aloud even by its author, even in its fifth decade after publication. This is attributable as much to Bidart's strategies of form as subject matter for he attains an intimacy alongside a command of tone and authority that seems impossible to combine through design. It is art driven by the necessity of human feeling subject to its own tragedies of repeated action. As Bidart himself states in his interview with Mark Halliday (*Collected Poems,* p.699):

> I've never been able to get past Yeats' statement that out of our argument with others we make rhetoric, out of our argument with ourselves we make poetry. At times, that's seemed to me the profoundest thing ever said about poetry.

[45] John Milton, *Paradise Lost,* Book IV lines 73 –75.

**Chapter 4: 'Ellen West'**

'Ellen West' was first published in 1977 in *The Book of the Body*, a collection concerned with the dualism implicated in Cartesian approaches to ontological questions.[1] The first poem in the collection – 'The Arc' (*Collected Poems* p. 103) – is in the voice of a man who lost his arm in a car accident who borrows Frank Bidart's life to convey what this bodily mutilation might mean:

> but after
> the accident, I had to understand it
>
> *not* as an accident – ;
>
> the way my mother,
> years before locked in McLean's,
>
> believed the painting of a snow-scene above her bed
> had been placed there by the doctor to make her feel cold.
>
> How could we *convince* her it had no point? [2]
>
> (*Collected Poems,* p.104.)

The narrator in 'The Arc' also shares memories of a female patient on the same ward who refuses to wear her clothes or name tag as she feels this will limit her and give her an identity she does not want to have. This collection engages in the family themes of Bidart's first collection (especially in the long poem sequence 'Elegy') but, in the poem 'The Book of the Body,' offers an account of parental death and the realisation of the poet-narrator's homosexuality.

> -- So many
> infatuations guaranteed to fail before they started.
>
> Terror at my own homosexuality,

---

[1] Frank Bidart, *The Book of the Body* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1979).

[2] McLeans is a Psychiatric facility in Massachussetts where Robert Lowell was treated; Bidart's mother - being in California – would have stayed in another facility but this setting, in the poem, can be read as a conflation of biographical events and imagination.

terror, which somehow
evaporated slowly …..

(*Collected Poems,* pp. 129 – 130.)

'Ellen West' dramatises the mind-body question through the ambivalence, suicidality and final self-destruction of its central character. Through this long dramatic monologue poem Bidart develops his interest in the enigmas of subjectivity, in the voice of a woman who is receiving psychiatric care for her refusal to eat. Again we see Bidart dependent on source material (as in 'Herbert White') as he draws on a psychological case study, first published in English in 1958.[3] The real Ellen West was treated by the Swiss psychiatrist, Ludwig Binswanger who was born in 1881 and for 45 years worked as the Director of the Bellevue Sanatorium in Kreuzlingen, Switzerland, an institution that was founded in 1857. His distinctive contribution to psychiatric practice was a form of phenomenological, existential psychotherapy (based on the philosophy of Heidegger) developed by his grandfather (who was also named Ludwig) and concerned with the patient's lived experience or their 'being in the world': this came to be known as Daseinsanalysis.

What we learn from the case study is that Ellen West's troubles started in adolescence and she died in 1921 at the age of 33 after taking poison. It is a case that has generated increasing controversy, particularly because Binswanger, fully aware of her suicidality, sent Ellen home to die. The equanimity of Binswanger's account of Ellen West as an 'authentic' suicide was rejected and met with outrage by Carl Rogers:

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[3] Ludwig Binswanger 'The case of Ellen West: An anthropological-clinical study,' (trans. Werner M. Mendel & Joseph Lyons) in *Existence: A New Dimension in Psychiatry and Psychology* eds. Rollo May, Ernest Angel & Henri F. Ellenberger (New York: Basic Books, 1958).

fig 3

> Reading this tragic case angers me (as will have been evident) but it also encourages me. I feel angry at the tragic waste of a human being, encouraged because I feel we have learned enough during the intervening years that if Ellen West came today to my Office, or to the offices of many therapists I know, she would be helped.[4]

R.D. Laing called the case of Ellen West 'psychiatric diagnostics taken to the point of absurdity.' [5] Bidart's poem dramatises the process of thinking as a way of exploring psychological biography and also finds a way of building narrative through a cinematic tapestry of voices that cut in and contrast with Ellen's story at the centre of the poem.

The photograph of Ellen (fig 3), from the case files, shows the face of the woman who was given the pseudonym 'Ellen West' by her doctor. There is no indication of her age in the photograph but her face is thin and she looks very young and frail. Perhaps one of the central attractions to Bidart in using Ellen as a character in his poem is the fact that, according to the case study, Ellen loved poetry and aspired to be a poet. On the night of her death, at the age of 33, before she took poison (with the assistance of her husband) she read the poetry of Rilke, Goethe and Tennyson.

If the duality explored in 'Herbert White' is between mask and the abjected subject, between madness and lyric, then the central concern in 'Ellen West' is the duality of body and mind, subjectivity developed through strategies of narrative, biography and autobiography of the person who exists in the world, who lives, feels, and has sensations and perceptions. Bidart explores Ellen West's experiences through a voice (an interior voice) so intimate in tone that it suggests the process of thinking:

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[4] Carl Rogers, 'Ellen West and Loneliness' in *The Carl Rogers Reader* eds. Howard Kirschenbaum and Valerie Land Henderson (Boston, New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1989), p.165.

[5] Allan Beveridge, *Portrait of the Psychiatrist as a Young Man – The early writing and work of R.D.Laing,* 1927-1960 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p.133.

> – I knew I could never
> with such ease allow another to put food into my mouth:
>
> happily *myself* put food into another's mouth –;
>
> I knew that to become a wife I would have to give up my ideal.
>
> (*Collected Poems,* p.136)

This intimate thinking is important in a poem that explores the experience of a young woman with anorexia, where the split between mind and body is dramatised in the assertion of will over the natural drive of hunger. As Almas Khan notes:

> Affixing a pseudonym to the poem's title character and untethering her from temporal and jurisdictional constraints […] facilitates universalization of the protagonist as one of the many "grotesques" in Bidart's oeuvre who operate as figures for the ordinary […] [6]

However, as with his other dramatic monologues, the epithet 'grotesque' is an alienating one and would be better expressed as 'mad people' for Bidart's many mad people operate as 'figures for the ordinary.' Indeed, his mad people have their origins in the familial and in the experience of filial disobedience that haunts his life and writing.

Of the drama of ideas contained in his dramatic monologues, Bidart states:

> No genuine issue, in my experience, has an "answer" or "solution." But the argument within oneself about them is still inevitable and necessary. In "Ellen West" and the Nijinsky poem, I didn't feel I was making up the drama – they were *there*, and I felt that to write the poems I had to let them (both the *voices* and the *issues* their lives embody the torments and dilemmas of) enter me. Of course they were already inside me (though I still had to let them in).
>
> (*Collected Poems*, p.700.)

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[6] Almas Khan, 'Postconfessional Poetry and the Concentric Circles of Ideas in Frank Bidart's "Ellen West" ' *Proteus: A Journal of Ideas* Volume 30, No 1 (Spring 2014), 25-29 (p.26).

This previous existence (the "already there"-ness) of the drama of Ellen's suffering corresponds to Bidart's notion of "pre-existing forms" both through the source document and the sense of human psychological pain.

'Ellen West' develops Bidart's interest in the enigmas of subjectivity, through a study of a woman who does not wish to have a body; he challenges pure interiority in favour of *dasein* through the dramatisation of Ellen's ambivalence about her own physical being. He can only do so because the 'issue' (not wanting to have a body) was 'already inside' (in his dilemmas of desire and homosexual identity). Carrying her inside may refer to the way he also carries his mother's voice and concerns inside:

> I was surrounded by creatures
>
> with the pathetic, desperate
> desire to be *not* what they were.
>
> (*Collected Poems,* p.144.)

Bidart learned as a child to perceive the world through his mother's experiences. Ellen West is not an anti-self like Herbert White but becomes the voice and despair of Bidart's mother, as well as Bidart's alter ego and also the protagonist in a drama of existential despair.

Bidart recently stated:

> If you're writing a poem called Ellen West it must be in her voice. It's not just words. It's a narrative. It's gestures, it's your sense of her life, of all those things that are generating words… you have to figure out how this thing that seems to want embodiment can find embodiment in words.[7]

Frank Bidart's central concern is to *fasten the voice to the page* – to use the dramatic devices of character and action, to explore what Edmund White calls "the tragedy of the will".[8] Here, Bidart offers us a way of encountering mental illness and suffering

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[7] Ron Charles interview.

[8] Edmund White, 'On Ellen West' in *On Frank Bidart – Fastening the Voice to the Page* ed. Liam Rector and Tree Swenson, p.111.

in and through poetry not simply through dramatic monologue but by creating a texture of layered narratives: his own filial narrative of parental conflict and divided sense of self; the story of Ellen West as experienced by Ellen West, incurable; the story of his own mother's death and his subsequent guilt about his refusal to comply with her demands; the story of diminishing voice in the allegory of Maria Callas; the story of existential psychoanalysis at a moment between the two world wars in the twentieth century. One way of approaching the transformation of Ellen West's life from case history to poem is to think about it as a story; to consider this it is helpful to contemplate what kind of storytelling we can find in contemporary poetry.

From Homer, through the oral tradition until the 20th century, narrative was central to the human understanding and experience of poetry. What distinguishes narrative poetry is the key elements of story: character (including the narrator), conflict, event, action, plot, linearity, landscape – we think of Tennyson's 'The Lady of Shallot' in her closed cell or Coleridge's 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner', even Longfellow's 'Hiawatha.' These are often linear narratives composed in blank verse told in the third person. Formal metre and rhyme, as well as structure, are important in narrative poetry; in its range it includes epic verse such as Milton's 'Paradise Lost,' and ballads, for example, Keats's 'La Belle Dame sans Merci.' It also includes more expansive contemporary poetry that combines history and biography – for example Rita Dove's *Thomas and Beulah* [9] or Sandra M. Gilbert's sonnet sequence, *Belongings*.[10]

> Stories in contemporary poetry are told in other ways. As Bidart says:
>
> Narrative is the Elephant in the Room when most people discuss poetry. Narrative was never a crucial element in the poetics surrounding the birth of

[9] Rita Dove, *Thomas and Beulah* (Pittsburgh: Carnegie Mellon University Press, 1986) - in the Pulitzer prize-winning collection Dove tells the story of her maternal grandparents.
[10] Sandra M. Gilbert, *Belongings* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2006).

> Modernism, from The Waste Land to the Cantos to "Home Burial," Paterson and beyond, are built on a brilliant sense of the power of narrative. What Modernism added was the power gained when you know what to leave out. Narrative is the ghost scaffolding that gives spine to the great works that haunt the twentieth century.[11]

This idea is further supported by the absence in narrative theory about the possibilities of poetry. In a recent article Brian McHale notes, "Contemporary narrative theory is almost silent about poetry."[12]

In 'Ellen West' Bidart offers us the strategy of cinematic cutting to move us between interior voice and third person (medical) commentary and creates psychological narratives by combining biography, autobiography and source materials. He takes Pound's ideogrammatic strategies and replaces them with voice so that two voices juxtaposed bring an additional element to his poetry to offer an interpretive linking of psychological pain - a way of understanding human suffering.

From narrativity in film studies and narratology in literary studies to narrative therapy as psychotherapy there is a vast body of evidence and research across disciplines rooted in story and storying that is outside the remit of this study. However, the work of Hühn and Kiefer[13] and theories of Arthur W. Frank[14] provide a useful framework for considering how Bidart tells stories. Hühn and Kiefer apply narratology to the study of poems. Huhn[15] argues that the essential dimensions to consider, as with narrative, are sequentiality, mediation and narrative act; he identifies

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11 Frank Bidart *Metaphysical Dog* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013), p. 112.
12 Brian McHale 'Beginning to Think about Narrative in Poetry' *Narrative*, Volume 17, Number 1, (January 2009), 11-27 (p.11).
13 Peter Hühn and Jens Kiefer, *The Narratological Analysis of Lyric Poetry Studies on English Poetry from the 16th to the 20th Century,* translated by Alastair Matthews (Berlin, New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2005).
14 Arthur W Frank *The Wounded Storyteller* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).
15 P. Hühn, 'Plotting the lyric: forms of narration in poetry' *Literator* 31 (3) December 2010: 17 – 47.

the essential elements of mediation as biographical author, composition and organisation of text, speaker or narrator and the protagonist.

A consideration of sequentiality is useful when reading 'Ellen West.' What happens in this poem, what psychological incidents can we find and what kind of sequence do these happenings have? We know through Bidart's autoethnographic writing and 'Writing "Ellen West*" '* that his mother's death is the impetus for writing 'Ellen West': this autobiographical grief is the emotional story (or ghost text) behind the first poem. The central plot is concerned with Ellen's life and her psychological torment about having a body and eating. It is a psychological sequence, a dramatisation of her thoughts, set in the context of hospital confinement, that moves from the dilemma of loving sweets and yet not wanting a body to existential puzzling about the nature of man and woman, bodily attraction, fear of death and natural processes; it includes a sequence concerned with intelligence that cannot defeat "the ideal/*not* to have a body" (lines 217 – 218, *Collected Poems,* p.142); there is an account of Ellen's last train journey home with her husband – and an epistolary section at the end addressed to another patient which expresses regret and resolve, and refers to the letter being received after Ellen's death, so it also serves as a suicide note. These fragments of Ellen's life are interrupted by four sections of prose, each a summary of the medical opinion of her doctors. They represent a particular story of twentieth century psychiatry as Ellen's case involved opinions and consultations with Kraepelin, Bleuler and Alfred Hoche. Emil Kraepelin (1856 – 1926) is seen as the father of pharmacopsychology, Eugen Bleuler (1857 – 1939) was a Swiss psychiatrist known for inventing the term 'schizophrenia' – and one of the consultants in Ellen's case. Alfred Hoche (1865 -1943) – the German psychiatrist consulted in Ellen's case

– is best known as a proponent of euthanasia and co-author with Karl Binding of the famous 1920 essay 'The Destruction of Life Devoid of Human Value.'

The first medical section in the poem (lines 23-29, *Collected Poems,* p.133) is a near verbatim account from the Binswanger study describing Ellen's reduced body weight and laxative abuse.[16] This immediately follows the section where Ellen asks: "Why am I a girl?" (line 16, *Collected Poems,* p.132). The second medical section follows the anti-"Nature" sequence (lines 85-96, *Collected Poems,* p.136) and is taken from the case record to describe Ellen with her husband taking coffee, but showing how she 'devoured like a wild animal', that she has been reading Faust, considers art to permeate both body and spirit, judges her own poems as 'hospital poems,' experiences "agitation", "vexation" and torment, becomes homo-erotically engaged with another female patient and 'for the first time in years' stops writing poetry.[17] This is cut by a sequence about Maria Callas (lines 114-201, *Collected Poems,* pp. 137 – 141), as discussed later, concerned with voice. The third medical section summarises the final agreement of the three medical men:

> All three of us are agreed that it is not a case of obsessional neurosis and not one of manic-depressive psychosis, and that no definitely reliable therapy is possible. We therefore resolved to give in to the patient's demand for discharge.
>
> (*Collected Poems,* p.143.)

The fourth medical interjection (*Collected Poems,* p.146) is Binswanger's account of Ellen's final day as though it is a happy ending – Ellen "is as if transformed." She eats and is satisfied by her food, she takes a walk with her husband, reads poems in "a positively festive mood" then writes letters, takes poison

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16 Existence, ch.9, p.249.

17 Existence: Jan 16, Jan 21, February 8 and Feb 15 details can be found on pp.259 –260 although the details in the poem are very short and not verbatim with some facts such as the reading of Faust taken from a different section of Binswanger's account.

and dies. The tone of medical disinterest contrasts sharply with Ellen's desperation and flight. To consider 'Ellen West' in the light of narratological constructs forces a separation between the plot (events or happenings) of the poem, how these are mediated – for example through biography, autobiography, source texts etc., and the narrative act, which here is through utterance, the story being told essentially through Ellen's interior voice. We realise throughout that we are hearing Ellen's articulated mind being placed inside the new body of Bidart's poem. Frank Bidart's 'Ellen West' at 318 lines creates an expectation of story through the presence of a central narrator who speaks the drama of her life convincingly. This authentic quality arises from the interweaving of the poet's life experiences within Ellen's autobiographical monologue. It is interrupted by fragments of Binswanger's case notes, an allegory on voice (the Callas section) and ends in a letter; this collage technique creates dramatic tension as the fragments of historical text are extracts from the medical judgments that sealed Ellen's fate, and contrast so sharply with the intimate, resignedly sorrowful notes in Ellen's own (reconstructed) voice.

It is in the main a sustained free verse dramatic monologue consisting of 12 sections. These sections are separated by breaks, each indicated by a faint line of 3 dots across the page. The voice of Ellen – as in her life – is elliptical, disrupted by extracts from psychiatric case notes. The poem starts with the lines:

> I love sweets, -
> heaven
> would be dying on a bed of vanilla ice cream…

The first word of the poem is "I" which establishes an expectation of an autobiography or confession. We hear the child's voice and the dream of confection and excess ('a bed' of ice-cream), a delight in appetite and the taste of sweetness, but there is already a suggestion of mortality and extremes for 'heaven' follows the

declaration "I love sweets" but also links with a longing for death – "heaven would be dying"… In the image of "a bed of vanilla ice-cream" we understand the alienating link between an insatiable hunger for sweetness in the presence of coldness. This insatiable hunger renders a bed of ice (a frigidity in place of bodily desire and sexuality). The first 15 lines present us with the central dilemma of Ellen West's life. It is that her true self has no substance, that she denies her body as being herself, that she is a self, divided between body and consciousness or soul. To be an integrated and whole person her body must reflect her 'true' self:

> But my true self
> is thin, all profile
>
> and effortless gestures, the sort of blond
> elegant girl whose
> body is the image of her soul.
> (*Collected Poems,* p.132.)

This is not just the body as an ideal of female beauty but in Bidart's voicing of Ellen she longs for her body's beauty (her external self) to reflect her innermost self (consciousness). The paradox is in her quest to be thin bodily to show the world the beauty of her mind. The poem continues:

> --My doctors tell me I must give up
> this ideal;
> But I
> WILL NOT…cannot.

Her defiance of medical instruction is indicated in the capitalised WILL NOT as an emphatic shout on the page, with the qualifying 'cannot' in lower case. There is then a space and a line that suggests she is understood and accepted as a person of integrity by her husband:

> Only to my husband I'm not simply a "case"

What can it mean to be considered a case – an example, a medical object, a problem, an empty container to be filled, and a semantic relation of a word to another word? Ellen's rejection of the husband's understanding is brutal:

> But he is a fool. He married
> meat, and thought it was a wife.

In rejecting the body she is distinguishing between meat and wife, that in her natural form she herself is somehow edible, something to be consumed. Wife stands as an ideal in opposition to meat, as a rebellion against becoming food yet wifehood carries an implied threat of fatness in the possibility of pregnancy; the next section of the poem begins with a question about gender:

> Why am I a girl?
>
> I ask my doctors, and they tell me they
> don't know, that it is just "given."

It is the child who asks the question and names what she is as "girl." The alliterative response "given" is suggestive of inevitability and fate. To be a girl in the medical view is an unchangeable fact. It is also a 'gift' to be so, if it is given. But who gives such a gift and in rejecting it why does this lead to the desire to die? There is also a sense of command and it links with the previously reported verdict of the doctors that Ellen must 'give up' her ideal of an ethereal body. The poem continues in response to the givenness of girlhood.

> But it has such implications-;

There is an inevitable conclusion to being a girl, a conclusion to be drawn. It has hidden qualities, what is implied may be hidden within something, subtle, not its exterior qualities just as the body may conceal the consciousness. Here we have not only fate but also complicity for this section ends:

> and sometimes
> I even feel like a girl.

Bidart often writes about himself in the third person, as a character. It is a technique that not only creates distance but also contributes to the shaping of voice in his dramatic monologues. This sense of myriad voices in 'each human head' corresponds with Ricoeur's 'Mimesis' – the pre-narrative level of understanding. Ellen West emerges for the poet as his subject *because of* his mother's death. We understand it as a poem not only about a tragic historical character but one of psychological autobiography. Ellen West is also Frank Bidart.

'Ellen West' captures, conveys and combines the historical, biographical and autobiographical voice. It also shows the poet intervening in what might be understood as a chaos story, the story of a woman who died as a consequence of anorexia at a time when this condition was not understood. In 'Ellen West', Bidart is offering restitution to the woman behind the poem perhaps in atonement for the grief and unresolved anger he experienced at his mother's death. He describes the writing of this poem as 'exorcism'. Rather than metaphors of healing we find here a claim for poetry as a religious rite, purification, words that have the power to free its maker from evil. This is not simply confession, following an examination of conscience; in exorcism we find a claim for priestly power – the power of the word to free the victim from bodily possession. Bidart is both the possessed and the one with the power to cast out the demon. In the second Ellen West poem he writes:

> This is the body that you can draw out of you to expel from you
> the desire to die.
>
> *
>
> Give it a voice, give each scene of her life a particularity and
> necessity that in Binswanger's recital are absent.
>
> *
>
> Enter her skin so that you can then make her other and expel her.
>
> *

Survive her

(*Collected Poems,* pp. 489 – 490.)

The word 'particularity' is interesting. In Christian theology this denotes the incarnation of God as Jesus Christ, at a particular time and place in history. It also refers to the question of individuality. In seeking to give scenes in Ellen's life a particularity and necessity he is also seeking to reincarnate her, to give her a new body. It is a word Bidart uses in relation to narrative – linking narrative with the body:

> The particularity inherent in almost all narrative, though contingent and exhausting, tells the story of the encounter with particularity that flesh as flesh must make.
>
> (*Collected Poems,* p.487.)

There is inevitability in individual desire, in the flesh. What Bidart recognises in Ellen's plight is his own pain, and the death he seeks to survive is not only Ellen's but also his mother's. He seeks to do this by giving birth to Ellen – by expelling her from his *own* body into a new (textual) body. He chooses this character as a way to explore in part his own sufferings of desire through his experience and gradual acceptance of his homosexual identity. Bidart explains his strategy of characterisation in a recent interview:

> It's a way of making fact available to art. To write about oneself as a character – to think about oneself as a character – opens up spaces between the "I" and the author. (In this sense, calling the *I* "he" is only a way of making inescapable this space. You can write as an "I" and still think of yourself as a character.) The space is necessary because the work isn't going to be any good if it is merely a subtle form of self-justification, if one is supine before the romance of the self. Not that self-justification is ever wholly absent.[18]

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[18] Shara Lessley interview with Frank Bidart, National Book Awards: < http://www.nationalbook.org/nba2013_p_bidart_interv.html#.WpITmhR2eNg > [accessed 8 September 2017]

In a later section of the poem we find contemplation of the artistic voice in an allegory of Maria Callas's diminishing voice: when Callas had a large body, she had an enormous voice. In being (self)-driven to starve herself she starts to lose her voice.

> --No one knows *why*. Perhaps her mind,
> ravenous, still insatiable, sensed
>
> that to struggle with the shreds of a voice
>
> must make her artistry subtler, more refined,
> more capable of expressing humiliation,
> rage and betrayal...
>
> (*Collected Poems,* p.139.)

This gives an additional texture and drama to the poem. Bidart first heard a recording of Callas as an undergraduate at the University of California, Riverside, in his tutor's (Philip Wheelwright's) living room (*Collected Poems,* pp. 684 – 685) – something in her voice carrying and causing sadness and disappointment ("I remember he was upset because he felt that it wasn't, compared to her first recording, nearly as well sung.") In most commentaries on the poem the four and a half pages that comprise the Callas allegory is assumed to be in Ellen's voice; the obvious parallels between the rejection of the body evidenced in Callas's famous transformation from a large woman to a slender one. However, if this account about Callas is read as direct authorial voice rather than being spoken through Ellen it gives an additional texture and drama to the poem; if we approach this experiencing of the voice of Callas, the transformed "shreds of a voice" as a metaphor for Bidart's development in poetics, it says something about how he has learned to trust in the voices he makes through his poetry. As he stated in his NBCC Award Acceptance speech:

> I remember a review of Maria Callas' recording of *Carmen* that suggested that first hearing her voice was shocking, like biting into a

> lemon. I remember saying to myself that I wanted my poems to startle, to arrest the attention, in that way.[19]

The Callas metaphor also comments on the drama of thinking essential to Bidart's poetics:

> …. Perhaps her mind,
> ravenous, still insatiable, sensed
>
> that to struggle with the *shreds* of a voice
>
> must make her artistry subtler, more refined,
> more capable of expressing humiliation,
> rage, betrayal …
>
> -- Perhaps the opposite. Perhaps her spirit
> loathed the unending struggle
>
> to *embody* itself, to *manifest* itself, on a stage whose
> mechanics and suffocating customs
> seemed expressly designed to annihilate spirit.
>
> (*Collected Poems,* pp.139-140.)

The oppositional thinking in this section of the poem is what makes it allegorical, rather than a parable; the drive of the artist to starve herself being driven both by the need to suffer and the desire to be freed from the artistic drive towards embodiment or manifestation. This is a reminder of how Bidart seeks to dramatise thought and thinking processes in his poems.

It is helpful to consider how Binswanger's phenomenological concerns connect with Bidart's aesthetic strategies. Bidart's much later poem, 'Writing "Ellen West" ' uses as its source his first poem and also offers the reader an additional layer of interpretative evidence for what Bidart is seeking to do when he presents particular lives through his poetry as embodied presences. The two Ellen West poems read together fuse history with psychology, autobiography with existential analysis, and

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[19] Frank Bidart's NBCC Award Acceptance Speech FSG <https://fsgworkinprogress.com/2014/04/frank-bidarts-nbcc-acceptance-speech/ > [accessed 6 July 2017]

the universal themes of body versus mind, human guilt, and desire. Bidart also provides a strategy for writing about suffering and madness through voice, character and dramatic narrative, a way of understanding the suffering of Ellen as a living woman and aspiring artist – in contrast to the medical regime that failed her and sent her home as a hopeless case.

Bidart's aesthetics of embodiment may be understood with reference to Husserl's challenge to naturalism – that what is essential is the lived experience of the body from within (that is, the experience of embodiment through particular sensations or emotions) not merely as a physical body. Ellen's is a story that was first presented as a medical history by the man responsible for Ellen's care whose decisions enabled her suicide; the story becomes a medium through which Frank Bidart writes a response to the death of his mother, considering the antipathy between them, his own grief and what the writing of the first poem meant to him as a means of survival. As he writes (of himself in the third person) in 'Writing "Ellen West*" '* (lines 22 – 40):

> "Ellen West" was written in the year after his mother's death.
>
> *
>
> By the time she died he had so thoroughly betrayed the ground
> of intimacy on which his life was founded he had no right to live.
>
> *
>
> No use for him to tell himself that he shouldn't feel this because
> he felt this.
>
> *
>
> He didn't think this but he thought this.
>
> *
>
> After she died his body wanted to die, but his brain, his cunning,
> didn't.
>
> *

He likes narratives with plots that feel as if no one willed them.

*

His mother in her last year revealed that she wanted him to move back to Bakersfield and teach at Bakersfield College and live down the block.

*

He thought his mother, without knowing that this is what she wanted, wanted him to die.

*

All he had told her in words and more than words for years was that her possessiveness and terror at his independence were wrong, wrong, wrong.

*

He was the only person she wanted to be with but he refused to live down the block and then she died.

(*Collected Poems,* pp. 487 – 489.)

There is simplicity in this story told thirty-seven years after the first poem was published and the distancing device of using the third person makes the account more moving. Bidart does not condemn his mother but rather seeks to understand her. This is an explication of the emotional force of maternal possessiveness and filial guilt and its legacy of distrust (of human love) and – for him – the life-giving force, or at least the power to resist the death wish, endowed through poetry; as reiterated in 'Martha Yarnoz Bidart Hall':

Though she whom you had so let
in, the desire for survival will not

allow you ever to admit
another so deeply in again….

Later in the same poem we find the lines:

As long as you are alive
she is alive

(*Collected Poems,* p.563)

This is an acknowledgement, in part, of the life-long force of adverse childhood experience.

Arthur W. Frank in *The Wounded Storyteller* adopts an approach to narrative in the context of life-threatening *physical* illness and recovery that is helpful in thinking about the circumstances of Ellen West's and Bidart's suffering; not least because Ellen's all-consuming death-wish makes her a terminal case. We might tentatively claim for Ellen (and perhaps Frank Bidart) the title of 'Wounded Storyteller.' Frank offers three models of narrative: the restitution (preferred) narrative, chaos narrative (in which "the teller is not understood as telling a 'proper' story"[20]) and quest stories ("the quest is defined by the ill person's belief that something is to be gained through the experience"[21]). Frank provides a theoretical framework in which he argues for an ethics of narrative and the moral necessity of telling stories through the wounded body in order to seek healing. His concept of the communicative body is one of human connection; similarly Paul Ricoeur establishes a concept of narrative identity that mixes the narratives of history and fiction. Ricoeur too argues that narrative is a privileged form of mediating human experience.[22]

Frank claims an ethics of narrative in which suffering involves the whole person, mind and body. Frank's concept of healing is that telling stories is both a way to resist the silence that illness forces on the body and a way to make sense of and resist suffering in order to remake the body-self. He claims that stories of suffering have two sides – one of 'narrative wreckage' when there is a 'threat of disintegration'

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[20] Frank, p.97.
[21] Frank, p.115.
[22] Paul Ricoeur, 'Narrative Identity' *Philosophy Today* 35: 1 (1991; Spring), p. 73.

and the other one of resistance, seeking "a new integration of body self"."[23] The concept of body-self is a rejection of mind-body dualism, an acknowledgement that the whole person suffers in illness.

Frank claims that finding a voice that is used to tell stories is a form of resistance central to the healing process in the experience of life-threatening illness. His thesis does *not* consider whether the voice in poetry can resist the threat of illness through fragmentary or lyrical expression. It is worth considering the absence in narrative theory about the possibilities of poetry or what Strawson identifies as episodic experience. As already noted, Brian McHale comments that "Contemporary narrative theory is almost silent about poetry" and he also acknowledges Kinney's observation that: "As far as narrative theory is concerned, Homer has been made an honorary novelist."

We can reflect on narrative as a method of seeking healing (found in the practice of narrative therapy as well as Frank's thesis). While there are contrasting methods and strategies found in narrative *and* poetry in relation to illness and expression of suffering there is some commonality between Frank's work and the concept of narrative identity developed by Paul Ricoeur. Frank's concept of the communicative body is one of human connection; similarly Paul Ricoeur establishes a concept of narrative *identity* that mixes the narratives of history and fiction. Ricoeur presents narrative as a privileged form of mediating human experience. In his re-evaluation of mimesis he describes it not as an imitation of action but a complex process that starts in a pre-narrative level of understanding, of symbolic order. This becomes fixed in a literary work then reintroduced into the culture through refiguration; the story gains a life within the consciousness of readers, when their life

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[23] Frank, p.171: here he refers to the work of Cassell and Kleinman.

experience is profoundly changed through the encounter with the world of the book. Ricoeur distinguishes two dimensions in the question of identity; the idem or sameness (where the story relates to the 'whom of the action') and the ipse – or selfhood – through which 'the identity of the whom is no other than his narrative identity.'[24] His exposition of narrative identity is also an understanding of the narrated world as one of ethical value and moral unity.

Galen Strawson argues against the claim for narrativity as an essential component of an examined ethical life. He argues in defence of the episodic human experience (and it could be argued that Bidart's poems comprise an interweaving of episodic experiences) and claims that the dogmatic adherence to narrative can:

> hinder self-understanding, close down important avenues of thought, impoverish our grasp of ethical possibilities, needlessly and wrongly distress those who do not fit their model, and are potentially destructive in therapeutic contexts.[25]

Stories depend on the movement of time in their structures, the ubiquitous beginning, middle and end of human expectation (as well as temporal duality explored by Ricoeur where stories are told both forward and backwards at the same time) yet the experience of mental illness or severe emotional distress fractures this sense of time. Such a fracture may disrupt the urge to tell stories and create other forms of articulation. While Strawson argues that this is possible through episodic expression and telling, Frank places the storyteller at the centre of human experience and argues that the voice must also be healed. He states:

> Seriously ill people are wounded not just in body but in voice. They need to become storytellers in order to recover the voices that illness and its treatment often take away. The voice speaks the mind and expresses the

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[24] Maria Villela-Petit *Narrative Identity and Ipseity by Paul Ricoeur* <http://www.onlineoriginals.com/showitem.asp?itemID=287&articleID=11 > [accessed 10 May 2015].

[25] Galen Strawson,'Against Narrativity,' *Ratio* 17 (2004) 428 – 52, p.429.

> spirit, but it is also a physical organ of the body: in the silences between words, the tissues speak.[26]

Poetry depends on the silences, the breath between words. Can poetry represent in contemporary literature what Strawson argues for in the defence of the episodic? Can we discover new ways to make poems from ghost narratives and sequences, collages, fragments and documents to reflect episodic experience through voice that is rooted in narrative identity, or the ipseity of self?

It can be argued that Bidart's poetics are his means of survival, an affirmation of life and through which he reflects both the suffering of Ellen, the woundedness of Callas and the despair of his own mother:

> that to struggle with the *shreds* of a voice
>
> must make her artistry subtler, more refined,
> more capable of expressing humiliation,
> rage, betrayal…
>
> (*Collected Poems,* p. 139.)

[26] Frank, Preface, p.xii.

**Chapter 5: Strategies of Narrative and Voice in 'The War of Vaslav Nijinsky' and *Half-light***

'The War of Vaslav Nijinsky', was first published in *The Paris Review* in 1981 before it appeared in Bidart's third collection, *The Sacrifice* in 1983, a collection that opens with the following epigraph (italicised and lineated by Bidart) taken from Hegel's 1802 work *Faith and Knowledge*:

> *…the speculative Good Friday in place of the*
> *historic Good Friday must be*
> *speculatively re-established in the whole truth and*
> *harshness of its Godforsakenness*.[1]

These words signify the utterance of the death of God to tell us something of Bidart's own concerns – the search for meaning in the face of despair, the search for forgiveness in spite of death, the human longing for a system of metaphysics, contemplation of suffering and expiation, the finite and the infinite, body and soul, the elusiveness of redemption.

As in his previous dramatic monologue poems Bidart uses an interplay between voice and narrative to convey a broken psyche but, in contrast to his previous unknown characters, the protagonist here, Vaslav Nijinsky, is the celebrated early twentieth century historical figure and pioneer of modernist dance, also famous as a genius madman. His biographer, Richard Buckle, summarises Nijinsky's life as: "ten years growing; ten years learning; ten years dancing; thirty years in eclipse." [2] He also notes: "the enigma of Nijinsky is still unresolved. He is indeed a mystery and likely to remain one." [3] Below is an image (fig. 4) of Nijinsky in the role of *Petrouchka* (1911).

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[1] G.W.F.Hegel, *Faith & Knowledge* translated by Walter Cerf and H.S. Harris (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1977), p.191.
[2] Richard Buckle, *Nijinsky* (London: Penguin Books, 1975), p. 538.
[3] Buckle, Introduction, p. xxx.

fig. 4

The unresolved nature of Nijinsky, exiled from his art by madness, has its obvious attractions for Bidart, concerned as he is in his poetics with themes of existential suffering. Nijinsky, unlike Ellen West, invested his talents and energies through his body yet his disability of mind, diagnosed as schizophrenia, stopped him from practicing his art and denied him a normal life: Nijinsky was diagnosed as schizophrenic in 1919 by Eugen Bleuler,[4] (also one of Ellen West's doctors). The conflicts in Nijinsky's life were not merely between madness and sanity but also concerned with sexuality. His wife, Romola, took great care in her writings to characterise Nijinsky's homosexuality as involuntary, with his former lover and ballet impresario Diaghilev cast as a villain.[5]

Bidart's choice of protagonist – one of the key revolutionary figures in twentieth century dance – also reflects his abiding interest in modernism; dance becomes a metaphor for poetry. The movement of the body in dance, and the quest to annotate the body (something Nijinsky tried to do) also becomes a metaphor for Bidart's struggle with language. As he states:

> Syntax – the way words are linked to make phrases, phrases to make sentences, even sentences to make "paragraphs" – has had a huge effect on the punctuation of my poems. Often the syntax is extremely elaborate. As the voice moves through what it is talking about – trying to lay out, acknowledge, organize the "material" – it needs dependent clauses, interjections, unfinished phrases, sometimes whole sentences in apposition. The only way I can sufficiently *articulate* this movement, express the relative weight and importance of the parts of the sentence -- so that the reader knows where he or she is and the "weight" the speaker is placing on the various elements that are being laid out -- is punctuation.
>
> (*Collected Poems*, p.693.)

In the notes to *Half-light* (2017) Bidart writes that he has changed passages of three of his poems, including 'The War of Vaslav Nijinsky':

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[4] Peter Ostwald, *Vaslav Nijinsky A Leap into Madness* (London: Robson Books, 1991), p. 196 –198.
[5] Romola Nijinsky, *Nijinsky* (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd., 1936).

> None of the words are different. But in terms of punctuation and "set-up," they seemed to me too often spoken *à haute voix*, as declaimed to the last row of the balcony. I have always heard the voice in them more intimately. They increasingly to my eye lacked this intimacy. I have tried to modulate the voices, by shifting punctuation, spacing, pacing.
> (*Collected Poems*, p.669.)

Bidart's ambition to capture the sound of his poem, in its shape and written form, is a continual struggle and his words remind us what a difficult enterprise this can be, especially in free verse. One example of change comes at line 75 (*Collected Poems,* p.27). In the first version in *The Sacrifice* the lines read:

> that just before the "famous man"
> was taken away, INSANE,
>
> he acted and looked
>
> AS I DO NOW.

In the updated version the lines read:

> that just before the "famous man"
> was taken away,
>
> INSANE, he acted and looked
>
> as I
> do now.

The syntax now places the capitalised 'INSANE' on the same line as 'he acted and looked' – and changes the previously capitalised 'AS I DO NOW' to lower case and from one line to two. The shift of intimacy comes in the words of self-revelation - "as I | do now." It is the 2017 version of the poem that will be used for reference here. The preference for intimacy in the revised version is an option for the expression of lived experience in contrast to dramatic performance. It also reflects confidence in the poet's practice away from baroque punctuation towards assurance of tone.

* * *

Vaslav Nijinsky was born in 1889 in Kiev to Polish parents who were both touring dancers. He was 7 when his father left his family and his mother moved them to St Petersburg. Vaslav had an older brother, Stanislav, and a younger sister, Bronislava. When he was 9 he became a pupil at the Imperial Theatrical School where he struggled with his studies but excelled in dance. Joan Acocella summarises his giftedness as follows:

> By the time he appeared in school productions, the press was already calling him a prodigy, and when he graduated from school in 1907, at age eighteen, he was taken into St. Petersburg's Imperial Ballet not as a member of the corps de ballet, the usual starting rank, but as a *coryphée*, one rank higher. The company's foremost ballerina, Mathilde Kschessinska, requested him as her partner.[6]

In 1909 Nijinsky joined the Ballet Russe as a principal dancer, on their innovative tour of Paris, returning in 1910 to perform in *Giselle*, *Scheherazade*, *Carnival* and to portray the puppet *Petrushka*, in a new ballet with music by Stravinsky. While Nijinsky's genius was recognised in these roles, his notoriety, first linked to his relationship with Diaghilev, was confirmed in the response to his new choreography. He presented the ballets *L'apres-midi d'un faune* in 1912 with music by Debussy and *Le Sacre du Printemps* with music by Stravinsky in 1913. Richard Buckle describes the end of the second scene of the ballet, *The Sacrifice*, as follows:

> To *staccato* shrieks and percussive chords the final ritual begins as the tribe stamp around the Chosen Virgin, whose dance of exhaustion will be the culmination of the dance drama. Then there breaks out a persistent but halting convulsive rhythm on the strings, and the Virgin is drawn first to assist then to lead her fellows in the celebration of her own sacrifice. Meanwhile, there are heard blood-curdling ejaculations, which seem to be threats or warnings from the erupting forces of nature. These are played first on loud muted trombones answered by two loud muted trumpets, then by a piccolo, E flat clarinet and D trumpet call,

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6 Joan Acocella, ed, *The Diary of Vaslav Nijinsky, unexpurgated edition* translated from the Russian by Kyril Fitzlyon (Urbana & Chicago, University of Illinois Press, 2006) p. 8.

> twice. A hysterical trill on the violins, augmented by piccolos ascending in a nightmarish way, leads back to the wild, chaotic rhythms of the opening. These are developed and intensified, becoming ever more complex and unbalanced. The members of the tribe repeat the same jumps again and again, turning in ritual despair to left and to right, while the Virgin is galvanized into leaps of increasing frenzy. At last she falls exhausted. She tries to rise, but in vain. Her last breath, which is also the orgasm of the god, is a gurgle, like the spilling of sap, heard as a little upward run on the flutes. A short silence, then to a final conclusive chord, not on full orchestra, but on cellos, basses, horns, trombones and tuba playing *fortissimo,* she dies. Six men raise her body at arms length above their heads.[7]

Performed only eight times in his lifetime, Nijinsky's ballet was lost for many years until reconstructed and performed again in 1987 by the Joffrey Ballet, a professional dance company originally founded in New York in 1956, now based in Chicago; it performs a repertoire of both classical ballet and modern dance. The painstaking reconstruction of the ballet by Millicent Hodson and Kenneth Archer using sketches, prompt books, interviews, photographs, reviews, annotated scores took more than 15 years.[8]

The fiercely negative response from audience and critics inhibited Nijinsky's career as a choreographer. He developed one further ballet, Richard Strauss's *Till Eulenspiegel* in 1916. Valentine Gross,[9] who was an eyewitness to the 1913 riot-causing Paris performance of the ballet, gave the following account:

> Nothing that has ever been written about the battle of 'Le Sacre du Printemps' has given a faint idea of what actually took place. The theatre seemed to be shaken by an earthquake. It seemed to shudder. People shouted insults, howled and whistled, drowning the music. There was slapping and even punching. Words are inadequate to describe such a scene. […]
> [...] I cannot think how it was possible for this ballet, which the public of 1913 found so difficult, to be danced through to the end in such an uproar […]

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[7] Richard Buckle, *Nijinsky* (London: Penguin Books, 1975), p.352 – 3.

[8] 'The Joffrey Ballet Resurrects the Rites of Spring,'
< https://www.arts.gov/about/40th-anniversary-highlights/joffrey-ballet-resurrects-rite-spring >
[accessed 24 April 2017] annotated scores, and interviews with eye witnesses, such as Dame Marie Rambert, Nijinsky's assistant."

[9] Buckle, p. 357. Buckle notes that Valentine Gross, also known as Valentine Hugo (1887-1968), artist and balletomaine, left an archive of illustrations and material now held by the V&A Theatre and Performance Collections.

> I felt quite at ease at the heart of the maelstrom, applauding with my friends. I thought there was something wonderful about the titanic struggle which must have been going on in order to keep these inaudible musicians and these deafened dancers together, in obedience to the laws of their invisible choreographer. The ballet was astoundingly beautiful.[10]

The above offers something of the biographical background to Nijinsky's fame as the dancer who first staged modern dance, dance that broke with the tradition of classical ballet. Nijinsky can be seen as an embodiment of modernism, a pioneer of the new, an exotic (in terms of his sexuality and appearance), a genius, and an enigma. He was also as a young boy abandoned by a feckless and disloyal father to become the centre of his mother's hopes both as family provider and artist.

Bidart uses the moment in Nijinsky's life just as he descends into permanent madness, between his last dance before an audience (at Suvretta House) and the start of his 'mad' diaries to open the poem. He uses Romola Nijinsky's biography of her husband, Nijinsky's diary (the version heavily edited by Romola Nijinsky) and the biography by Richard Buckle as his main source texts for the poem. There are no films of Nijinsky dancing, as Diaghalev would not allow him to be filmed and the reconstruction of *The Sacrifice* by the Joffrey ballet was not staged until 1987, six years after Bidart first published his Nijinsky poem in *The Paris Review.* In addition the unexpurgated diaries were not published until 1999. So the dance itself is conjured up in Bidart's poem through his own imaginative choreography of language and adoption of Nijinsky's voice. Bidart was not able to draw directly on the dance as a source (as the ballets were lost) except through the voice of Nijinsky

* * *

[10] Buckle, p. 357.

fig.5

*The Sacrifice* contains only six poems of which 'The War of Vaslav Nijinsky*,'* takes up 29 pages. Bidart's autobiographical impulse remains in this poem, as noted by James Sullivan:

> When in the mid-1970s he read an early version of his long poem 'The War of Vaslav Nijinsky' at the Blacksmith House, he worried that the poem's lines about its subject's mental instability would strike Lowell, who was often institutionalized, as a veiled reference to him.
> "Oh no," Lowell told his younger friend after the reading. "It's about you."
> According to Bidart, Lowell was right. "I've never had a breakdown, but the animating emotions were, of course, mine." [11]

It is in 'The War of Vaslav Nijinsky,' that we see an evolutionary stage in Bidart's poetics, moving through autobiographical or confessional mode in his previous two collections – *Golden State* (1973) and *Book of the Body* (1977) – towards the greater complexities and intertextual collages of his 'Hour of the Night' poems, the first of which appears in his subsequent 1990 Collected Poems, *In the Western Night*. In this sense 'The War of Vaslav Nijinsky' is a breakthrough poem for Bidart enabling him to use his 'animating emotions' (concerned with guilt and expiation) to present a story of the fallen artist as one version of man's fall. Nijinsky is a genius artist who can no longer be an artist but must live a life of fragments in confusion, an ideal subject for a poet experimenting with source materials and voice, interested in philosophy and ontological questions.

The Nijinsky poem experiments with subjectivity and narrativity, moves from psychological autobiography soliloquised in poetic lines, to biography within historical context set in prose but always with what Liam Rector calls:

> self-questioning and questioning of the world, the extraordinarily nervous, self-consciously reflexive doubt, which forms the core of drama and purgation

[11] James Sullivan, *'*At home in a world of books*,' Boston Globe*, 13 September 2013.

in [Bidart's] work.[12]

Key themes in *The Sacrifice* include guilt and expiation expressed through, or in contrast to, the experience, distortions and torments of Christian faith, demonstrated both in the Nijinsky poem in relation to killing and war and in the previously discussed long poem 'Confessional', in relation to filial love. Nijinsky, with his Polish origins, was raised, like Bidart, as a Catholic. *The Sacrifice* was published seventy years after the first production of Nijinsky's ballet, *The Rite of Spring* and echoes the title of the second act of the 1913 Nijinsky ballet, an account of which is spoken in Nijinsky's voice in Bidart's poem. Act II of the ballet, the ritual marriage between a maiden from an ancient pagan Russian tribe and the sun god is present in Bidart's poem as follows (lines 300 -309):

> A young girl, a virgin, is chosen
> to die
> so that the Spring will return,–
>
> so that her Tribe (free
> from "*pity,*" "*introspection*," "*remorse*")
>
> out of her blood
> can renew itself.
>
> (*Collected Poems,* pp. 38 – 39.)

The maiden dances herself to death in expiation and sacrifice in order to save the earth: this is an expression of pre-Christian faith that symbolises the redemptive powers of human action or making.[13] The four performances of the ballet in Paris,

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[12] Liam Rector *The Sacrifice in On Frank Bidart: Fastening the Voice to the Page,* ed. Liam Rector and Tree Swenson, 130 – 134, p.130.

[13] This is certainly the interpretation favoured by Millicent Hodson who extensively researched the history of the original Rite of Spring ballet: stated in *The Search for Nijinsky's Rite of Spring*,

were enough to create a critical furore, as well as an audience riot in the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées. *The Rite of Spring* with its themes of tribal worship, bodily sacrifice and death, embodied in modern dance, was a pivotal artistic moment in Nijinsky's life and is carefully recounted in the poem. Nijinsky speaks to us of the maiden's acceptance of her fate:

> she knows that her Tribe, -
> the Earth itself, -
> are UNREMORSEFUL
> that the price of continuance
> is her BLOOD: -
> she *accepts* their guilt, -
>
> . . . *THEIR GUILT*
>
> *THAT THEY DO NOT KNOW EXISTS.*
>
> She has become, to use
> our term,
> a *Saint.*
>
> (*Collected Poems,* p. 41.)

The ballet narrative becomes a fable (within Bidart's poem) about a life that has been sacrificed to art yet also destroyed by the loss of that art. When Diaghilev dismissed Nijinsky from the *Ballet Russe* in September 1913 (on learning the news of his marriage) the star lost his future artistic life. Having pioneered modernist practice he could not go back to the traditional ballet. There is a deep pathos in lines 363-370:

> training in the traditional
> "academic" dance, -

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documentary BBC 2, 1989 this can be accessed here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l8TQH-5Vrhk [first accessed; 28 April 2017].

emphasizes the illusion
of *Effortlessness,*
*Ease, Smoothness, Equilibrium* . . .

When I look into my life,
these are not the qualities
I find there.
(*Collected Poems, p.* 42.)

Nijinsky speaks (in the poem) about it taking two months to write down the choreography of his ten-minute ballet, *L'Apres Midi d'un Faune* (lines 210 -218):

I rise from my books, my endless, fascinating
researches, notations, projects,

dazzled,

-- Is this happiness? …

I have invented a far more
accurate and specific notation for dance;

it has taken me two months
to write down the movement in my ten-minute

ballet, *L'Après-midi d'un Faune*…
(*Collected Poems,* p. 34.)

This struggle of Nijinsky's – to write down the notation for the body – is analogous to Bidart's struggle to capture the voice on the page through his practice of writing and rewriting of lines, sometimes over many years. That he uses dance as the metaphor

for writing emphasises the centrality of the body to human making and art.

Peter Ostwald, author of *A Leap into Madness*, a medico-psychiatric study of the dancer's life, says of Nijinsky: "He is one of the few dancers in history to be considered a genius."[14] Such a claim deepens the enigma of Nijinsky, a man famous for his art and genius who disappeared into institutionalisation, madness and illness. His mystery is further enhanced by his diary, which gives his own account of experiences of psychosis.

The heavily edited and expurgated English edition, first published by Nijinsky's wife Romola Nijinsky in 1936, was quickly claimed as a classic of confessional literature and is one of Bidart's sources. The unexpurgated edition of the diary, published in 1999[15] was described by Adam Phillips as a 'book by a perfectionist in praise of mistakes.' Phillips also says: "It often sounds like 'The Wasteland', but written by Fyodor Dostoevsky."[16]

Writing in the late 1970s, Frank Bidart reanimates this devastated man through the technique of prosopopeia (the poet speaking as another figure) through a dramatic monologue. The 'War' of the poem's title alludes both to the Great War so recently ended in 1918 (in Nijinsky's life; the moment of the poem is 1919) and the war of existential crisis and unreason held within Nijinsky's experiences, body and mind or his "soul sickness" as he himself names it. Or as stated in Bidart's poem (lines 672-675);

*MY SOUL IS SICK, -*
*NOT MY MIND.*

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[14] Peter Ostwald, *A Leap into Madness* (London: Robson Books, 1991), p.1.
[15] Joan Acocella, ed. *The Diary of Vaslav Nijinsky* unexpurgated edition (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1999).
[16] Adam Phillips, *'*The Diary of a Mad Dancer: Nijinsky in Praise of Mistakes,*' The Observer*, 2 August 1999.

> I *am* incurable . . . I did not
> live long.
>
> (*Collected Poems,* p.58.)

How does Frank Bidart construct the story of Nijinsky's existential crisis? Helen Vendler argues:

> Bidart's method is not narrative; unlike the seamless dramatic monologues we are used to, his are spliced together, as harrowing bits of speech, an anecdote, a reminiscence, a doctor's journal notes, a letter, an analogy, follow each other in a cinematic progression.[17]

Brooks Lampe goes further and interprets Bidart's work as questioning the role of narrative 'to decipher experience and achieve understanding.' [18] In contrast, Michael Dirda praises his storytelling abilities declaring:

> Part of his effectiveness comes simply from his ability as a storyteller: You long to discover what happens to his poor doomed people.[19]

Bidart himself argues that the great modernist works "are built on a brilliant sense of the power of narrative" – that "Narrative is the ghost scaffolding that gives spine to the great works that haunt the twentieth century."[20] The necessity of this 'ghost scaffolding' or finding a narrative structure through the articulation of different voices and allusions to other texts (perhaps as hauntings) is one of Bidart's original methods and certainly one he uses in this collection, 'The Sacrifice' which references not only the sources for his Nijinsky poem but also Nietzsche and *Ecce Homo*, The *Gospel of John*, the ballet *The Rite of Spring, The Confessions of St Augustine,* the work of Catullus and the Old Testament, specifically a rewriting of the first two chapters of *Genesis*. The collection also includes two personal elegies that both acknowledge two

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[17] Helen Vendler, Review of *The Book of the Body,* Yale Review, Autumn 1977, pp. 78 –79.
[18] Brooks Lampe, *Frank Bidart's "Golden State": Resisting the Diachronic Urge* March 25, 2011 on blog ThethePoetry < http://www.thethepoetry.com/2011/03/frank-bidart's-"golden-state"-resisting-the-diachronic-urge/ > [accessed 14 April 2015]
[19] Michael Dirda, *Washington Post* 'The Sublime and the Surreal', *Washington Post,* 3 March, 1991.
[20] Frank Bidart *Metaphysical Dog* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013): from Notes, p.112.

suicides, raising questions about contemporary modes of sacrifice, experiences of grief and expiation. 'For Mary Ann Youngren,' a poem of forgiveness, apology and memorial, is an acknowledgement of the particular experience of suicide; it tells of a friend who cut herself off from the voices of friends, unplugged the phone and decided to die because of illness:

> dying of cancer, eager to have the whole thing
> over, you nonetheless waited
>
> for your sister to arrive from California
> before you died, -
>
> (*Collected Poems* p.62.)

'The Sacrifice,' the title poem of the collection, also remembers another of his friends who killed herself, Mary Kenwood, in its stark opening lines:

> When Judas writes the history of SOLITUDE, --
> …let him celebrate
>
> Miss Mary Kenwood; who, without
> help, placed her head in a plastic bag,
>
> then locked herself
> in a refrigerator.
>
> (*Collected Poems* p.92.)

This is another encounter with guilt – the guilt of betrayal and fear – and is a reflection on another child-mother relationship that contrasts with, and yet reflects, his own. Whereas Bidart resists death following his own mother's death – as recorded in 'Writing "Ellen West" ' – Mary does not:

> *The solution,* Mary realized at last,
> *must be brought out of my own body.*

In part this poem meditates on the necessity of Judas' betrayal of Christ as part of the redemption story. If we are redeemed through his sacrifice we are also guilty: "Wiping away our sins Christ stained us with his blood." (*Collected Poems,* p.93.)

What is noticeable within these two short elegies is how connected they are to the circumstances of *life* in both cases. Bidart embodies his own grief in the poems so that we see their subjects, Mary Ann and Mary, neither as the speaking dead nor tormented ghosts, but as suffering beings. It is a suffering that begets suffering and is not ended by death, but rather by a horrified realisation, as the final lines of 'The Sacrifice' testify:

> When Judas writes the history of solitude,
> let him record
>
> that to the friend who opened
> the refrigerator, it seemed
>
> death fought; before giving in.

(*Collected Poems,* p.93.)

* * *

Bidart's Nijinsky is concerned with the *unf*amous and lost man; it consists of 709 lines divided in 18 sections or scenes with the first and last sections serving as a chorus; each section is separated by three dots across the page similar to the asterism used in the severely edited version of Nijinsky's diary published in 1936. In Bidart's poem the asterisms are scene breaks or may be read as cinematic cuts or fades. There are three clear voices in this poem and the story they tell is of the conflicts in Nijinsky's life and his encroaching madness, rather than his astonishing artistry. The voices we hear include Nijinsky's own dramatised voice juxtaposed with selected extracts from the second or documentary voice, mainly in extracts from Romola Nijinsky's biography of her husband. The poet is in the poem too, of course, as a

chorus voice and a haunting, speaking about his own work through Nijinsky's experiences: (lines 204 – 213):

> The *nights* I spend –
> reading and improving
> Nietzsche, analyzing and then abandoning
>
> my life, working on the *Great Questions*
>
> like WAR and GUILT and GOD
> and MADNESS, --
>
> I rise from my books, my endless, fascinating
> researches, notations, projects.
>
> dazzled.
> --Is this happiness? …
> (*Collected Poems,* p.34.)

The poem's circular structure (ending where it starts) conveys inevitable Bidartian irresolution and demonstrates that Nijinsky is stuck. He revolves in unreason, going over and over the dilemmas of his life, returning to the lines:

> --the Nineteenth Century's
> guilt, *World War One,*
>
> was danced
>
> by Nijinsky on January 19, 1919.

This is the date of Nijinsky's last disturbing public performance before a mixed, wealthy audience at Suvretta House in St Moritz. Before the performance he declared

that he was going to "dance the war" while also accusing his audience of failing to prevent it. This is told in a prose section of the poem (at lines 517 – 528, *Collected Poems,* p.50) and closes with the stark simple statements: "Tea was served. Nijinsky never again performed in public." January 19, 1919 is also the date on which Nijinsky begins to keep his diary over six weeks. His aim, to convey his message to the world (which included the necessity of *feeling* in opposition to thinking) turns into a document of his own madness. It is the voice of this diary that is dramatised in Bidart's poem.

The second section of the poem begins with an indication of previous speech or conversation through ellipsis, a sense that we are hearing Nijinsky in a continuing conversation:

> … I am now reading *Ecce Homo.* Nietzsche
> is *angry* with me –:
>
> he hates "the Crucified One."
>
> But he did not live through War – ;
> when the whole world painted its face
>
> with blood.
>
> Someone must expiate the blood.
>
> (*Collected Poems,* p.23.)

Not only is Nijinsky directly addressing us in the present tense – "…I am now reading…" - but he also says "Nietzsche/ is *angry* with me" emphasising 'angry' through italicisation, as though the philosopher has a current and personal animosity against him. This does two things. It conveys Nijinsky's madness through his inability to frame the material he reads as external to his own life and elicits in the

reader a sense of pity or sympathy in response. Of course, we also see parallel lives here. 'Ecce Homo' (with its subtitle 'How One Becomes What One Is') was the last book Nietzsche wrote before he was deemed mad: and 'Ecce homo' – "behold the man" from the Vulgate edition of John's Gospel (*John:* 19:5) are words uttered by Pontius Pilate as he presents the scourged figure of Christ, crowned with thorns, to the hostile crowd before his Crucifixion. The war conveyed here is not only the Great War but also the war between Nietzche and Christianity. When Nijinsky speaks of the philosopher's anger he is adopting the role of God. He had already claimed at his Suvretta House performance that it was the moment of his 'marriage to God'. The idea of the whole world painting 'its face with blood' evokes both the theatre and performance of war and leads to the pronouncement "Someone must expiate the blood." Nijinsky thinks of himself as God; the moment in which he speaks directly to us is just 2 months after the Armistice and 5 months before the signing of The Treaty of Versailles.

It is in the shadow of mass killing that claimed more than 18 million dead and left 20 million wounded that Nijinsky breaks down. In the dreadful moments of his illness Nijinsky takes on the world's guilt into his body and calls for atonement and expiation; he tries to analyse his own sufferings and confuses them with global violence and terror and he calls for expiation in the delusion that the 'god of dance' (as he was once called) has become God Almighty.

The next section of the poem (starting at line 15) contradicts the previous section and reiterates the word 'forgotten':

> No. Let what is past
> be forgotten. Let even the blood
> be forgotten - ; there *can be no* "expiation."
>
> (*Collected Poems,* p.24.)

This style of argument continues throughout, making the tone more desperate and inducing increasing anxiety in the reader. Nijinsky recalls his need for his former lover, Diaghilev, and his recoil from him, acknowledging his need and fear at the same moment that he wished to leave him (lines 36 – 56):

> -- Many times Diaghilev wanted me
> to make love to him
> as if he were
> a woman –;
>
> I did. I *refuse* to
> regret it.
> At first, I felt humiliated for him,--
>
> he saw this. He got angry
> and said, "I enjoy it!"
>
> Then, more calmly, he said,
>
> "Vatza, we must not *regret* what we *feel*."
>
> -- I REGRETTED
>
> what I FELT … Not
> making love, but that since the beginning
> I wanted to *leave* him…
> That I stayed
>
> out of "GRATITUDE,"—
> And *FEAR OF LIFE,* --
> and AMBITION…
>
> That in my soul,

I did *not* love him.

(*Collected Poems,* p.25.)

The lines about Diaghilev reduce the relationship to a list of conflicting emotions – refusal of regret, humiliation, anger, regret about feelings, the desire to leave, gratitude, fear of life, ambition – summarised as 'I did *not* love him' ('in my soul.') These emotions of regret are quickly followed by an acknowledgement of Nijinsky's fear of having another child with his wife. These fears gather a collective momentum to become (in lines 59-64):

the things a human being must learn –
the things a child

must *learn* he FEELS, -

frighten me! I know people's faults

*because in my soul,*
*I HAVE COMMITTED THEM.*

(*Collected Poems,* p.26.)

We encounter Bidart's idiosyncratic punctuation. The poem unfolds in staccato lines, hesitations, his unusual use of capitals and italics. In the opening sections inverted commas and capitalisations eg. "the Crucified One" and then CHANGE RENEWAL BECOMING (in line 24) indicate Nietszche's voice just as italicisation indicates Nijinsky speaking in the voice of God as well as his internal mad voice. Both the conceptualisation of God's voice and Nijinsky's concept of himself as joined with God's authority is found in the italicised announcement (line 18):

*Expiation is not necessary*

This section (lines 15 – 27, *Collected Poems,* p.24) is followed by documentary prose so that the poetic line

I am not Nietzsche. I am the bride of Christ.

is juxtaposed with a long paragraph from Romola Nijinsky's biography. The second short paragraph of prose (lines 28 – 35, *Collected Poems,* pp.24-25), in his wife's words, summarises and contextualizes Nijinsky's experience from an external viewpoint:

> He was planning a new and original ballet. It was to be a picture of sex life, with the scene laid in a *maison tolérée.* The chief character was to be the owner – once a beautiful *cocotte*, now aged and paralysed as a result of her debauchery; but, though her body is a wreck, her spirit is indomitable in the traffic of love. She deals with all the wares of love, selling girls to boys, youth to age, woman to woman, man to man.
>
> When he danced it, he succeeded in transmitting the whole scale of sex life.

The poem is structured throughout in this same way through juxtaposition of broken, hesitant poetry that slowly speaks of Nijinsky's domestic, relational, and family dilemmas and psychological torments as counterpoints to extracts from other published accounts of Nijinsky's life. His madness gains pace through the poetry while there is a clear, factual almost forensic account of his violent, difficult or impulsive behaviour told through extracts from other sources – the events they detail told in the past tense woven throughout in scenes (or sections): scene 4 covers his imagined ballet about sex (in lines 28-35), scene 6 tells of Nijinsky claiming he is feigning madness (lines 83 – 97, *Collected Poems,* pp. 27-28), scene 9 (lines 187-197, *Collected Poems,* p.33) describes his lost ballet of the Renaissance, scene 11 (lines 264-299, *Collected Poems,* pp.37 - 38) accounts for his reckless sleigh drive that frightened his wife and daughter, scene 13 (lines 410- lines 452, *Collected Poems,* pp. 44 - 45) describes how he threw his wife and daughter, Kyra, down the stairs, scene

15 (lines 517 – 528, *Collected Poems,* p.50) is a brief account of his last performance, and the penultimate scene (lines 691 – 702, *Collected Poems,* p.60) describes Diaghilev's visit in 1923 and ends (at line 706):

Vaslav shook his head. "I cannot because I am mad."

Of its 709 lines, 138 are in documentary prose and 571 in lines of poetry, broken and moving across the page.

* * *

Robert Richman protests that Bidart makes Nijinsky 'a sideshow freak' in order 'to deal with his own obsession with human casualties.'[21] Fred Chappell says of the poem that it is 'merely unnecessary' and attacks Bidart in the following terms: "Trying for urgency, he achieves hysteria; attempting wisdom, he manages platitude. A loud obscurity parades as mysticism. His own puerility fascinates him." [22] Both critics transfer a sense of feminised lyric shame to Bidart (inferring hysteria, foolishness, platitude) in their misunderstanding, misreading and, perhaps, recoil. Bidart's interrogation and representation of Nijinsky's life is prompted by his own origins and poetic formation in modernism as well as his abiding interest in human suffering. Indeed, in addition to the themes of faith and guilt we find the frustration experienced by Nijinsky in the inability to be understood – no matter how much he speaks, writes or dances he has no one to understand his dilemmas because he is mad; his art becomes inarticulacy, his virtuosic dance, stillness.

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21 Robert Richman, 'Two Poets,' *New Criterion* Volume 2, No 3 Nov (1983), p.71.

22 Fred Chappell, *On the "War of Vaslav Nijinsky"* in *On Frank Bidart Fastening the Voice to the Page* ed. Liam Rector and Tree Swenson, p. 115.

Frank Bidart encounters the real and the ghostly in this long poem and throughout *The Sacrifice*. His poems resound with the voices of the dead and his own grieving – or more precisely what Judith Butler terms 'grievability.' In *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* [23] Butler argues that in order to understand a life as liveable or grievable, in the context of war, it must first be recognised and apprehended as living. This is precisely Bidart's project. Grievability is shared between Bidart and the reader through his poetry's recognition of its subjects' liveable lives, even when doomed and desperate. In other words, his work is not full of historicised masks or speaking cadavers – or comprising what Diane Fuss calls 'corpse poems [24] – but rather he resurrects (and recognises) the dead either as ghosts (and thus disembodied voices) or, as with Nijinsky, he reincarnates his character through soliloquy making the constant presence of the poem an articulation of his subject's lived life at a moment of extreme psychological distress or trauma. He uses the trope of confession through soliloquy and sets this against the external judgments of others (eg. Binswanger, Romola Nijinsky) to create a poetic drama of existential pain. In doing so Bidart articulates something of his own 'animating emotions' of grief, distrust, suffering and fear, as well as memorialising a fragile man.

* * *

[23] Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* (London: Verso Books, 2015).
[24] Diane Fuss, 'Corpse Poem,' *Critical Inquiry* Vol.30, No 1 (Autumn 2003), p.1 – 30.

*Half-light* [25] – the title of the Collected Poems (2017) – is a quintessentially Bidartian title, suggesting as it does not simple illumination but shadow, not clarity of vision but dimness, when things cannot be seen too clearly. Although, of course perception is still possible, and essential in this poet's enterprise of half a century, the title also conveys both internal and external experience, the on-looker with perception clouded or dimmed and the external source of natural light diminished either at the breaking of night into day, or the falling of day into night, dawn and dusk, beginnings and endings, birth and death. In Bidart's poetry the human seer is subject to greater elements and experiences than can be contained in the mind or heart. Christopher Spaide contends:

> Bidart's tendency, swept up in divided ceaseless revolt, is to expand: intolerable propositions, even a single word, can detonate into forty-page sequences and book-length interrogations; *Half-light* itself can read as a single seven-hundred-page poem, reprising the same obsessions over its fifty-year composition.[26]

In addition to his previous poetry collections, a further 66 pages of new poems – including 'The Fourth Hour of the Night' – are published together under the title *Thirst.* In the notes to *Half-light* Bidart admits to making changes in format of three poems; 'The War of Vaslav Nijinsky,' 'Confessional' and 'The First Hour of the Night'. He explains why this is necessary, as previously noted:

> None of the words are different. But in terms of punctuation and "set-up," they seemed to me too often spoken *à haute voix,* as if declaimed to the last row of the balcony. I have always heard the voice in them more intimately. They increasingly to my eye lacked this intimacy. I have tried to modulate the voices, by shifting punctuation, spacing, pacing.

He decries what he sees as his youthful judgmental tone in his poem *Book*

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[25] Frank Bidart *Half-light* Collected Poems 1965-2016 (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2017).

[26] Christopher Spaide, 'Poetry in Review: Half-light: Collected Poems, 1965–2016, by Frank Bidart,' *Yale Review* Jan 2018, Vol. 106 Issue 1, pp.178 – 191.

*of Life*:

> This is the first poem I wrote about my family. The four-line refrain now makes me wince – such confidence about what the alternatives are, such speed in judgment. Hard to encounter in writing one's old self. I feel some version of this throughout the book, but most acutely in *Golden State* (1973) *Such confidence about what the alternatives are.*
>
> (*Collected Poems,* p. 672.)

The four-line refrains he refers to is as follows:

> Its memory is of poverty,
> not merely poverty of means
> but poverty of history, of awareness of
> the ways men have found to live.
>
> (*Collected Poems,* p.174.)

*Such confidence about what the alternatives are;* the commentary reflects both age and experience, and is a mark of the poet's compassion for his younger self (as he doesn't alter the poem) and the lives his parents lived. It is also a mark of Bidart's motivation; he writes and continues to write because he is never satisfied with what he has written.

Bidart's famous dramatic monologues demonstrate that the strategy of his poetics rests on the four pillars of voice, autobiography, sources and survival. This strategy can be seen to work throughout his collected poems, and is exemplified in his new poems including the title poem, 'Half-light' (*Collected Poems* p.603) as it embodies paradox and duality both in its structure, themes and figurative language. It consists of 36 lines arranged in 18 couplets across two pages with the familiar, intimate, autobiographical lyric voice of the Bidart that was first heard (read) in 'California Plush' (*Collected Poems,* p.163) incorporating a variety of time zones; of now and memory, of 'that crazy drunken night' and 'yesterday' of the unattainable future (when both the poet and dead friend he addresses might have become 'broken-down old men') and 'all the years we were | undergraduates.' This is a poem about

the irreconcilable aspects of a lived life, unrequited love, memory and regret and, as always with Bidart, a continuous conversation with the dead. He feels compelled to tell his old friend, now he knows his friend is dead – of his adolescent passion.

> We haven't spoken in years. I thought
> perhaps at ninety or a hundred, two
>
> broken-down old men, we wouldn't
> give a damn, and find speech.
>
> When I tell you that all the years we were
> undergraduates I was madly in love with you
>
> you say you
> knew. I say I knew you
>
> knew. You say
> *There was no place in nature we could meet.*

The italicised line is a repeated line from part II of his earlier poem 'Confessional' concerned with his filial relationship with his mother. The earlier poem states that there are two sentences our protagonist "can't get out of my head" – '*Forgiveness doesn't exist'* and (as punctuated in the first poem):

> THERE WAS NO PLACE IN NATURE WE COULD MEET.

This line, his earlier verdict about his relationship with his mother, now becomes a verdict about the poet in the voice of a dead man. It is a conclusion of sorts about human love and shame, self-identity, Oedipal longing, sexuality and its humiliations, friendship and loss. It is difficult not to hear the accusation and awkwardness in the repetition of 'knew' and 'you'. It also implies the question, Bidart's own riddle, of '*where in nature can we* [the irreconcilable] *meet?'* It's a question central to his poetics – and one he attempts to answer in the first new poem in *Thirst* – 'Old and Young' (*Collected Poems*, pp.599 – 602)*;* this is a meditation on looking at someone else in a mirror, of an old man

looking at a young man in a long mirror "backstage as you | prepare | for a performance." It might be about an old man, like Frank Bidart, looking at a younger man such as the actor, James Franco. Over four pages the poem asks whether anyone has made a film about two people looking at each other (and talking to each other) through a mirror:

> trapped but freed
> neither knowing
> why this is better
>
> why this
> as long as no one enters
> is release
>
> because you are
> twice
> his age
>
> THIS IS THE PLACE IN
> NATURE
> WE CAN MEET
>
> space which
> every other
> space merely approximates

(*Collected Poems,* p. 601.)

The mirror is a metaphor for the place in which Bidart has encountered his subjects, his torments, his research and themes of human connection and breach; it brings together the concepts of the male gaze, the voyeur, reflective artist and the study of human nature. It is the medium through which Bidart resolves the repeated dilemma: THERE IS NO PLACE IN NATURE WE COULD MEET – a line and concept he returns to, to articulate filial disobedience and the anguish of unrequited love. In 'Old and Young' he declares, at last:

> THIS IS THE PLACE IN
> NATURE
> WE CAN MEET

The mirror is the medium not of solipsistic reflection but the place through which the poet looks outwards to art and making:

> suddenly inspired not
> to look at each other
> directly but held by this third
>
> thing
>
> (*Collected Poems,* p. 600.)

> Making is the mirror in which we see ourselves.
>
> (*Collected Poems,* p. 346.)

Bidart's mirror – and solution to the divisions and paradoxes of human suffering – is, as it has always been, poetry, his art of making.

## Chapter 6: Reading Bidart and Writing Poetry

### 1

Two broad areas influenced my motivation to research poetry and madness. The first, concerned with the epistemological privilege of survivor experience as expressed through poetry – which can be construed as a form of outsider art – is prompted by my own experience and knowledge of being a psychiatric patient, and reflected in the original collection of poetry (*The Sensational Nellie Bly and Other Stories*) that forms part of this study. Epistemological privilege, a concept developed from Standpoint theory, is the idea that those who are part of a minority or marginalised group have special knowledge and expertise linked to this marginalisation. 'Survivor' is a political term adopted by those who have used psychiatric services and escaped/survived them. Survivors' Poetry is an organisation first formed in the UK in 1991.

The second area of influence is in the relationship between mental health and poetry that, for me, is linked both to my professional work as a writer and creative practitioner and my experience as a service-user (or psychiatric patient), linked to episodes of unipolar depression since the age of fifteen. I have worked as a poet in mental health services since 2009, developing writing projects with patients and service-users,[1] encouraging and facilitating performances and publication of their creative work for friends, family, other service-users and a wider readership. To

[1] The recent National Involvement Partnership survey by the National Service-Users Network (whose ethos embraces the social model of disability) demonstrates that people prefer to be described as having "lived experience of mental distress" or as "*service-users*." (My emphasis). <https://www.nsun.org.uk/FAQs/4pi-national-involvement-standards > [accessed 12 December 2017]

express or articulate the experience of mental distress in and through one's own voice can be therapeutic and transformative. But what is distinctive or important about poetry in this context?

'*Survivors' Poetry from dark to light*' includes the following statement in its introduction:

> Survivors of the mental health system are a disadvantaged group within the community, frequently denied access and opportunity. In common with other disadvantaged groups, survivors of the mental health system have a unique voice and experience to communicate to the world. Our poetry has a right to take its place alongside other forms of radical poetry.[2]

The claim is one of political protest, of voicing marginalised experience, of claiming epistemological privilege; survivor poetry speaks of both political alienation and suppressed identities: it developed out of the work of the Mad Pride movement,[3] in particular the Campaign Against Psychiatric Oppression (CAPO),[4] as a reaction to experiences of twentieth century psychiatric incarceration. It is poetry that demands a particular place, as a means of reclaiming personal experience that has been systematically denied or ignored. Survivors' Poetry held regular workshops in London in the early '90s and their first anthology included the work of three artists and fifty-four survivors, many of whom developed their poetic voices through these workshops. As Peter Campbell notes in his preface to the book:

> One great challenge for survivors is the establishment of our own identities. We are not only survivors of a mental health system that regularly fails to meet our wants and needs. We are also survivors of social attitudes and practices that exclude us and discount our experience. Many of the identities society would have us assume – the mental patient, the vagabond, the tragic victim of disease – are

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[2] Frank Bangay, Joe Bidder & Hilary Porter, editors *Survivors' Poetry from dark to light* (London: Survivors' Press, 1992).
[3]Robert Dellar, Ted Curtis, Esther Leslie editors, *Mad Pride: A Celebration of Mad Culture* (London: Chipmunka Publishing, 2003).
[4] CAPO was formed in 1985 and disbanded in the early 1990s.

> ones we would never choose for ourselves. [5]

Each poem in the Survivors anthology seeks to speak out not only against negative societal attitudes but also to claim "a right to take its place." For many who are service-users of the psychiatric system, it is not simply removal of liberty that marks their experiences of illness but also a consistent denial of their feelings, experiences and thoughts; it is a dominant and imposed silence, a denial of expressivity. As Campbell also states:

> For many of us, a central feature of our lives has been the way, at one time or another or even repeatedly, our perceptions, thoughts, ideas and feelings have been taken from us and possessed, processed, interpreted and described by others who have limited sympathy with who we are or who we might become.

In making a claim for expressivity, for affect, these poems of survival are predominantly lyric poems of autobiography and witness; they invest in the power of voice to claim and tell stories of pain, rejection, and loss, from Rosemary Dillon's contemplative lyrics to Paulette Ng's songs of protest:

> …Then we'll just twist your minds a little,
> put some blocks on your humanity
> We'll just screw you up and wring you out,
> Saying this way back to sanity…
> Yes, we'll screw you up and spit you out,
> Saying this way back to sanity …[6]

Survivors' Poetry continues to provide a platform for protest and expression through its regular meetings at London's Poetry Café and the magazine Poetry Express Newsletter. It offers an artistic means of protest and articulation for those who wish to speak against prevailing systems of control and regulation in the mental health system and can be seen as a form of outsider poetry in which lyric voice is claimed as a right, as a means of constructing and reclaiming dignity and identity. It

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[5] Bangay, Bidder and Porter, Preface.
[6] Bangay, Bidder and Porter, Paulette Ng 'The Mental Health Rack', p.54.

follows the romantic tradition of voice, expressivity and lyric. In its drive for particular voices and a particular audience it can be argued that in contrast to the crisis of self, acknowledged in experimental, linguistically innovative work, this is a poetry that forms part of what Wills calls a *possible post-modern development* in *the proliferation of specialist poetries* in the second half of the twentieth century:

> While the much vaunted collapse of the distinction between high art and mass culture cannot easily be mapped onto contemporary poetry, the increasingly specialised nature of poetry, aimed at particular audiences, can be understood as part of a movement towards local narratives, the rise of Identity politics and the continuing proliferation of sub-cultures. [7]

My original interest in considering poetry and mental health was to develop a study about my work with service-users in the National Health Service but this presented me with ethical difficulties: such a study would not only change the culture of our creative workshops (where I am accepted as a poet and also trusted as a person with lived experience of mental illness) but also require a change in my role to one of researcher, with workshop participants as research subjects; also, many of those with whom I work in creative settings do not identify themselves as "survivors" or align themselves with the survivor movement. This uncertainty about my role encouraged me to look at more literary methods of research as well as leading me to question and examine the value of the work I do in institutional mental health settings: this search also speaks to the problem Survivors' Poetry seeks to address:

> Through poetry and music, visual arts, writing and action we must fight for a broader understanding, a re-evaluation of individual experience.

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[7] Claire Wills, 'Contemporary women's poetry: experimentalism and the expressive voice,' *Critical Quarterly,* Vol 36, Issue 3, (September 1994), 34 –52, p.34.

It can be argued that survivors of the mental health system experience suppression of the expressive self, so the use of the lyric voice, the quest for the unified self, is a deliberate and necessary artistic strategy that makes a claim for survival poetry as poetics of alterity. Alternatively, it can be argued that while Survivor Poetry provides a particular literature of the experiences of madness it is limited in scope as it does not have a wide audience, it operates mainly in the romantic and lyric mode and its motivating raison d'etre is protest against institutional mental health systems. The epistemological privilege of the mental health survivor provides a dynamic element to the quality of voice in survivor poetry but it is a problematic strategy in contemporary poetics for it uses the norms of romanticism and lyric. It is part of my project to explore the limits and possibilities of lyricism and anti-lyricism in my own poetry.

**2**

My collection of poetry, submitted as part of this research, is divided into four sections designed to work together to give a layered imaginative account (including an autobiographical one) of the experiences of those subject to psychiatric attention and incarceration. The historical context is given through a retelling of the story of Nellie Bly, one of the first female investigative journalists in America, who feigned madness to get admitted, in 1887, to the asylum on New York's Blackwell Island in order to investigate and expose conditions there. In contrast, as a dramatising exploration, I also tell another story from the late 1960s when the American psychologist David Rosenhan organised an experiment (widely known as the "Thud" experiment) in which he (and eight colleagues) gained admission to a variety of

psychiatric institutions in America; they sought to test the ability of psychiatry to detect the sane, and their findings were published in the controversial, well-known study *Being Sane in Insane Places*.[8] These stories are good anchors for the poems and the different times and settings helped me to imagine conversations between these two very different characters. My poetry also seeks to engage with polemical matters around psychiatry as well as with what it means to be a subject.

Parts 1 and 2 come under the category of 'Other Stories' and the first section contain poems that consider the autobiographical experience of being on a psychiatric ward. The first poem 'This is Really a Ghost Hospital' sets a tone of loss, stuckness, invisibility. 'Tell-tale' is a Petrarchan sonnet that places the monolith of the medical model against faith and introduces the idea of being silenced; 'The Ward at Night' seeks to evoke the loneliness of the patient and introduces literary reflections through references to Romeo and Juliet, Marvell's 'To His Coy Mistress' and mad Miss Flite from Dickens's 'Bleak House,' a woman who finds comfort in naming her birds yet never receives a judgement. These intertextual references are acknowledgements of influences as well as aiming to build the layers of meaning in the poems through acknowledging the power of the imagination (and other poems and books) in making poetry. 'The Ward at Night' also considers the loneliness, isolation and fear of death one experiences in mad places. 'Treatment' is a parable of sorts using the cat as a metaphor for invisibility or unrecognised identity. 'Patrimony' is a poem linked to my own family history of inherited grief and an experiment in opening up the shape to have more air in it, so that the form works against the threat of death in the poem. (I feel a strong need to gather all the words in again to make a closely fitting long

[8] D. L. Rosenhan,'On Being Sane in Insane Places,' *Science*, New Series, Vol. 179, No. 4070. (Jan. 19, 1973): 250 – 258.

rectangular poem so I am not certain this is its final form). Part 1 also contains a short prose piece, 'Locked Doors,' (again, autobiographical) and a five-part poetry sequence that aims to dramatise the experience of being 'away with the faeries.' Part 2 is a series of poems written as part of a collaborative project with photographer, A.J.Wilkinson and these are responses to his autobiographical photographs 'Sleeping in the Middle.' Three of these poems experiment with, and adapt, Terrance Hayes 'golden shovel' idea of framing poems with lines from work by Gwendolyn Brooks but here I use lines from other poets. In three of my photograph poems I have worked with lines from William Blake, Emily Dickinson and Thomas Wyatt as an acknowledgement of influence and form. Part 3 interweaves the story of Nellie Bly's stay on Blackwell Island with David Rosenhan's experiences as a pseudo-patient. Part 4 is entitled 'And' as I wanted to include work that both continues links from the earlier section and enables the poems to move towards something different. 'Pseudo-Patient no 9' had to be placed before 'Rosenhan's Final Confession' in order to get the shape of the collection right.

> In his recent essay about his own poetics Frank Bidart states:
>
> > …When a writer imagines a poem he or she imagines a shape there, there were there was nothing. How, by what process, is the new shape imagined? Writers use very different terms to describe this experience. They experience it in different ways. Neither poets nor theorists will ever agree on how to describe it. All I can offer you today is how I have conceptualized my own practice.[9]

In this essay Frank Bidart conceptualises his own writing practice by discussing his poetic response to Borges' short essay 'Borges and I.' In his poem of the same name Bidart refutes the claim by Borges that writers have two selves, one that writes and one who lives. Bidart's contention is rather that it is through writing that the self lives, even

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[9] Frank Bidart, 'Pre-existing Forms: We Fill Them and When We Fill Them We Change Them and Are Changed,' *Salmagundi* No 188 –189 (Fall/Winter 2015), 613 – 626, p.613.

to the extent that the world (and pain) of the poem seems to become the life of the writer:

> But Frank had the illusion that his poems also had cruelly re-placed his past, that finally they were all he knew of it though he knew they were not, everything else was shards refusing to make a pattern and in any case he had written about his mother and father until the poems saw as much as he saw and saw more and he only saw what he saw in the act of making them.
>
> He had never had a self that wished to continue in its own being, survival meant ceasing to be what its being was.
>
> (*Collected Poems,* pp. 274 – 275.)

This not only claims that his poetry becomes his remembered life but also that survival is only possible in eschewing the separate (non-writer) being: for Bidart poetry is his life, the purpose of his life is to be an artist, to make his life into poetry. His essay also gives an account of pre-existing forms that have influenced him whether this is the work of Ovid or a song performed by Al Green. He shows how the structure of the Al Green rendition of 'For the Good Times' lies behind his poem 'The Yoke' even though this has become invisible to the reader of his poem.

Reading and studying the poetry of Frank Bidart has enabled me to think deeply and more critically about my own writing – the structures or 'pre-existing forms' that influence me and the way I make meaning through certain pre-existing forms (such as song), that claims a relevance through the subject matter of the poem, and a proper shape of voice through the poetic form used. Bidart's idea of pre-existing forms has helped me to interrogate my own writing practices. His exploration of embodiment is also helpful as it acknowledges many 'not-poetry' aspects of poetry, which he describes as: "something that struggle[s] to find existence through the medium of language, but whose source [is] not language."[10] A key example of this in his own work would be

[10] Ibid p.618.

both the dance and madness of Vaslav Nijinsky. A list of such 'not-language' sources might include motivation, suffering, place, emotional sensations, weather, experience of memory, gesture, dream, hunger, desire, fear, bodily pain, the instinctive need to escape, the dissociations and dislocations of madness. Bidart also offers a useful metaphor of 'grip'[11] that is helpful when thinking about one's own motivations for writing.

What gripped me in the writing of these poems is the need to question the prevalent received wisdom about madness that is shaped and dominated by the psychiatric medical model of treatment and categorisation. I have wanted to write poetry about madness for a long time but have previously been anxious about the personal and painful nature of this subject. I have considered madness before in single poems engaged with memory and elegy or other characters. What also gripped me was the need to make poems about particular subjective experiences that encounter the monolith of psychiatry; both Nellie Bly's 'Ten Days in a Madhouse' and David Rosenhan's 'Being Sane in Insane Places' provide these particular experiences and can be considered two of the 'pre-existing forms' that I have used in making my poetry collection. It did not seem enough to provide my own experiences through the poems of autobiography in Part 1 of 'Other Stories.' I wanted to give the personal poems the ballast of a wider context to make a more serious and engaging collection. Contemplating this decision led me to frame the poems not simply in relation to biography and autobiography but also through ideas of story and narrative and, in one earlier version, more extensive photographs and images.

I removed the images connected with madness from the submitted collection of poems because they would require too extensive an explanation here about the ambition to incorporate emblematic explorations of madness as well as narrative ones.

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11 Ibid: "Writing this, I felt gripped by something that struggled to find existence through the medium of language, but whose source was not language."

Nevertheless, the need to explore what may be seen as emblematic has been added to my writing process as a consequence of studying Bidart. He has taught me that to search for frames and pre-existing structures or influences when making a poem is a necessary part of writing – as is the attempt to embody those aspects of affect and emotion that are most often absent or suppressed in the experience of mental illness and other contemporary life experiences (as well as being dismissed in terms of the shame now attached to lyric and Romantic poetics).

I have considered other pre-existing forms in shaping these new poems including paintings, photographs, other poems and autobiographical experience, songs and prayers. In my own writing, and published collections, influential pre-existing forms would include songs, lyrics, stories, nursery rhymes, photographs, radio broadcasts, cinema, matters of faith and doctrine, prayers and specific poetic forms, especially the sonnet and ballad.[12] My earliest influences and formation in poetry have been discussed elsewhere and include the work of Blake, Keats, Emily Dickinson, Wallace Stevens, Tony Harrison and Stevie Smith. I have previously considered poetry in relation to human pain being linked to emotional life and suffering – something I find in Bidart's elegies for dead friends and poems about his own experiences of growing up gay in an intolerant age.[13] What has been particularly instructive in reading Bidart is the question of how one can write most effectively about subjective experience while escaping 'the chauvinisms of the self'; my own previous approaches to subjectivity have included explorations of autobiography, collaborative practice with artists from

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12 Pauline Rowe, *Playing Out Time* (Formby, Driftwood Publications, 2005): Pauline Rowe, *Waiting for the Brown Trout God* (West Kirby, Headland Publications, 2009): Pauline Rowe, *Voices of the Benares* (Belfast, Lapwing Publications, 2014).

13 Pauline Rowe 'Going to Poetry' *The Reader* No 33, (Spring 2009) p.74 –76 also included: Maria Isakova Bennett interview with Pauline Rowe, *The Honest Ulsterman* June 2016 < http://humag.co/features/carried-in-your-heart > [accessed 12 April 2018]

other disciplines and an exploration of voice as a dramatic channel for story-telling or witness.

In 'The Sensational Nellie Bly and Other Stories' there are four strands of experience that work together to consider ideas about madness and subjectivity; the Rosenhan study (including the Rosenhan 'voice' and 'Pseudo-patient No 9'), the biography of Nellie Bly, autobiographical poems and poems seeking appropriate metaphors of madness and the frame poems written in response to photographs. The questions and matters I have encountered in working on redrafting these poems are questions of observation and ethics, about my place and position in my own work and the limits of subjectivity. I have also had to think more carefully about lineation, form, the layers of meanings in words and the purpose of rhyme in relation to meaning and sound. As part of the process of writing the poems I have been searching for metaphors and new ways of articulating the experiences of mental illness both as subject and as observer. A brief discussion follows of my own approaches to writing the poems 'Tell-Tale' and 'Pseudo-Patient no 9.'

**3**

The poem 'Tell-Tale' started with the memory of the children's rhyme: *Tell-tale tit, your tongue will split…* This rhyme entered my mind when I was thinking about a physical health problem (in contrast to mental illness) that necessitated a biopsy of my tongue. I can't articulate where or why these phrases or lines start in my mind but a poem often starts this way with a loose phrase that stays with me. The actual medical process of biopsy that I experienced was quick, straightforward and very clearly explained. I had to wait a week for the result of the biopsy. The doctor of the poem does not remain a doctor of the body. He becomes the archetypal figure of medical

authority that, through slicing the tongue, silences and stops the patient from speaking. There are prayers in this poem – where faith is better placed in the power of St Blaise (on whose saint day there are ceremonies for the blessings of throats) rather than in the drugs of Astra-Zeneca and Roche. We are once again in the realms of mental illness and competing discourses around madness. The sonnet seems to me the best form to inhabit when approaching issues of contradiction and paradox.

The Petrarchan sonnet form enabled me to engage with disputed ideas of health. The first quatrain raises the question of the power of the doctor, who physically slices the tongue and also possesses the power to silence song – this procedure serving as a metaphor for how the medical model reduces the human being to a biological unit. The second quatrain questions spiritual faith and belief in both supernatural healing and the body's own power in contrast to pharmaceuticals; the third quatrain brings the devil into the poem through a reference to the curing of the madman (Luke 4: 31 – 37). In the Gospel story the madman cries out to Christ "are you going to kill us?" and it is the voice of the demon within him who speaks. The precarious sense of self and mortality is acute when in hospital with a label of mental illness. I wanted to get this sense into this sonnet. This poem also engages with the meaning of the tongue for speech, health, its sinfulness, and sensuality. There is a question here about the role of the poet as outsider:

Unsure which portion cast me from the fold.

It took some time to decide where this poem should be placed and reading and studying Bidart has made me understand more about the cumulative effect of poems in a collection and how they must work together to create tone and meaning. This is the first poem here borne out of personal and autobiographical experience so it seemed right to place it second, to follow on from the setting of place as a

disappearing hospital – as autobiographical experience is only one element in considering art and madness. I want to also communicate the pain of the experience beyond the personal story, to invite the reader to become each character with a voice in this collection.

**4**

One of my main motivations in writing these poems has been to explore and express the experience of being silenced because of mental illness. I find a renewed encounter with matters of permission – when is a voice allowed to be heard? What can it mean to give voice to an experience of invisibility? This question is considered below in detail in my discussion about my thinking and writing processes when making the poem 'Pseudo Patient no 9'. Is this voicing against invisibility what am I grasping at in these attempted poems of madness? Why do they take me to matters of the mouth and the body, to darkness and sound?

I wanted to write the poem 'Pseudo-Patient No 9' in 2015 when I first discovered the work of David Rosenhan. It struck me as both astonishing and tragic that he excluded one of his 'confederates' from the reported results of the experiment *Being Sane in Insane Places*. Surely he was doing exactly what he thought psychiatry did every day to people in need of understanding. I became even more concerned to find a voice for the excluded pseudo-patient as he was excluded in particular for inventing a history for himself, for telling stories as a way of surviving his experience of detention. So the added dimension of not only being 'sane' but also a 'story-teller' was important. I read more about Rosenhan's work. The excluded pseudo-patient is only mentioned in footnote 6 of the original report in *Science* magazine. This subject struck me as an important metaphor for how science, psychiatry and experimental

psychology exclude human individuality even when these disciplines seek, as Rosenhan did, to expose the myths, dangers and excesses of psychiatric practice and institutional mental health systems.

Writing 'Pseudo Patient No 9' caused me a lot of difficulties – in part, this is because I consider it an important poem in the collection. Without this poem, without this subject, Rosenhan would remain a kind of hero or ideal figure but the fact of foot-note 6 and what it records seemed to me to demand attention. Rosenhan's exclusion suggests something rotten - at least worrying and imperfect - at the heart of the Rosenhan experiment and without the materials and means to investigate Rosenhan's papers, and interview all the surviving people who were involved in the experiment, at least the question about this person, this silenced person, can be posed and dramatised in a poem.

The voice took me nearly two years to find. I found Rosenhan's voice quite quickly through the help of recordings, his famous paper in *Science* and the BBC Radio 4 programme about his work. He was urbane and civilised, compassionate and concerned, a man of faith as well as science, someone who was in the final stages of his studies to become a Rabbi (studies which he never completed) when he entered the hospital as a pseudo-patient. Best of all his ambition was to challenge the monolith and deceptions of psychiatry. He had all the makings of a hero. He is a contrasting voice to Nellie's unthinking enthusiasm, self-invention and self-aggrandising approach to everything she attempted to do. But behind the champion there is an echoing of exclusion found in the story footnote 6 tells. This is why I use the footnote as an epigraph:

> Data from the ninth pseudo patient are not incorporated in this report because although his sanity went undetected he falsified aspects of his personal history, including

> his marital status and parental relationships. His experimental behaviours therefore were not identical to those of other pseudo patients.
>
> David L. Rosenhan 'On Being Sane in Insane Places,' Footnote 6.

It was finally finding a structure for the poem that helped me complete it. Out of pages and pages and pages of notes I tried to frame a beginning, middle and end to capture the experience of the number 9's voice. He was a willing and keen participant in Rosenhan's work. He invented a life that wasn't his when he was incarcerated in hospital. He was denied a place. Perhaps he always missed Rosenhan. These imaginings helped me with the order. It then struck me that it was necessary to build the poem around number 9. So in its penultimate draft it consisted of 9 stanzas and each line, except for the final line, had nine syllables, with each line insisting on nine sounds and each stanza insisting on nine lines. The final line moved to ten syllables to claim the world of story and poem – to resemble that central iambic pentameter line of English poetry. I want the art of language rather than the stories of madness to have the final say here. However, I found something too restrictive and closed in the syllabic structure so the final version of the poem is more broken and has more air in it than I originally envisaged.

The extended opportunity to study, write and think through the aesthetics and complete works, to date, of Frank Bidart has given me renewed confidence to write about matters that are relevant and important in our society and the world, not just in my own life. It has also taught me to write more slowly and carefully, to refuse to accept a poem if its form does not reflect its meaning, to be more certain about the paradox of formality and emotion, about experimenting with lyric and line, feeling and intellect, polemic and personal pain.

# The Sensational Nellie Bly
# and
# Other Stories

# 1

# Other Stories

**This is Really a Ghost Hospital**

It looks hospital. Regulation beds. Stamped sheets.
People who know the code. Different tunics.
Pink, grey, green, teal. Black and blue.

*

Greyscale light. Everything crashes
back: a waxy woman
walks the corridor pauses

stops
stands from breakfast
to lunch

at night when lights go out
but never quite completely

her batteries spark
she halts in surprise at her
own animated shout

"I'm a bit of a miracle,"
an index of memory.

At the shift change the building rises
from shallow footings,
floats

on space between its floors and earth –

I see a crowd of women trapped
who can't return a look; –

dissolve particle by particle
as breath turns to whispered words,
words to water and tissue to dust,
solute, solvent, solution.

Our own mad people
invisible in plain sight.

**Tell-tale**

A doctor slices tissue from my tongue
releases rising rifts of shaken sound
defies the broken skin to leave me bound
up, silent, touched; he keeps the cords of song:

dumbstruck ventriloquized ageusiac
I pray my body's grace will seal the wound
for benedictions from St Blaise, confound
the fix from Astra Zeneca and Roche.

Raw wool against my spit
stopped every noun.
A week of artful deaths, reprieve and sorrow
"Have you come to kill us?" – words I borrow

though not yet cleansed of love, nor speech nor sound
unsure which portion cast me from the fold –
the biter, top, the tip, its pull or hold.

**Patrimony**

When she died they buried me with her,

they buried her as dead as I was quick,

when her body's flesh began to melt – mandible, ribs, femur, clavicle –

I heard curses, like serpents on a petrifying head
(an ounce, a hiss of tempest fuelled the cell).

The rot breathed in breathed out along and through

the punishment of bones.

I felt forcefulness of atmosphere, tested the timber's dark

resistance

dampened with exhalations – slow, swollen gasps of air.

I sang along the humerus, scattered fun-sized leaves

in metastatic ecstasies.

I weakened the constraint

a steady shove of hatred pushed the lid

welcomed in shadow-light of a day's dawn,

dissolved the barricade.

I rejoiced,

excavated outwards upwards, felt

the warm earth against my corium

how I started again, stealthily

(little buttermilk mouldywarp)

how I landed in the fresh, bright day in contemplation of another home.

**The Ward at Night**

The madhouse stripped of colour,
occupants drugged dull and duller
*the mask of night is on my face.*

The phone is full  no breathing space
like messages, regrets
small change locked tight

the women all want cigarettes.

Each of us has left the world,
electric light is low but never out.

We line the corridors in disgrace
*The grave's a fine and private place.*
Like stations of the cross we wait, kowtow.

Blue's a name for health and many songs.
All the people we used to know
illusions to us now.

Long gone exemplars of remembrance –
real, unreal, vision, dream – hidden in our shames;

for one, I made an imprint of her face
gathered in cloth, pressed after love;
rain falling on my shoe.  A snowy dove.

Then, an attic prophet, I named my birds:
Baby, Periwinkle, Navy Knickers, Electric,
Pfnstuf, Cornflower, Catweazle, Cobalt,

Crystal Gayle, Sky Blue, Joni and Miles, Sleep-tight,
Mother's Pride, Omo, Dolly Blue, Midnight.

**'Away With the Faeries'**

Buses, radiator drums, cars whispering in their wheels,
a small hand runs a stick against park rails

unstopped house alarms, hammers inside paving stone,
shushing trees, the outdoor ringing tone.

Water hurts my eyes, rain rushes for the drain
frosted hieroglyphs across the bedroom window pane

pins, needles, smoothing irons, scissors, pans and pails,
window latches, hinges, hammers, horseshoes, nails,

blood circles in my skull –

precious scabs, buds, scars, souvenirs of red,
artefacts of cloth, wood, wall, boxes we construct to burn the dead.

Open mouths and vixen corpses spinning in the flood,
a closely woven basket, one tall woman in her widowhood.

Traffic lights, tulips, bricks, post-boxes, acid-litmus, sanctuary lamps,
lipstick, ladybirds, sealing wax, frayed lining in the coats of tramps.

I hear no signal of disorder in my room
an absent wash, perhaps, the failure to resume
cleansing rituals, the Hotpoint on-off spinning boom.

Detritus – of driving gloves, string, spoons, the grease-hard floor,
curdled milk in glass, maps of mold that thicken by the hour,
blackened walls, anointed crackling, burned flesh kept in a jar
where some forgotten man was killed by cabbage,

cough drops,
sugar lumps,
tar.

**Voice 1:**

hush little lady don't say a word
everybody thinks you're a cuckoo bird

everybody thinks that your life's absurd
hush little baggage, not one word

hush little mother, go to sleep
close your eyes in the fire, in the deep

no more breath, take a pill, not a peep

**Voice 2:** (in incantation)

fingers puncture eyelids, scratch
sticks poke ears, pierce their drums
hair's pulled out in single strands
nails prised out from bitten thumbs

morning light fill her eyes with grit
waken her with bruises, scalp to toes
let her bite her tongue, her teeth grind, split

we curse her when she sleeps so no-one knows

hush silly mother, go to sleep

hush now, lady – close your eyes,
no more music, no more lies

no one knows what a big surprise
when the old cold damsel cuts all ties

hush old lady, go to sleep
close your eyes, make a final leap

no more breath, take a pill, not a peep
hush old woman, go to sleep

bilge water rise, rise and rise - until she falls
we eat her body, bit by bit
scrape her teeth with bones and poison oils,
stab her tongue with thorns to make it split

now she thinks we've changed her for another

so long ago she never knew the start
whether she is mortal feels in doubt
there is no feeling in her hurried heart

**Voices on the ward (in chorus):**

we drown young men in lobster pots,
cut off young girls' hands,
seek revenge for petty slights,
do not allow amends

wager with the devil
glory in early death
by any cruel and tortuous means
we poison heart and breath.

**Two alternating voices:**

**Man:**

visions of rope, of rivers,
railway lines and racks

strategies of smotherings and smoke

plots of painless palliatives, poisons, pills

goodbye everybody, farewell, so long

**Woman:**

*where the heart must either break*
*or turn to lead*

*I shall be more silent and cold-*
*hearted when I'm dead*

*all will be over, I shall fall asleep*

too many times, too many times –
things just went wrong.

**Treatment**

I seem a little manic
for a home-grown grimalkin.

I stalk shadows through the night.
Day by day my limbs grow thinner.

I've an instinct that an anaesthetic deep
inside me might be triggered

by the pressure of my head.

He hurls a stick for me to catch.

I bring the cold mouse
killed the night before.

He takes it by the tail, commanding *Fetch.*
I feel a little blood rise in each paw.

I force my skull
against the doctor's leg.

I scratch the wooden arm
of his consulting chair.

I love each sharpened claw.

He puts a collar round my neck,
my throat catches on a tiny fist of fur.

I'm a breathing curlicue. I lie down
inside a yellow pool of setting sun.

(I see the master has fine whiskers
yet he cannot see the cat in me.)

I smell the scuttling muck – approaching dark.
I cry – call out – I try to bark.

No one in the world can hear me now.
Meow. Meow. Meow. Meow. Meow.

**The Locked Door**

When pregnant with my fourth child and close to term, my daughter, who was then two years old, locked me in the living room. I do not know how she managed to do this. My quiet calling could not elicit her interest in returning to the door. The windows to the street were sealed and I had no key to get back into the house even if I were able to negotiate an escape. In instinctive and practical fear I put both hands around the doorknob and tried to force the inward facing door open. After a search of the room I found a disposable Stanley knife in the corner desk draw and tested the distance of the lock barrel by slotting the blade between the edge of the door and the doorframe. I started to shave the wood away until I had carved a crescent into the wood, creating a gap between the doorjamb and the lock so there was now a space where the catch had held. The incident lasted no more than ten minutes, during which time I made constant theatrical pronouncements: "If you could just come to the door darling"… and I prayed the usual prayer of desperation …*Hail Holy Queen, Mother of Mercy*; "Mum's here. I won't be long. Don't worry"… *hail, our life, our sweetness and our hope.* My heart was thrashing about in my chest and ears as the baby had a good kick in sympathy. I kept to the task, flakes of wood falling like pencil shavings. Then the door gave way. The relief of the accomplishment, when the door opened, caused a kind of heat through my whole body, bones and heart. My daughter was hiding her head in her hands at the turn of the stairs. She was silent in the knowledge she had made me disappear, and hiding her eyes to make herself invisible. She was shy in the face of such power - and sad. I kissed and held her and did my best to reassure her. She did not cry. But she had lost a little faith in me, I think, to take such time to come back from behind the door. I delivered the new baby the following morning; he was fairly swift with his entry into the world, with his own instinctive push to be free. This small drama comes back with just the sound of a click, the heat of a June afternoon or the false reverence in the voice of a doctor. How painless it is to lock a door, how impossible to open without the power of the key.

**If I sleep, I dream of the dead**

You come back to remind me of everything I said
alive, and though I hear I do not comprehend,
like a war song in winter, you are gone, my friend.

Formless, you stand next to me,
there's no reach between us.
I wake up and expect snow.

The blue dawn of the room
threatens a world of white; I know
the shadows are inside the house.

A crow flies where the cloud is torn
the black of night in fragments
through its wings.

What follows from a dark of dreams?
A day in double time that strikes and seems
to scold me for the time I have to live
too late to make amends. You can't forgive.

I cannot love you now. I brim with blood
and dreams of you can never do us any good.

The room is full of old furniture.
The doll at the end of my bed has no eyes.
There's no rest with the dead.

**I drowned not in water but in dust**

My unbreathing head raised,
carefully conveyed
to the *Angel and Elephant*
half a league from the church.

"You're too young," shouts the land-lord
"we'll lose our licence. Come in."
The women hidden there were dull with gin.

The medical assistant shook his head
*Too late for electricity*, he said.

You cleaned my mouth, my nostrils
with strips of soft cloth
eased inside me.

The *John Smith's* ash-tray,
full of blackened bodies,
tadpoles, tar.

These late ablutions
didn't take us very far.

Breath, the principal thing
to be attended to
was stopped with dust,
it made my lungs all glue.

The dust - *your* sprinkling,
the dust was you.

The medical assistant
raised his hand,
*Does anyone here*
*possess a magic wand?*

The pipe from a pair of bellows
fitted in my left nostril, my mouth blocked
and half nose, an attempt to inflate my lungs.

Life did not appear.

The medical assistant lit his briar
*she is full dead of dust*
he murmured - *little liar.*

It was then they put my body on the fire.

# 2

# Frames:

# Poems to be read aloud to photographs

**The dead rehearse**

looking alive
all the time hop
into view when least expected

daylily peach, or flashes
of red in black,
beaks polished with worry

wings scattering dust
in an effort to be noticed.

Sometimes, mostly at night

they escape glass, iron, wood,
paper, granite, skulls

and try to sing.

**Dear Ghost**

My children left
a memorial of feathers

in the green stone wall,
praised the warm loam
beneath the coping-stone.

I was an ugly,
dead amphibious thing,

you carried me home like kill.

I found evidence of my life in the gaps
between ancient stones and

blood cleaned
from the sharp axe-blade.

**Fainting I Follow**

Who - why - when – how did I follow you
to the margin so extreme that to list
your perfections would not exhaust me

and to think of your body,
to study it like a scientist on a wild hunt
for vital evidence through the night, in a storm -

for I cleaved to you,
came to know your contours,
pelt, and stink, to hold

where you were most wounded;
what I dreamed, though
is impossible to recall.

Just ahead of me, always,
you seem, creature, to be preserved,
moveable, eternally lost to me,

bloodlessly tame.

**It all starts with light -**

how a face shines
from the shadows like the dream of a saint

the way wood comes from the world
scolded by wind and rain,
before it joins and serves us in flat offerings --

it all starts with fruit
a human hand
takes it from the tree

Satsuma, Ortanique, Okitsu, Minneola,
Clausalina, Fina, Marisol, Clemenvilla

covered, in cool crates above the clouds
in vessels on the routes of birds
to reach us in our Christmas ravings and regrets,

orange and green like Ireland
shadow and light as marriage
wax coat and flesh, sharp rind and sweet juice
the promise broken once the appetite sets in.

**Punctum**

I recognise how this childish arrow
pressed with deliberate study
makes measurements of loss.

None of us can look away
from the bulls-eye

or the fear that this vermilion “O” -
is a love letter or mouth of grief -
for someone who will not read it.

Perhaps it’s a warning
to the faeries, to stay away

or a confession,

it will paralyse
anyone who sees it;

fix them in the circle of blood
stuck on the picture window.

**Dark Secret**

O forced through my breath, I
rose solitary to the day

thou, the beat in me
art draws me fast away

sick with visions

the shadow that is not

invisible, nor your mirror
worm-worried by the rot

that death did not divide us
flies like the guilt of dust

in sure speed of faithlessness
the lack of hold, what's lost.

Night lapses into sleep,
into sorrows' absences

the unspoken frames of darkness
howling weather, broken senses
storm, wreckages, consequences.

*

*H*as she started her day already –
*found* it much simpler to be miles away
*out* of the bindings, vows, ties
*thy*, thee, thou – your
*bed*, you both made
*of* your bodies in the
*crimson* dusk

*joy* exhalable
*and*
*his* kisses
*dark,* her
*secret* buried in his bones – ?

*love* like an arc light
*does* its work well,
*thy* dreams extinguished:

*life* happens and happens, to
*destroy* what once was everything.

**Crown**

Perhaps she's the cousin of the mother of God,
her veil fallen in a moment of divine grace
as she feels her child move.

Behind her the façade imitates the cross.

Perhaps she's Mary herself, hair snow white
with shock at seeing him crucified?

Perhaps she's a wife shaking her hair free
as she remembers the Liturgy of the Word

between

*he came down from heaven* and
*became incarnate of the Virgin Mary*

and

*he became man*

she recalls the instruction in the text
*all bow,* it says

yet no one does.

**The Letting Go**

as I remember we were
freezing in high rooms,
worn out on Monkgate like old
persons rehearsing a winter marriage,
and the day after,

in resistance to sorrow, we tested pain
through new objects, a
spoon sometimes or formal
letter or toy to weigh the feeling
like ink in a reservoir, how it comes

out in blots and stains.

I remember the music you played, its warmth in the room –
rehearsals, repetitions –
snow – – filling the flat roof below our kitchen window.

First we held on to each other until the
chill of the season entered your heart
then I slept through dark nights in a
stupor until your green bones stretched,

then you remembered the path and the way,
the pilgrimage you had to make, the urgency of
letting me stay behind, your insistence:
“Go before I start wishing you were you dead.”

**Late Meeting**

When you asked about
ballistic stretching with therabands
I knew there was no future in it.

I asked you to repeat the words
just for the pleasure of your voice.
I paid my way and left the tip.

All the way home I assured myself
that twenty years changes a face:

without the fright-wig and pan-stick
I couldn't be sure it was you.

**Pilgrim**
*after Tom Wood*

(for my son, leaving Liverpool, Jan 2018)

*"the Photo mat always turns you into a criminal type wanted by the police"*
Roland Barthes

The first time I took you
further than the local shops
my skin was still loose
my bones precarious,

on our first morning journey to the river
through the exhalations and dirt
of the bus terminus

to a café where old men
face the same way without speaking

I took you to sit in a machine,
turned a potty-plastic seat
to its highest setting

closed a rough textured curtain
to record my disappearing face.

Look how separate we were, even then.

You – balanced on my lap
wrapped up tight against the cold.

I took time to read instructions
thinking how good it was
that no one could see
my uncertainty or fear.

You were my infant accomplice, my alibi.

I held you close and waited
until four damp frames appeared,
identical, upside down.

Like all new mothers
I needed to find an image
to study and imitate,

to avoid detection.

# 3

# The Sensational Nellie Bly

**A Madhouse Air**

Mr. Dickens couldn't stand
*the terrible crowd –*

words, exasperations, circumlocutions,
parentheses fixed from his inky pain,
across the Atlantic, home to London,
Paris to Gad's Hill and back again.

At La Saltpetrière,
the maniac points his finger
at the guards in vain.

In Kreuzlingen private sanatorium
the better class pick and touch torn
faces. Mouths are little O's of hell, men
with bony hands pull lips like chicken skin.

*…terribly painful,*
*everything had a madhouse air.*

Brentwood, New York
where Allen Ginsberg's mother died.

At Overbrook, 24 patients froze to death in bed
gaslight shadows, arms of silver trails,
holes – a thumb's width –
left in hollow faces.

Topeka State Hospital, Kansas
54 men castrated like cattle,
walked in circles searching for their names:

catalogues of stolen souls in bricks
their minds extracted – stored in slated roofs,
brown teeth and bitten nails
between the walls and greasy tiles.

McLean's, Massachusetts
with its famous roll call –

David Foster Wallace, Ray Charles,
Robert, Anne, Sylvia,
John Nash, James Taylor

*…this sad refuge of degraded humanity –*

each in their lonely days when
they could not find a friend.

**Breakthrough**

From broadsheet to spine I was
compelled to do what I did, say it as I did,
let the world know what a woman can do.

Madness was easy. The hardest part remained
my inner life, against this flesh,
as single as a beeswax candle.

The toughest matter, a corset
made of silk and bloodless bones

that kept my breath as though compressed
by a man's grip; I descended to the living
dead,
rose again
on the eleventh day.

**Trial**

In the working women's' boarding house –
84 Second Avenue, New York –
I refused to rest.

In the night mirror, an unblinking rehearsal –
I watched my face, and practiced looking mad, for days.

I sat upright, stared ahead all night,
sacrificed all sleep,
(like an actor returning to his script)
*face to face with self.*

One woman stayed from kindness
as I named the crazy
ways their faces changed.

"Poor child, poor child," she said –
held my hand while others were afraid.

Mrs. Stanard called the police
when I refused to leave –

In the station house
I played at make-believe,

ferreting about for a doll-spoon
and a single shoe.

**The Courtroom**

The crowd of men pushed forward
like dehydrated cattle at the
water trough.

I sensed the heat rise up,
the sound of blood and far away
a calling man his sing-song cry
"She's a daisy.  She's a daisy true."

In the Essex Market Police Courtroom
I came before Judge Duffy,
kindness in his face
like a close fitting suit.

"This young woman doesn't know
who she is or where she's from."

They argued about evidence in my voice.

*When did you come to New York?*
"I did not *come* to New York"

all around me, the papery faces of the poor,
what an old story I was.

Judge Duffy asked the matron what she knew.

She told him that I booked a room and stayed
but did not go to sleep.—
for fear the other women there were mad.

The judge thought me a lady with a voice,
a dear one and pretty one, well dressed.

"I'm positive she's someone. Someone's darling.
She reminds me of my sister who is dead."
He judged me to be Cuban.

"I have a headache,
all the time forget."

I jumped up, ran about, assumed an agitated manner,
freed myself from constraints, gave my cavortings
permission to take hold.

The ritual of the court kicked in,
ceremony I knew from other work

they summoned an ambulance surgeon –
and I confessed in sorrow and apparent grace
"…my memory is lost…"

I danced a little more.

Judged Duffy told them to be kind to me.
and hoped that I would very soon be free.

**Dropping the Act**

The clever-looking doctor
like a tufted diving duck
in his river element,
has his target.
*Sit. Put out your tongue.*

His yellow eyes,
fragments of gaslight.
*Put out your tongue when I tell you!*
*You are sick and I'm a doctor.*

An ember caught my skirts
*I am not sick, I am not sick*
*and never was.*

Everyone must see
my sanity and soul
my breath takes every sound
fast, faster, fast my heart
is hurried, whispering –
sssh, ssh, sssh, sh, shush.

I rang out like a ship's bell.
For ten days.

Warders unyielding as any warrant,
rubbed me out,
sure in their faith.

I lived in a place of wreck and ruin.
It made my name.

**Chaperone**

"One for the pavilion"
the doctor's voice an auctioneers
with poor young Nelly Brown
as bargain of the day.

The undernourished crowd sighed
to see the new unfortunate,
as though the playing out of power
were as good as a cold repast.

The ambulance surgeon
walked me through the well-kept grounds

to the insane ward,
to the rooms of broken women,
to the cells of hard billets
to the buckets of black water,
to the atmosphere of excrement and fear
to the rules and orders
to the white capped nurse,

"Take off your hat. You are staying."

I heard my voice as though
in another mouth – repetitions
like childhood disadvantages
or the sound of guns.

"I am waiting for the boat."

That first insane night
ruminant noise of nurses
kept us all awake.

The food was filthy, festering like a wound.
They removed my clothes.
"Do you see faces in the wall?
Do you hear voices? *Tell us* what they say."

As though I had strange powers
beyond the world, powers they longed to kill
or claim themselves.

Then a parade of visitors,
each one scrutinised my face,
tried to see the skull beneath my skin,
the pickled brain beyond,
a specimen in a case.

**From David Lucie (aka Rosenhan), 1969**
(investigator of the 'Thud' experiment)

*After being admitted for the first time*
*an attendant led me to the day room.*

*Pointing to a chair he said:*
*"You've missed your dinner."*

*After an hour and a half*
*someone brought a tray.*

*And I prayed:*
When pain and illness
are my companions
let there be room
in my heart
for strength.

*I was uncomfortable*
*I had no idea*
*where the bathroom was.*

*Nor did I know*
*where I would sleep*
*or where my belongings were.*

**Captured, 1887**

Across the Lethe I went out
with other souls on the wide water

the guards, dank-mouthed villains,
one spitting out tobacco on the floor
another with an isolated icy stare.

The gallows would be easier than this.

Women all about me full of fear,
locked up, labelled lunatic.

One whispered in my ear:
"We have to be quiet
until we can escape."

Another begged our guards: "Please try all tests – you'll see…"

Then they measured me
height, weight
while flirting with each other
doctor – nurse.

The piano in the sitting room
was out of tune.

I played a sprinkling of horrible notes
'Home, Sweet Home'

then the talking stopped.

**After Supper**

The women asked for music once again

I sat quite still and played another tune,
Miss Tillie Maynard sang quite beautifully –

some chattered nonsense to invisible companions;
another tearful, one laughed aimlessly,

a grey haired woman nudged me, nodded, winked
"Do not mind them, they're mad."
She raised her eyes and gestured to the door.

Miss Maynard sang out loud.
a clarion to call any sort of aid.

She sang a baby falling from the trees.

When the nurse calls
the chatter will stop

when the heart breaks
the spirit will stall

and down fall the women
the end of us, all.

**What David Did**

*The staff stayed in the nurse's station.*
*We could see them. They could see us.*
*There was no contact.*

*What does one do here?*
*Is there a phone?*

*Can I call my wife – and children?*
*When will I see a doctor?*

*When can I get my clothing back?*

*After 4 hours, fearful*
*of an accident*
*I asked another patient:*
Where's the bathroom?

And I prayed:
when the days and night
are filled with darkness
let the light of courage
find its place.

I was there though I hardly existed.

**Bath-time on Blackwell Island**

In the end we all give in –

a crazy woman scrubbed at me with rags,
rub – rub – the guards came in,
tipped ice-cold water on my head,

I felt my breath stop, then
howled, from animal to laughter
in a rush of smoke that signalled

ice, verglas on the walls, the floor,
and every human heart made glacial,
stuccoed in hoarfrost.

They dressed me in a sour flannel slip,
labelled round the hem in large black forms –
Lunatic Asylum B.I. H6.

Shivering I heard my death,
the gelid cell walls closed,
hair dripping like a pocket watch.

I cried out for a night-gown.
A jailer snorted like a hunting dog,
She laughed – “no kindness here.”

Once the door was locked
I had no power.

In my weakened mind, all night
the constant thought of fire.

**From David**

As though madness is a trade union
or an ancient land like Israel
there are secrets or codes
you must know, to belong.

"You are in league
with the patients," they said.
Yet I knew my office –
the importance of time on the wards

like an investment or a prophet
as sure as a priest's death invocations
sure where I slotted, as sane as a key.

The turns I could find to free obstacles,

to unfasten small lawful boxes,
to read like the first publisher who saw
potential powers, not a pig's ear:
and all those confidential files,

men trapped by sentences,
character after character
lined up, regimented, typed.

It was difficult to take it in –

once the key was turned
my name was lost.

**Nellie waking**

Dawn washed the wall, a memory of light
a fractured second, a trip of sleep, my mind
trawled back to day, delivered by the din
to get up now, to dress in alien clothes –

humiliations from the night before.

Breakfast, a joke of grey dough, a saucer of oatmeal
with molasses. A choke of cold tea the only thing
consumed before we set to work.

The patients here clean up everywhere.

The nurses armed with combs came in,
commanded us to sit like naughty girls,
teeth dragged through matted hair.

Day started with torments on our heads,
a reign of blows and insults.

I set my teeth hard, tamped as gunpowder,
myself an escutcheon, endured the pain.

I saw Miss Grady with my notebook
and long lead pencil.

Her hands were clenched
as though she held a prize.

When I asked the doctor I was told
'There never was a pencil.
Fight against the fancies of your brain.'

**Promenade**

We put on Coney Island white straw hats,
walked two by two into freezing air

the smell of violent women from the Lodge
reached us before their bodies
yelling, cursing, singing, praying, preaching
*the most miserable collection…ever seen.*

Until the women 'on the rope' came by
*each busy on their individual freaks,*
bound together with an absolute stamp
of madness. Women everywhere.

We kept on, foot then foot, tormented by the scent
of new made bread rising from the kitchen
Insults, scornful words and wounds from nurses,
putrid provender, vile victuals, no sleep…

I saw one woman kneel to pick a fallen golden leaf
shouted at – "Leave it on the ground."
Inscribed on the wall behind her
were the words *While I live I hope,*

guarded by ageing hellions in whose mercies
perfect angels would cry out, hopeful for the deep.

**Last Days**

Louise, a pretty German girl,
carries her dead parents in her hair.

They seem to like it there –
observant, safe.

The doctor pinches her ribs
to force her to obey

she prays for snow
for frozen nights
so she can stray,

never wake again
to face the orphan day.

> Another young girl mourns:
> *I dreamed of my mother last night,*
> *she will come today to take me home.*
>
> The blue-eyed Irish girl
> walked and walked,
> each step marked by her cry:
> "I'm damned for all eternity."

Old and young, tiny, small,
pretty, ugly, thrown away
by their kith, their own nativities,
for lack of currency to help them stay
outside the reach of devils –

or the moolah, readies, loot,
boodle, lolly, dosh
to pay for protection
to live untouched.

Patients like ghost sailors
rooted to the bottom of the sea
in stone awe longing for the city,
admiring heaven from below.

Without my back-up plan
I'd still be there,

singing a song of saneness
to the cold.

**I Became David Lucie**
***after Elizabeth Bishop***

> *"Strange to say, the more sanely*
> *I talked and acted,*
> *the crazier I was thought to be."*
> Nellie Bly

This is a father
bearing a name
that tells the sane
of the insane men
who hide in the bin of Mayhem.

David, the name
that I held as mine
the time that I lived in Mayhem.

Lucie the name I
chose to adopt
of the scientist man
who hid in the bin of Mayhem.

This was the path
that nine of us took
bearing our names
that tell the sane
of the insane men
who rule every roost at Mayhem.

"Thud" "empty" "hollow" – the words we all used
to keep on track like Joan of Arc,
led by the father
bearing a name
that tells the sane
that powerful men
determine the laws of Mayhem.

This is a prof in a patient's hat
who fancies teaching everyone
more than the sinking ship of fools
more than the father
bearing a name
that tells the sane
of the brutish plan
that governs all houses of Mayhem.

This is the world of the DSM.
This is the prof in a sick person's cot
who fancied teaching everyone
who sails the sinking ship of fools

of the lonely father
who bears the name
who tells the sane
of the only plan
that governs all houses of Mayhem.

This is the nurse who locks the door
to keep all the doctors safe from harm
from the nosey prof in the poor patient's cot
who fancies preaching on and on
who wants to pilot the ship of fools,
such a lonely father
who knows his name
who calls the sane
to attend to the plan
that lies about life in Mayhem.

These are the minutes, hours gone before
we forget the nurse who locks the door
to keep all the doctors safe from harm.
This is the prof in his patient old hat
who tells and tells to the day he dies
of the loneliest ship of fools
where the saddest father
forgets his name
cries for the sane
to remember again
the lies at the heart of Mayhem.

This is the woman saved from the war.
These are the seconds, the minutes before
we forget the nurse who locks the door
to protect dear doctor from all harms
of their hands. What of the prof in his hat?
He whispers words in his old age cell.
He's lost. There's nobody left to tell.
He's a crazy father
who has no name
cries all the same
for the wretched souls
who live out their lives at Mayhem.

**David Speaks of Experience**

Madhouse corridors –
    glazed tiles shining,
        high rooms  for lost cries –
have no fluid philosophy

or assured practices
that hold human beings
in kindness.

Nobody told me.

        Context corrupts
the truthful heart.

Before I could sleep
I needed to eat.

I needed to know
where the bathroom was.

I gained secret
admission, yes,

but as my true self.

**Everything Looks Pathological**

Waiting, eating, writing,
wearing clothes.

Everything looks pathological.
Nobody talks to you.

They discuss your case
while you're there.

Nobody comes to visit.
Nobody sees you.

But they watch you in doorless cubicles
struggling for dignity having to pee,
trying not to.

Nobody hears you.

When you ask a question
they look through you.

Your body smoke, your mind ash.

I can hear my own words:

*I can get you in, but I can't get you out,*

to the others – all of them sane
in insane places –

**By-lines**

1885 **Lonely Orphan Girl**

Nellie Bly, Nellie Bly, bring your broom along
tell the tales of women brave and sing a little song
sing the songs of women poor and make the fires burn
keep the flame alive for us until we take our turn.

1886 **Nellie in Mexico**

Hey, Nellie! Ho, Nellie – listen, love to me
I'll honour you, remember you
with this sweet melody.

1887 **Inside the Madhouse - All The Doctors Fooled.**

Nellie Bly close your eyes when you go to sleep
dream a world of motherhood, of loving care to keep
dear children with dear parents safe, secure at home,
future all provided for – no more need to roam.

1890 **AROUND THE WORLD**
**A Continuous Trip Which Will Girdle the Spinning Globe.**
**ON TIME!**

Hey, Nellie! Ho, Nellie – listen, love to me
I'll pity you, mourn for you
with this strange melody.

1893 **NELLIE BLY AND THE TIGER**

Nellie Bly, Nellie Bly, never sigh, never sigh
never let those tears fall from the corner of each eye
fathers die too early and mothers love their sons
truth is often told by the tongues of orphaned ones.

1894 **NELLIE BLY AT PULLMAN**
**Misery and Suffering Among the Strikers in the Big Parlor Car Works**
**WHAT THE WOMEN SAY**

1895 MR & MRS NELLIE BLY

Hey, Nellie! Ho, Nellie – every word you write
disappeared so quickly
through the tidal turns of night.

1896 **NELLIE BLY AS AN ELEPHANT TRAINER**

Nellie Bly, Nellie Bly, voice as soft as lovey doves
we hear her over breakfast, in our parlours and our clubs,

Nellie Bly, Nellie Bly, heart as honest as the moon,
she cannot tell a lie my dear, the truth's her only tune.

Nellie is a widow.  Nellie goes to war.
Nellie cares for Mary Jane,
for family more and more

for cousin, nephew, niece,
her brother steals her profits,
her mother prays for peace

her mother weeps, in spite of tears she takes her thief-son's part –
and Nellie says: *My words are written only from my heart.*

Hey, Nellie!  Ho, Nellie – listen, love to me
I'll honour you, remember you
with this sweet melody.

Hey, Nellie!  Ho, Nellie – listen, love to me
I'll pity you, mourn for you
with this strange melody.

**Dear Mother**

You are a spiteful thief-bird, like your son.

I can no longer be fooled by your desires
for gold and protection.

Your gait is slower of late,
your croak diminished

your beak no longer precise
in its stabbings – it is time

to take the telling of tales
from your back, one by one,

the shine from your gatherings,
bit by bit, the reach from your claws

(slow now in their barky pre-
historic clutchings)

in full knowledge of your fall
to earth
find silence, disrepair
like dishonourable fruit

while I let the air take me up
hold my blue funks and promises
wide to my limits on the drifts

a kite staked out against the sky.

**Nellie Bly's Notes for a (never written) Letter to her Mother, Mary Jane, Jan 10th 1921**

1. May I remind you that I have had to wage my life as a war.

2. I was just 6 when my father died but I know he was the noblest of men and I have lived my life to honor him.

3. Without him I was always an orphan.

4. Energy rightly applied and directed can accomplish anything.

5. Even when you failed to safeguard the money for my education I found a way.

6. At the age of 25 I circumnavigated the globe in 72 days, 6 hours, 11 minutes, 14 seconds.

7. I have lived a public life. I could never be a slave or doll as most women are.

8. Death, which leaves no opportunity for forgiveness, is the severest reproach one can harbour in heart and soul in the very grave.

9. I take my leave of you with a clear conscience having provided you with a home, security, clothes, fine furniture and every comfort you could wish.

10. As you well know, mother, I carry my own bags.

11. I have lived with the mad and rejoiced.

# 4

# And

**Making Faces**

(*watching 'R.D.Laing Has No Face' on You-tube*)

You look like a fine,
Russian dancer
or mime artist.

Do you follow the news
in the dark or shadow land –
can you hear us think about you?

When we read your books
are you released
from some small agony?
Like a plenary indulgence?

I watch your face become
your mother's face
- what you remembered
as your mother's face

how you try to emulate
her mask of sorrow,
in your own features

the expression that flooded
her cruel face, one rare day –
when your father brought home
a birthday gift, a small box
within a larger box;

anticipation deliberately engineered
for his pleasure,

fragments of him,
ten cut toe-nails
from his dirty, hard feet.

**This is the gourd I found**
**for Giuseppe Arcimboldo**

There's too much talk
about his puzzle-making.

Some say he's mad
to see fruit in faces
everywhere.

I hear him in his studio
"where's the red pear
for Vortumnus's nose?"

"find me a crab
for the Admiral's ear."

"Air has to have a peacock
for an arm."

My table was a poor
affair, he said

though I was proud
of the gourd I found.

It took hours to bide,

wearisome conversations
in the marketplace
with hawkers.

That's what it takes, he says,

waiting of the essence,
as important
as the work itself.

He tries to comfort me,
says it would suit a bible story

the colour of the flesh
too bright for Autumn

too small for the girth
of the waiter

not quite big enough
for an edible
emperor's chest

Art comes, he says
(with some sadness)
from the waiting.

**Cutting the Stone**
*after Hieronymus Bosch*

He longs for sleep, it drives
him to wander the open fields
to escape the threat of gryllos
in ecclesiastical gloom.

The destitute man
beneath the wideness of a summer sky
reaches the tribunal at parish limits,

where the powerful hold a pouring jug, a red book,
the instruments of small theatre.

A surgeon and a monk attend, assisted by
a nun who wears the book upon her head.

They bind each subject to a chair,

monk and nun pretend to pray
a mime of incantations,

the surgeon drills the skull,
in which a tulip bulb pretends
to be a stone

through which the victim's heart
is terrified,

in which the stone pretends
to hold the key

to start the spark of folly.

**Pseudo patient No 9**

> Data from the ninth pseudo patient are not incorporated in this report because although his sanity went undetected he falsified aspects of his personal history, including his marital status and parental relationships. His experimental behaviours therefore were not identical to those of other pseudo patients.
>
> **David L. Rosenhan 'On Being Sane in Insane Places'**
> **Footnote 6**

Unlike the happy doctors, I'm erased,
tranquilised and uninvented –

yet long to be consoled by footnote 6
even in its absencing, a sign

I'm not the disappeared –
that I was there.

In the state hospital the nurses
come from their setts darkly
to pretend the stink of earth is care.

They are deeply afraid of the mad, of the mind.

I remember written words –
drugs and the names of drugs,
they made me eat their words;

prescriptions are never
poems but verdicts –

doctors make rare
appearances like ring-masters
they arrive and depart.

Still at night the house floats like a boat,
I see through small glass frames my neighbours
watching a box or sleeping in frames.

I have been deleted many times.

All renditions say that there were eight.

He did to me what he tried to prove
that doctors do inhumanly
to those they label mad.

Privileging science above all.

The more I try not to think of it,
I think of it.

I was sane then as now.

I can't sleep tonight,
the old gutters of my heart spill over
as memories run away from me like rain.

My bare feet search for the wood
on the floor of the old bungalow.

The insane not the sane smell the sane
but the sane, they never know the sane.

None of us know sanity at all
unless we are mad. I am not mad.

The normal are not detectably
sane. I sacrificed more than the rest
losing my place.

I *wanted* to be married.

My wife was an artist, trained in song –
I put her on the stage in Rome and Paris.

Flying back to me for autumn as
though a migrating bird swimming back
against storms to be with me again.

My new friends liked my wife best of all.
So sweet in nature and voice yet not at home
in the difficult seasons. This helped
me to fix the house, cut the grass.
No one imagined me a cuckold.

Best of all, my loving mum and dad.
After the final pills of the day
I'd settle down, tell of how we'd sing,
dad playing the piano by ear.
A voice like Hoagy Carmichael's –
*Old buttermilk sky.*
Mum would harmonise.
*I'm telling you why-hy I'm so blue…*

Why music, I'm not sure.
But when I closed my eyes
music came to me,
strengthened my bones,
a kind of inheritance even
though my parents, long divorced,
never sang together.

In the hospital we were terrified by power
shining down the corridors each day

their glasses and their shoes, instruments
twinkled like the Colgate smile.
Hair clean and clothes immaculate.

Low voices humming with cruel words,
their sentences judicial, holding without trial
the name of another fiction.

A myth-kitty of scientism.

I'm too old to fight. Back then I was
too crushed.

Rosenhan is dead, he spent his final days alone,
his mind in different places, bereaved.

I always miss his friendship.

Even now I dream he puts me back in place.

After death he's learned that stories keep
the provenance of everlasting grace.

**Rosenhan's Last Confession**

I am in a storehouse for people nobody wants.
My friends are waiting somewhere else. Close by.
I am longing to see my wife.

When I ask – the woman says "Fa-cil-i-ty"
in a slow loud voice. "FOR THE FRAIL ELDERLY."

Am I old now? Will this change tomorrow?
The insane are not always insane.
The old not old. The ceiling is low for a hospital.

I'm waiting for my wife. My father watches me
through the wall but never speaks.
(Am I writing this down or just thinking it?)
It's not like him.

I can see through the glass to the weather –
a neat courtyard with a bench,
nine small bay trees in pots.
I want to see a different flower in each.

No one ever sits there. Even in the sunlight.

Today I'll make a list of important things:

Clean feet.
Open doors.
Company.

Thank you.

Coffee.
God.

After you.

Road safety.
Friendship.
Cut nails.

Please.

Forgiveness.
(Did I tell the truth?)

Socks.

**Residents**

*But all the bloomy*
*flush of life*
*is here.*

I rejoice
to find a pillow
for my shattered head.

In this place it is
the blessed pledge
of everyone
*more bent to raise*
*the wretched*
*than to rise.*

From spendthrift
to broken soldier,
we ask our guests
to sing for us –

willow girl
and wounded,
sing for us,

grieving widow,
forgetter,
father-frail sing for us,

voice and spirit follower,
witch and wanderer,
sing for us,

fast talker, fool,
flake and freak,
sing for us,

ever-hungry,
Feste, clown,
half-wit, ass
sing for us,

worry-worrier,
constant washer,
non-talker, howling man,
compulsive scribbler,
sing for us.

Head case,
cuckoo, dullard,
nut and radge,
commune with us.

Zany, banana,
maniac,
nincompoop,
commune with us.

Moon-struck,
simpleton,
fruit and kook,
poltroon and loon,
commune with us.

Screw-ball, cake,
let old things break
commune with us.

*You too can claim*
*a kindred here and*
*have your claims allowed.*

(If I could remember
how I got here
I would send a map
though you will know
this place by the fireside
you can sit beside,
open door and touch
that's neither
paid for nor begrudged,
the extra chair
at the table,
water freely shared,
where walls
are without mirrors
and no-one wears a watch.)

Here it is
the blessed pledge
of everyone
*more bent to raise*
*the wretched*
*than to rise.*

**Postlude**

My body (not a story) will decide
the last island, place or village

reversal to girlhood
or towards an inconsistent age

early summer at the civic pond,
olive mud, spawns fecund stink

towards uncertainty at the river-edge
powerless to think.

*

Like rice at the threshold
words are eaten by creatures,
fall and scatter

as madness forgotten
bodies melt

eyes, heart, tongue
matter to matter.

**Notes to 'The Sensational Nellie Bly and Other Stories'**

Some of the poems in this collection are inspired by the life and work of Nellie Bly and the famous late 60s 'Thud experiment' by David Rosenhan.

On 9 October 1887 the first part of Nellie Bly's exposé ("Ten Days in a Madhouse") on the conditions in the Women's Lunatic Asylum on New York's Blackwell Island was published in Joseph Pulitzer's *New York World.*

Earlier in 1887 Nellie Bly feigned madness and managed to be admitted to the Blackwell Island Asylum in order to witness the conditions. She stayed there for 10 days.

Nellie Bly was the newspaper name of Elisabeth Jane Cochran(e) (1864-1922) who was one of the first women investigative journalists in America.

The Rosenhan study, sometimes known as the Thud experiment. 'On Being Sane in Insane Places' was published in *Science* in 1973. The psychologist David Rosenhan worked with a number of colleagues who all presented the same symptoms/ experiences at a range of psychiatric institutions – and were all admitted. Once inside they behaved normally but were nevertheless all treated as psychiatric patients. The study details these experiences: D.L Rosenhan, 'On Being Sane in Insane Places,' *Science*, New Series, Vol. 179, No. 4070. (Jan. 19, 1973), pp. 250-258.

'Tell-tale' p.160 - St Blaise is known for the blessing of throats.
'Have you come to kill us?" is a reference to Christ curing the madman (Luke 4: 31 - 37).

The Ward at Night' p.162 includes a line from Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* and a line from Andrew Marvel's 'To his Coy Mistress.'

'Away with the Faeries' p.163-164: In the folk-lore tradition faeries are afraid of iron and all things made of iron, the colour red, mess and disorder, bells, water and being looked in the eye.

'I drowned not in water but in dust' p.168: some references here to bellows etc., are taken from old instructions on trying to revive the apparently dead.

Some phrases in "The Sensational Nellie Bly' are taken from the book *10 Days in a Madhouse* (1887) by Nellie Bly.

In poems about David Lucie/David Rosenhan the italicised sections are taken from an extract of Rosenhan's unpublished book, the extract being first broadcast on Claudia Hammond's BBC Radio 4 programme 'Mind Changers (The Pseudo-Patient Study)' BBC, 27th July 2009. The prayers are prayers for healing in the Jewish tradition. David Lucie was the pseudonym Rosenhan used as a patient.

Biographical information about Nellie Bly has been taken from a number of sources including Brooke Kroeger's *Nellie Bly - Daredevil, Reporter, Feminist* (New York, Times Books, Random House, 1994).

'A Madhouse Air' p.181: Mr. Dickens is Charles Dickens and an account of his visit to Blackwell Island can be found in his *American Notes*, first published in 1842.

In 'Nellie Bly's Notes for a (Never Written) Letter…' p.204 - notes 4 and 8 are words written by Nellie Bly.

'Cutting the Stone' p.209 is a reference to a painting by Hieronymus Bosch also known as 'The Extraction of the Stone of Madness' or 'The Cure of Folly,' completed around 1494 and displayed in the Museo del Prado in Madrid.

Some lines in 'Residents' p.214-215 are taken from Oliver Goldsmith's poem 'The Deserted Village', first published in 1770.

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