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Textual Confessions:
Narcissism in Anne Sexton’s
Early Poetry

Jo Gill

Confessional poetry, a mode that was prominent in the United States in
the 1960s and early 70s, has, over time, come to be regarded as a regrettable,
aberrant, and momentary spasm in the development of that nation’s
literature. It is habitually, if a little inaccurately, consigned to a specific
and distant time and place: Robert Phillips, the author of the first and
indeed only full-length account of the mode, situates it in “Post-Christian,
post-Kennedy, post-Pill America” (xiii). Its chief impact is now understood as providing a foil against which to measure the sophistication and achievements of postconfessional writing—Language poetry, the New York school, and various other avant-garde and postmodern forms. As Alan Williamson suggests, “confessional poetry—almost from the moment that unfortunate term was coined—has been the whipping boy of half a dozen newer schools, New Surrealism, New Formalism, Language poetry” (“Stories” 51).

Marjorie Perloff defines the exciting “radical poetries” that dominate contemporary American poetry by distinguishing them from an earlier tradition of personal lyricism:

The more radical poetries of the past few decades, whatever their particular differences, have come to conceive the “opening of the field,” not as an entrance into authenticity but, on the contrary, as a turn toward artifice, toward poetry as making or praxis rather than poetry as impassioned speech, as self-expression. (“Changing Face” 93)
Similarly, Michael Davidson characterizes the interests of current Language poetry by reference to its difference from the “expressive” poetry that preceded it:

Language writing bases its analysis of authority not on the author’s particular politics but in the verbal means by which any statement claims its status as truth. Moreover, by foregrounding the abstract features of the speech act rather than the authenticity of the expressive moment, the poet acknowledges the contingency of utterances in social interchange. (74)

Both Perloff and Davidson define postmodern poetry by reference to its other—confessional or self-expressive poetry. Yet paradoxically, as the argument below demonstrates, what fundamentally characterizes this other and thus gives definition to “radical poetries” is the same deeply embedded interest in “artifice,” in “poetry as making or praxis,” and in the “verbal means by which any statement claims its status as truth” as is thought to characterize postconfessional writing alone. “Authenticity,” “artifice,” “praxis,” and “truth” are the crucial and contested terms here.

The implication that contemporary avant-garde poetry is “radical” while the confessional poetry that preceded it is reactionary and conservative itself merits scrutiny. In its own time confessional poetry was perceived to be a profoundly radical movement. It represented a startling departure from—and offered powerful and potentially fatal resistance to—the conventions of the high academic poetry that it succeeded, a literature that Irving Howe describes as “responsible and moderate. And tame” (qtd. in Gray 216). For A. Alvarez, one of the form’s earliest champions and commentators, confessional or “extremist” (229) poetry had apocalyptic potential. Its function—indeed its responsibility—was to break the mould of what he termed “the accepted Academic-Modern style.”

It is apparent from any survey of the criticism of confessional poetry that the mode is habitually and negatively associated with an authorial self-absorption verging on narcissism. Elizabeth Bruss, for example, refers to the “narcissistic indulgence of the confessional tradition” (18). Edward Lucie-Smith, writing in 1964 in Critical Quarterly, argues that in contemporary “personal” poetry “introversion seems to have triumphed over experiment. The poet gazes with obsessive narcissism at his own reflection in the mirror of art” (357). Alvarez, in his highly influential Times Literary Supplement essay “Beyond All This Fiddle,” distinguishes Robert Lowell’s
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*Life Studies* from the work of “vulgar” confessional poets, concluding in Lowell’s defense that *Life Studies* “is left with something more sustaining than mere narcissism” (230). He also quotes, approvingly, Sylvia Plath’s comment: “I think that personal experience shouldn’t be a kind of shut box and a mirror-looking narcissistic experience. I believe it should be generally relevant to such things as Hiroshima and Dachau, and so on” (231).

Of the confessional poets of post–Second World War America, it has been said that none was “more consistently and uniformly confessional than Anne Sexton [. . .] her name has almost become identified with the genre” (Lerner 52). And it is Sexton, more than any of her peers, who has been pronounced guilty of narcissism. As Joyce Carol Oates explains: “Sexton has been criticized for the intensity of her preoccupations: always the self, the victimized, bullying, narcissistic self.” Patricia Meyer Spacks condemns her “shrill narcissism” and “insistent mirroring” (188). Alan Williamson complains of the “later Sexton” that she has become “the uneasy narcissist, self-indulgent and sarcastic at once” (“Confession and Tragedy” 178), and Helen Vendler pointedly gives thanks for a rare volume in which the poet “turn[s] away from the morass of narcissism” (441). As Alicia Ostriker concludes, “Anne Sexton is the easiest poet in the world to condescend to. Critics get in line for the pleasure of filing her under N for Narcissist” (“That Story” 263).

It is the contention of this essay that narcissism, rather than exemplifying the difference between confessional and postconfessional forms of poetry, represents its potential convergence. By exploring the mythical and psychoanalytic roots of narcissism and examining recent readings of the term’s place in contemporary literature and culture, it is possible to recuperate the adjective *narcissistic* and demonstrate its importance in apparently divergent poetic traditions. Narcissism is to be understood not as a limiting and inadvertent error peculiar to confessional poetry (and acute in the work of Anne Sexton) but as a sophisticated and productive strategy employed by confessional and avant-garde poetries alike in their negotiation of such shared preoccupations as language, subjectivity, representation, and referentiality.

What appears to be authorial self-absorption in Sexton’s work may, then, be read and defended as a sophisticated textual narcissism of the kind delineated by Linda Hutcheon in *Narcissistic Narrative* and more typically identified with the “radical poetries” mentioned above. In Hutcheon’s
analysis, it is “the narrative text, and not the author, that is being described as narcissistic” (1). She concentrates on a writing that is textually rather than biographically “self-reflective, self-informing, self-reflexive, auto-referential, auto-representational” and that, above all, contemplates and interrogates its own “narrative and/or linguistic identity.” Sexton’s confessional poetry demands to be read in these terms. It foreshadows, in more fundamental ways than has been recognized, the markedly self-reflexive tendencies of more recent American poetry. This is not to assert that it represents a proto-postmodern rejection of authenticity, referentiality, or expression but rather to suggest that it is skeptical, knowing, and inquisitive about the status of these and about the processes by which they are established and understood.

Since Hutcheon’s Narcissistic Narrative mainly concerns fiction, many of her examples and conclusions derive from a comparison of contemporary or postmodern novels with those of the dominant (that is, realist) tradition. Indeed, Hutcheon makes a point of distinguishing between poetry and fiction, arguing that, in this context, poetry is in advance of the novel: “Of all the literary genres, the novel is the one which has perhaps most resisted being ‘rescued’ from the myth of the instrumentality of language. Poetry escaped with the aid of the Symbolists, the New Critics, and others” (87). Further, she suggests that “whereas poetic language is now more or less accepted as autonomous and intransitive, fiction and narrative still suggest a transitive and referential use of words” (88). In both respects I would disagree with Hutcheon. Confession, unlike much other modern poetry, has not been entirely liberated from this “myth of the instrumentality of language.” The language of the confessional text continues often to be read as “transitive and referential,” as a truthful representation of the lived experience of the author. Confessional poetry, unlike other postmodern poetry, persists in being read as an expressive/realist mode, offering privileged and reliable insight into personal experience.

Yet Sexton’s form of confession, like “narcissistic narrative,” resists such readings. Her apparent self-absorption masks a knowing and theoretically astute textual engagement with the problematic processes of writing and representation. Her poetry is keenly aware—and indeed flaunts its awareness—that its truths are arbitrary and its authority disputable. Crucially, it is aware that its putative originality is displaced by a discursive and productive relationship between text and reader. Just as narcissistic narrative thematicizes or mirrors its own processes of reception (Hutcheon,
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*Narcissistic* xvi), so too the confessional text takes as one of its subjects the complicity of its own audience in the generation of its meaning—in the “completion” of its truth (Foucault 66).

In *The Mirror and the Lamp*, M. H. Abrams distinguishes between expressive and mimetic theories of art. While conventionally, confessional poetry belongs to the expressive realm (it is the “internal made external” [22]), it is also, as I have suggested, possible and persuasive to read it as mimetic, as textually narcissistic, as mirroring its own aesthetic processes. Indeed, the image of the simultaneously luminous and reflective glass bowl that dominates Sexton’s poem “For John Who Begs Me Not to Enquire Further” (hereafter “For John”) is important in encapsulating both of these possibilities—a point to which I will return. With this in mind, one might argue that Sexton’s writing looks both inside and outside simultaneously and to that extent is always doubled, split, or fragmented in its perspective.

The early poems discussed here—“An Obsessive Combination of Ontological Inscape, Trickery and Love” (hereafter “An Obsessive Combination”) and “The Double Image,” both written in 1958, and “For John,” written in 1959, are narcissistic in the sense that they are intrigued by and reflect on how, exactly, their meanings are realized and shared. They seek to reach and convey a better understanding not of the experience ostensibly at the source of each but of the way in which they themselves work as confession. Mirrors and other reflective surfaces (windows, glass bowls, portraits) are fundamental to this enquiry, either covertly—as in the case of “An Obsessive Combination,” where mirroring processes are “structuralized, internalized” (Hutcheon, *Narcissistic* 7)—or overtly—as in “For John,” where they are “explicitly thematized.” The textual narcissism that we see here forms the foundation of Sexton’s exploration of the dynamics of confession in later poems such as those in the “Letters to Dr. Y” sequence (1960–70), with their sophisticated analyses of their own linguistic processes, and in “Talking to Sheep” (1974), which displays an acute consciousness and condemnation of its own audience. Throughout, narcissism is presented as both strategy (reflection as process) and object (the reflection as material subject of enquiry) and, while generous in proliferating meanings, is also always shown to be susceptible to error, to be potentially distorting and distorted.

The cultural origins of the concept of narcissism are to be found in the story of Echo and Narcissus from Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. Narcissus is a
beautiful and proud youth, the object of many observers’ unrequited desires—including those of the nymph Echo, who “cannot stay silent when another person speaks, but yet has not learned to speak first herself” (83). Narcissus spurns Echo’s advances and in despair she retreats to the woods and caves, wasting away until only her voice remains. As punishment for his pride Narcissus is condemned to experience the same frustrated desire, and falls in love with his own reflected image in a pool. He is admonished: “the thing you are seeing does not exist: only turn aside and you will lose what you love” (85). Realizing that, like Echo, he will never possess the object of his love, he too wastes away and dies, leaving in place of his body a circle of flowers.

The myth of Narcissus is important to Sexton’s poetics in several respects. It offers a framework within which to develop themes of self-love and desire, it offers fruitful metaphors such as those of the mirror and the cave, and it lends the structural and linguistic potential of the echo. As James Goodwin has argued, in the context of the origins of autobiography,

the figure of Narcissus represents complexes—or, in other words, structures of great intellectual and affective force—that are indicative of the functions and consequences of self-knowledge at different stages in our cultural history. (69)

The story of Narcissus is also of profound significance in Sigmund Freud’s account of human psychology and is instrumental to his recognition and definition of the superego. In “On Narcissism” Freud identifies a universal “primary and normal narcissism” (66)—an early and necessary stage of self-love that must be transcended, the other replacing the ego as love object, if the subject is to assume his or her proper place in relation to parents, to subsequent sex objects, and to the wider world.

In the context of Sexton’s exploration and defense of narcissism, Freud’s argument is influential because he asserts—in contradiction to the opinions of his predecessors and peers—that narcissism is common and “normal,” that there is contiguity between “healthy and neurotic subjects” (73). The belief that narcissism is a universal and shared condition dominates Sexton’s poem “For John.” It specifically informs the I/you dialogue that is sustained throughout and insists on the reciprocity of the subject’s and implied reader’s experience. Freud’s analysis is valuable too because it describes in psychoanalytic terms the tendency to turn inward, “away
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from the external world” (66) that, although apparently characteristic of confessionalism, is at issue in Sexton’s poetry. It also traces the necessary route outward by which “our mental life [. . .] pass[es] beyond the limits of narcissism” and forms an attachment to objects (78). In addition, “On Narcissism” foregrounds the importance in psychological terms of observing and “being observed” (91). It recognizes—and this is crucial to an understanding of confessional writing and its reception—the compelling attraction of someone else’s narcissism: “it seems very evident that another person’s narcissism has a great attraction for those who have renounced part of their own narcissism and are in search of object-love” (82–83).

In Freud, then, we find what might be described as the first of several psychoanalytic defenses of narcissism—a defense that Jacques Lacan was later to take up. 2 For Lacan, narcissism—the gaze in the mirror—initiates the infant child’s realization and confirmation of his or her identity. The mirror is vital to the two finally inextricable processes of finding and naming (or textualizing) the self. In Lacanian terms, it is by means of the mirror stage (“le stade du miroir” [2]) that the aspiring subject leaves the realm of the imaginary and gains access to the symbolic order of language—a journey that is invoked in Sexton’s poem “The Double Image,” discussed later.

Richard Sennett and Christopher Lasch, writing about contemporary American culture in the 1970s—the period that had, contentiously, been labeled the “me decade” (Lasch 238)—study the growth and dominance of narcissistic “personality traits” in the “prevailing social conditions” (239). Sennett identifies a problem with the erosion of boundaries between public and private life, between external and internal worlds—a concern that is also voiced in Sexton’s writing. He argues that “cultural forces [. . .] have produced this narcissistic self-absorption” (333) and insists that it is the “social environment” (12) that is at fault and must be changed. Lasch discusses narcissism—the extreme consequence and end of modern society’s “logic of individualism” (xv)—in the context of changes in American domestic, cultural, and political life. Narcissism, he suggests, represents a reaction to and retreat from a general loss of faith in contemporary society, in the lessons of the past, and in the promise of the future (xvi–xvii). For Lasch, it is a limiting, impoverished (xviii) stance, one that exemplifies the individual’s inability to “make connection with the world” (240).

For Sexton, however, as in Freud and Lacan, narcissism is broader,
more complex, and finally more productive. Paradoxically, the self-disclosure in her work is made always with a view to its reader; while ostensibly focusing inward, it also looks outward and turns away from the self. Crucially, Sexton’s poetry is predicated on restoring the “connection with the world” that Lasch sees as absent in narcissism (whereas Freud, as Jeffrey Berman explains, sees narcissism as precisely engendering a “relationship between the self and the object world” [10]) and on flamboyantly laying bare the processes by which this connection is established. This communicative impulse has tended to be lost in many readings of what narcissism signifies.

In Sexton’s “An Obsessive Combination,” “The Double Image,” and “For John,” the I can only be comprehended, the self only known, by placing itself in conjunction with an other. The I alone is not self-sufficient and cannot be expressed without a you. Thus all three poems are predicated on a persistent and sustaining dialogue. In this context, a narcissistic perspective denotes not a solipsistic devotion to the self but recognition that the self can only be perceived as part of a larger social context, as one among many. Narcissism here is an outward-looking gesture or process representing not stasis (Lasch’s “diminishing expectations” [8]) but change, not silence (Plath’s “shut box”) but dialogue and communication—it engages the Echo at the heart of Ovid’s tale.5

The seeds of this interest in the fertile and discursive possibilities of narcissism—understood as a purposive textual strategy rather than as a symptom of debilitating self-absorption—are apparent in one of Sexton’s earliest and uncollected poems. “An Obsessive Combination of Ontological Inscape, Trickery and Love” was drafted in 1958 and first published in Voices: A Journal of Poetry in 1959. The poem is striking for the way in which it anticipates, and makes explicit, concerns that are developed subsequently in her writing. For example, we see here the roots of a sustained interest in the function and fallibility of language, expressed later in poems such as “Is It True?” and “Hurry Up Please It’s Time” (1972?) and throughout the posthumous volume The Awful Rowing Toward God (1975). “An Obsessive Combination,” although described by Diane Wood Middlebrook as “an awkward little exercise” (124), is paradigmatic of Sexton’s poetics in its determined and self-conscious exploration of its own linguistic and representational status.

“An Obsessive Combination” is narcissistic in the sense that in it “process [is] made visible” (Hutcheon, Narcissistic 6). It exemplifies what
Hutcheon defines as a characteristically postmodern interest in “how art is created, not just in what is created” (8). Arguably, of course, such self-consciousness has a long literary history. For Hutcheon, however (and Sexton’s writing, I would contend, sustains this reading), “the more modern textual self-preoccupation differs mostly in its explicitness, its intensity, and its own critical self-awareness,” and this is a consequence of a post-Saussurian “change in the concept of language” (18).

To look first at the title of the poem, the adjective “obsessive” seems to lay itself open to typical accusations of confessional compulsion and self-absorption. However, it transpires that the obsession is not with the self but with writing, with the linguistic strategies by which meaning is generated and shared. “Ontological” shifts attention away from direct, lived, “raw” (to use Robert Lowell’s term [qtd. in Hamilton 277]) experience to a more abstract, impersonal consideration of the condition of being. “Combination,” too, has considerable resonance in the context of Sexton’s poetics, signifying the combination or meeting of minds, the discursive relationship between speaker and reader required for the confession successfully to be created and disseminated.

Gerard Manley Hopkins’s notion of “inscape” is the lodestone of the poem and plays a key role in disclosing Sexton’s larger poetics. It is explained by *Webster’s Third New International Dictionary* as

> Inward significant character or quality belonging uniquely to objects or events in nature and human experience esp. as perceived by the blended observation and introspection of the poet and in turn embodied in patterns of such specific poetic elements as imagery, rhythm, rhyme, assonance, sound symbolism, and allusion.

Clearly, “inscape” suggests the complex and seemingly contradictory process, subsequently explored in “For John,” by which looking out and in (“blend[ing] observation and introspection”) become synonymous. It connotes the way in which meaning is realized—in the dual and seemingly contradictory sense of being made apparent (“embodied in patterns”) and being received. Hopkins writes:

> oftening, over-and-overing, aftering of the inscape must take place in order to detach it to the mind and in this light poetry is speech which afters and oftens its inscape, speech couched in a repeating figure. (qtd. in Gardner xxiiin2; Hopkins’s emphasis)
The inner essence is projected outward by the same kinds of linguistic and syntactical patterning, repetition, and palindromic construction as we see in Sexton’s poem.

In one of the Crawshaw Lectures that Sexton delivered at Colgate University in 1972 she describes this projection: “one writes of oneself [. . .] in order to invite in” and “to find the way, out through experience” (Lecture 9, p. 1; my emphases). Thus “An Obsessive Combination,” like many later poems, takes as its subject the liminal space between I and you, speaker and reader, exposing and exploring the boundaries between self and object world. It traces the process by which the self and its metonyms (here imagination and ideas) manifest themselves in and connect with the exterior—and this is primarily, indeed unavoidably, through language.

“An Obsessive Combination” achieves its effects by the “generative [word] play” and “linguistic self-consciousness” identified by Hutcheon as characteristic of narcissistic narrative (Narcissistic 120, 118). Moreover, in its “performative” (Perloff, Dance 176) and “playful” (Hutcheon, Politics 34) aspects, the poem may be said to display some of the defining features of postmodernist writing. Hutcheon sees as typical of such texts linguistic features such as acrostics, anagrams, cryptograms, and puns (Narcissistic 119) that serve to “call the reader’s attention to the fact that the text is made up of words, words which are delightfully fertile in creative suggestiveness” (101). The title of the poem is a near acrostic, containing the word coital (perhaps suggestive of self and other joining together). The text itself features numerous puns, homonyms, and anagrams (“tiers,” “tries,” “rites,” “right,” “routes” [4]). It also incorporates the palindrome “RATS / . . . STAR,” a supreme example of narcissistic wordplay, one that appears repeatedly in later poems: “With Mercy for the Greedy” (1960) concludes with a despairing and self-reflexive definition of poetry as “the tongue’s wrangle, / the world’s pottage, the rat’s star” (63), and “Hurry Up Please It’s Time” features a sustained dialogue between the paired voices of “God” and “Ms. Dog” (384–95).

The opening lines of “An Obsessive Combination”—“Busy, with an idea for a code, I write / signals hurrying from left to right” (4)—confirm the self-reflexivity of the title. “Busy” suggests not only that the speaker is preoccupied (“obsessive?”) but also that this is important work (business). The fascination here is not with personal experience, but with thoughts, ideas, semantic and epistemological sequences—with an “idea for a code” in the first line and with “reasons” in line 4.
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That the poem is “a code” and that writing “signals” confirm its interest in the hermeneutic process by which words emerge and are deciphered. The metaphor of the “code” indicates that the confessional text might obscure (as we will see in a moment, I use the verb advisedly) rather than, as is commonly thought, lay bare its secrets. The line break after “write” suggests, and the rest of the poem confirms, that the “signals” are autonomous; the poet writes, yet in what seems to be a distinct movement, it is the “signals” that hurry across the page. Language in this poem, as elsewhere in Sexton, pre-exists and dominates the subject, constructs rather than reflects experience. As Hutcheon argues: “in literature, words create worlds; they are not necessarily counters, however adequate, to any extraliterary reality. In that very fact lies their aesthetic validity and their ontological status” (Narcissistic 102-03).

“An Obsessive Combination” examines this complex and—as it transpires—amazing process:

[... ] I write
signals hurrying from left to right,
or right to left, by obscure routes,
for my own reasons; taking a word like “writes”
down tiers of tries until its secret rites
make sense.

The image of the physical and orderly progression of language across the page (“left to right”) offers a metaphor for the way the act of confession is, typically, thought to put things “right” in the therapeutic sense. However, as this poem demonstrates, it is not the simple act of release or the tapping of the wellspring of inner compulsion that makes things right but rather the textualization, the act of writing. Moreover, as the addendum in the next line (“or right to left”) indicates, the act of confession may compound rather than resolve problems. It may not offer the “expressive-purgative release” that Alicia Ostriker (Stealing 126), for example, expects of the mode but may instead complicate, confuse, and ultimately make sinister.

The recourse to the “obscure routes” suggests that understanding may emerge from the dark (from the private, the unseemly, the sinister), which is thereby recuperated as a viable source for poetry. In this respect, the poem anticipates “For John,” where the inauspicious “narrow diary of my mind” (34) produces and refracts something of dazzling and broad
significance ("something outside of myself"). It also paves the way for a number of later poems, including “With Mercy for the Greedy” and “Hurry Up Please It’s Time,” in which equally abject or occluded experience is “amazingly”—to speaker and reader alike—transformed into radiant meaning.

In “An Obsessive Combination” language, perception, and meaning are constantly in flux, multiplying ceaselessly:

[. . .] taking a word like “writes”
down tiers of tries until its secret rites
make sense; or until, suddenly, RATS
can amazingly and funnily become STAR
and right to left that small star
is mine, for my own liking, to stare
its five lucky pins inside out [. . .]

Authorial responsibility is denied, hence the passivity of voice and the astonishment at these linguistic and ontological transformations. Certainly Sexton does not go as far as later Language poets in rupturing the bond between signifier and signified: “RATS” and “STAR,” while locked in a palindromic relationship, do also connote distinct and opposing referents that are metaphorically suggestive within the context of the poem. However, she places this bond under critical scrutiny (the transposition of a letter or phoneme can drastically alter the signification of a word). Nothing, Sexton insists, can be made into something, and this by a seemingly random succession of semantic shifts.

The enthusiastic explanatory rhetoric of the second half of the poem, with its bright adverbs (“suddenly,” “amazingly,” and “funnily”) and its gleeful aside (“for my own liking”), gives way, in the final clause, to a more skeptical and resigned tone:

and right to left that small star
is mine, for my own liking, to stare
its five lucky pins inside out, to store
forever kindly, as if it were a star
I touched and a miracle I really wrote.

The tentative “as if” concedes that words—and the confessional text—may not deliver what is expected of them, that language may fail. The sudden shift at the end from the present tense to the conditional and
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qualified suggests that the epiphany that the poem seems to promise is a transient thing. “An Obsessive Combination” warns that “RATS” may become “STAR” not by a miracle but by semantic “trickery.” Thus we are returned to the textuality of the confessional poem, to its status as “autonomous and intransitive object” (Hutcheon, Narcissistic 88). “An Obsessive Combination,” one of Sexton’s earliest poems, is paradigmatic of much of her later writing in that it is unable or unwilling to proffer closure. It refuses the temptations of an easy and satisfying conclusion, finishing instead on an open-ended and conditional note (“as if it were”). In Hutcheon’s terms—like many postmodern texts—it “admits its own provisionality” (Poetics 13).

Similar concerns inform “The Double Image,” a complex and profoundly artful poem that contemplates the relationships between three generations of women: the speaker, her dying mother, and her infant daughter. The defining motifs are the fluctuating mental and physical sickness of the speaker and her mother, the patterns of absence and presence that define the relationships, and the dual portraits (or double images) that the mother commissions of herself and the speaker and hangs “on opposite walls” (40). “The Double Image” may be read in terms of Lacan’s understanding of narcissism—as an examination of the way in which we achieve subjectivity by perceiving and identifying ourselves in relation to others. For Lacan, as we have seen, the mirror (or the “mirror stage” [2]) is fundamental to this process. What is interesting in “The Double Image,” though, is that beneath the “transitive and referential” (Hutcheon, Narcissistic 88) surface of the poem—the narrative of loss and recovery that ostensibly inspires, shapes, and validates it—lies a compelling, effective examination of its own processes of production and reception.

“The Double Image” is not, then, only or primarily about the relationships and experiences it describes. It is about its own status as confession. It is a metapoem that flaunts its own mirroring processes (Hutcheon, Narcissistic 20) in order to draw attention to its constructed, contingent, and finally illusory nature. The poem’s title gestures toward this doubleness and signals its larger achievement: its self-reflexive—and arguably postmodern—undermining of the mimetic strategies apparently at its thematic and structural core. For what the poem describes and finally exemplifies is a succession of doublings or reflections mimicking only each other (the dual portraits of the speaker and mother, the image of the speaker looking at her own painted image and drafting her own textual
portrait). Speaker and reader alike are locked in the endless *mise en abyme* characteristic of postmodernism and typical of narcissistic narrative, a proliferation of images in infinite regress offering no necessary access to extratextual reality.

“The Double Image” is intensely catoptric. The arrangement of the poem’s seven sections represents a near-perfect symmetry of action. In the first three sections we see the daughter and then the speaker leaving home, followed by the central (fourth) section, which denotes a liminal moment of uncertainty. The closing three sections complete the symmetry, first the speaker and then the daughter returning to the family home.

The multiple repetitions within the poem (“Too late, / too late” in section 2 [36], “as if,” “as if,” “as if” in section 3 [38]) echo, mimicking the proliferation of reflections that the poem describes. The emphatic if irregular end rhymes work in a similar way and reflect the claustrophobia of the situation with all three participants seemingly trapped in a hall of mirrors. There is a constant swaying, forward and backward movement within the poem—not only of action (the symmetrical pattern of departure and return mentioned above) but of attention—such that the reader, like the speaker, is forced to look from one mirrored image to another and then back again. In this way the text brings “to readers’ attention their central and enabling role” in the production of meaning (Hutcheon, *Narcissistic* xii).

The poem emphasizes the symmetry of the double images and their implicit polarity. The paintings resemble each other—both women’s smiles are described as being held “in place” (37, 40)—but they also invert each other: the speaker’s portrait is illuminated by the “north light” (40) while the mother’s is lit from the “south.” (As Lacan points out, such inversion is characteristic of the mirror stage [2]). Sexton’s speaker addresses both the mirror image of the mother and the reflection of the self, thus confirming the identity and inversion that unite them: “my mocking mirror, my overthrown / love, my first image” (40). That the mirror is “mocking” indicates that it offers an idealized image of what the speaker should be, reinforcing her inadequacy. We are reminded of the plight of the humiliated Echo in Ovid’s tale and of Narcissus too, who perceives a “mocking mirror” and experiences the simultaneous enticement and rejection of his “first image.”

The closing stanza further elaborates the double image of the title. The speaker finally acknowledges to her daughter that “I needed you”
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(41), naming the bond between the “I” and “you” suggested in the opening lines. It is now the daughter, rather than the mother, who has bestowed (gender) identity on the speaker. The mother’s failure is made good by the daughter:

I, who was never quite sure
about being a girl, needed another
life, another image to remind me. (41–42)

The “image” is the daughter, produced by the speaker in order to confirm her own identity, just as the speaker’s mother created first the speaker and then an image (portrait) of her in a vain attempt to cling to life. Hence the speaker’s final admission: “And this was my worst guilt; you could not cure / nor soothe it. I made you to find me” (42). This is a compelling conclusion. However, the real interest lies in the confession not that the speaker made the daughter (biologically) but that she has constructed the daughter in the poem (textually). These final lines confirm the poem as textually narcissistic in Hutcheon’s terms. For the ultimate referent of “double image” is the poem itself—the strategies it employs in its construction and its aestheticization of relationships, experience, subjectivity. The “worst guilt” pertains to the speaker’s fabrication and manipulation of the mother/daughter relationship in order to construct this very poem and thereby to create or found (and emphatically not to reflect) her singular identity as poet: “to find me.”

Narcissistic narrative, as we have seen, is a writing that is concerned with the role of the reader. Sexton’s early poem “For John” is noteworthy for the way in which it exemplifies this concern, addressing in particular the discursive relationship between speaker and reader, penitent and confessor. There is a critical consensus about the importance of the poem as an expression of Sexton’s poetics. Middlebrook describes “For John” as a “defense […] of the whole genre of poetry that would soon be labeled ‘confessional’ ” (100). Diana Hume George declares that “the autobiographical I becomes a spokesperson for the poetic and personal authenticity of the confessional stance” (101). Caroline King Barnard Hall argues that “For John” should be read as “a credo […] for Sexton’s entire oeuvre” (14). I agree that “For John” marks out Sexton’s position as a poet and her conception of and aspirations for the confessional mode. However, I would argue that its importance lies not in its defense of what confession reveals but in its exemplification of how it functions.
The images of the cracked mirror and glass bowl in “For John,” in addition to evoking Narcissus’s pool, signify primary subjective narcissism (“the cracked mirror / or my own selfish death” [34]) and may be read as metaphors for the creative process (I, the poet, look to myself and show you a reflection of what I see) in all its multifaceted complexity. Moreover, in this particular poem, the reflective glass instigates the calling in of the reader and the exchange of responsibility between reader and writer in the act of perceiving and interpreting confessional meaning. The poem is predicated on the paradox that in order truthfully to tell us about telling the truth, the speaker must weave a “complicated lie” (35), which may itself be a lie—a *mise en abyme* of the kind that, as we’ve seen, characterizes narcissistic narrative. The poem’s manipulation of successive shifting mirror images confirms the potential multiplicity and unreliability of self-representation. In place of a coherent subject, faithfully mirrored, we see only fleeting, oblique glimpses of a fragmentary reflection.

“For John” achieves its effects, in part, by anticipating—indeed parodying—orthodox expectations of its speaker’s narcissism. It parades its insistent first-person voice, its emphatically domestic concerns (“the commonplaces” [34], the “kitchen” [35]), and its protagonist’s prolonged self-scrutiny in the mirror. The poem resounds with images for the self, for self-admiration, idealization, and subjective pleasure. Lines end with terms of self-absorption (“mind,” “mirror,” “me,” “myself,” “private” [34]) that emphasize the narcissistic impulse at play. Yet the text’s flamboyant narcissism is beguiling, masking the absence or dissipation of the self. Marjorie Perloff argues of postmodern poetry that “the Romantic or Modernist cult of personality has given way to what the new poets call ‘the dispersal of the speaking subject,’ the denial of the unitary, authoritative ego” (*Dance x*). However, I would contend that this fracturing or “dispersal of the speaking subject” is not unique to postmodern poetry and is carefully mapped in Sexton’s poem. The fragmentation of the “unitary authoritarian ego” is represented in multiple and proliferating images of fracture and dissipation reminiscent of those in “The Double Image” and owing something to the characteristics of narcissism (a “fragmented” sense of self, and “identity diffusion” [Berman 25]) as perceived from certain psychoanalytic perspectives.

The self-assertion of the opening lines of “For John” is countermanded by a recognition of others (“you,” “your,” “something outside,” “someone,” “anyone” [34–35]). The characteristic confessional speaker
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does not emerge until line 5 and is swiftly counterbalanced by the “you”—the explicit (John) or implicit (the unspecified reader) addressee whose presence, although always latent in and instrumental to confession, is here unusually rendered visible within the text. The back and forth movement anticipates the exchanges between speaker, mother, and daughter in “The Double Image” (which appears immediately after “For John” in To Bedlam and Part Way Back, although it was written one year earlier). Further, the speaker and John/any reader share a mutually vengeful and predatory fate akin to that of Narcissus and Echo. Neither is able to satisfy his or her desire, both have reached the limits of identification, and neither can penetrate the boundary between self and other. This is the ever-present risk for confession: that it will not find an auditor and achieve realization.

The poem addresses the critical hostility that seems to sustain many readings of confessional poetry. Its specific origins, arguably, lie in Sexton’s response to a letter she had received from her mentor, the poet and teacher John Holmes, in which he expressed reservations about what he perceived to be the narrow narcissism of her work. Latent in the I/you exchange in the poem is a dialogue between Sexton (the implied author) and Holmes (the implied addressee). In identifying this letter as a possible source I do not, however, propose that it explains, or concede that it limits, the poem’s potential meanings. (As Bonnie Costello argues of the overdetermination of sources in Marianne Moore’s work: “This multiplicity of sources is quite different from the multiplicity of references” [6].) What I would contend is that Holmes’s letter may be taken as a catalyst for the poem’s self-conscious examination of larger confessional processes.

Scrutiny of the letter to Sexton, dated 8 February 1959, reveals the extent to which “For John” repudiates confessional poetry’s detractors. Her privileging of the “selfish death” may be read as a defiant challenge to Holmes’s view that she should efface her “hospital and psychiatric experiences [which seem] to me very selfish.” Holmes’s letter accuses her of “forcing others to listen” and complains that, in her work, there is “nothing given the listeners, nothing that teaches them or helps them.” He adjures her to “do something else, outside yourself.” Sexton’s speaker counters that she does teach something, that she offers a “lesson” (34) that is “worth learning.” This is “something special” (35) and defiantly “something outside of myself.”

“For John” insists that there is “sense” and “order” in even the most private and seemingly abject of experiences:
Not that it was beautiful,
but that, in the end, there was
a certain sense of order there;
something worth learning
in that narrow diary of my mind,
in the commonplaces of the asylum (34)

By opening the poem with the emphatic “Not,” Sexton confronts from the outset the criticisms she anticipates and proceeds to refute them with her arguments in the subsequent two lines. The syntax of the first line refuses the chief motivation ascribed to Narcissus—that is, love of his own beauty. Sexton suggests that it is “not” the product (the “beautiful” object) that is worthy of attention but the process—the ordering, the reading, the making of “sense.” The lesson that can be learned by scrutiny of the “narrow diary of my mind” and “the commonplaces of the asylum” is valuable because it is a lesson that can be shared. “Commonplaces” indicates the potential common ground that unites speaker and reader. Moreover, in its pun on commonplace book, it invokes the textualization, including that carried out in this very poem, by which the “lesson” will be delivered.

More generally, the opening lines of the poem foreground the hermeneutic processes of reading and evaluation by which meaning will be constructed. The opening line postulates a subject “it” that is never fully defined, remaining ambiguous throughout the poem in spite of the speaker’s repeated efforts to identify and represent it. The reader’s commitment and interpretative powers are first solicited and then held at bay by this persistent ontological uncertainty. He or she shares the speaker’s uncertainty and (frustrated) desire for resolution. The poem thematizes this, inscribing within itself an interpretative place for the reader. In Hutcheon’s terms, it is narcissistic in that “it encourages an active personal response to itself and encourages a space for that response within itself” (Narcissistic 141).

Fundamental to Sexton’s representation in “For John” of how meaning is realized and dispersed are the metaphors of mirrors—first the “cracked mirror” (34) of line 7 and later the inverted glass bowl (line 18). The mirrors figure the text’s own processes of contemplation and reflection. The poem concedes that narcissism is a frustrating and limiting practice, as the confessing subject’s initial self-scrutiny in the mirror
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offers no reassurance: “my own selfish death / outstared me.” She seeks in the mirror confirmation of her identity, yet is met with a disfigured reflection that is inverted; the living subject looks for signs of life and finds only evidence of death. We recall “The Double Image” and the distortion of the two women’s images represented by the dual portraits. For Lacan, looking in the mirror is a progressive moment—a necessary step toward successful assumption of the “function as subject” (2)—but in this poem, there is no such progression. There is no pleasure in this literal and metaphorical introspection (nor, by extension, in the act of confession), and considerable psychic risk.

Here and subsequently, with the introduction of the metaphor of the glass bowl, the speaker gazes at the mirror expecting to see only her own self given back to her, but what she sees exceeds or “outstare[s]” her. In addition to her own face she sees reflected the larger context that surrounds or frames her; her context is thus perceived through and beyond the glass. Equally, when the reader contemplates the mirror (reads the poem), she thinks that she is looking at someone (“something”) else. What she sees—alongside the putative object of her gaze—is herself in the process of observing. The shift is reified by the shift in line 11 from the address to an implied auditor to a specific addressee (“you” the reader). Thus in attending to this poem the reader recognizes her own participation in the discourse. As we saw with the indeterminate “it” of the poem’s opening line, “For John” inscribes a place for the reader within the body of the text, rendering the public significance of what had once seemed merely private.

“For John” demonstrates that the narcissistic gesture becomes productive and meaningful only when it is shared. The “selfish” gaze must—if it is to mean anything “outside of myself”—be subject to dispersal and dissemination. The fragmentation of the cracked mirror is instrumental in bringing this shift to multiplicity about. The mirror in and of the text offers no clear image, no direct mimesis, but only multiple, scattered—though suggestive—shards. A similar process is figured in the lucky star in “An Obsessive Combination” that shines its “inside out.” It is only by refraction that it externalizes its meaning. The language of Sexton’s poetry, then, is multiplicitous, elusive; it functions less as a unifying mirror than as a prism, splitting and projecting fractured and elliptical images of its subject.

Consider the image in “For John” of the inverted glass bowl:
Jo Gill

I tapped my own head;
it was glass, an inverted bowl.
It is a small thing
to rage in your own bowl. (34)

The inverted bowl, while sharing the mimetic properties of a mirror, is simultaneously transparent. It has the potential to contain and to reveal, to reflect and refract. The image signifies the potential entrapment and vulnerability of the subject (Sylvia Plath’s *The Bell Jar* is an obvious palimpsest). ⁹ It discloses whatever lies within it and permits the observer to see all sides of the object, to gain a complete impression. ¹⁰ It also displays its own external properties, its hermetic identity. Revealing both its inside and its outside, it stands as a metaphor for the confessional poem and the larger narcissistic process by which the subject reaches a reconciliation with the object world. That the speaker “tapped” her “own head” confirms the potential contiguity of self and other and the fluidity of the boundaries between the private and the public. For “tapped” signifies both the process of siphoning insights from inside the head and the act of beating out a pattern (a poem?) on the outside for the edification of others. The speaker may tap—make a sound—either to initiate a dialogue or cause an echo. ¹¹ The image insinuates the indivisibility of subject and discourse, product and process.

The inverted bowl, like the earlier cracked mirror, gives back fragmented images (the awkward bowl’s “cracked stars shining” [34] sustain the original disfigurement in and of the cracked mirror). As Jonathan Miller points out: “in contrast to a plain or flat surface, which faithfully reproduces the proportions of whatever it reflects, a curved surface systematically disfigures it” (43). As an image of the poem itself, the bowl suggests the confessional text’s own distortions and unreliability. Sexton’s mirrors are always imperfect, crazed, curved, oblique, or, as in “The Double Image,” set directly opposite another mirror so that all one sees is an endless, imprisoning cascade of reflections that allows no space for the growth and development of the subject. Self-reflection is not what it might seem, and gives back an image that is attenuated, fractured, separated, and dispersed.

Mimesis is to be treated warily; there is no such thing as direct, unproblematic reflection. The act of mirroring, we find, is fraught with error and uncertainty. It is both multiplicitous and duplicitous. We should note
that Abrams’s generally positive account of poetic mimesis is only able to refer to its subject in a sequence of synonyms that connote distortion and imprecision: “counterfeiting,” “feigning” (11). Thus the representation of subjectivity or experience that confessional poetry (specifically “For John”) offers is to be understood as a copy of or approximation to the original, but not as identical with it. What confessional writing does is contemplate and expose the complexity of identity, the absence or elusiveness (even in this apparently self-expressive mode) of a unified, homogenous subject.12

Sexton’s poem presents a fundamentally narcissistic moment—a moment of crisis in the subject’s sense of self and her relation to the external world. This is laid bare for contemplation by both speaker and reader. It is the potential communality of experience here, the fact that narcissism forms “a place in the regular course of human sexual development” (Freud 65), that forms the heart of Sexton’s argument and aesthetic defense. We all go through this process, and the poem reminds us of this, inviting us to revisit it:

This is something I would never find
in a lovelier place, my dear,
although your fear is anyone’s fear,
like an invisible veil between us all . . .
and sometimes in private,
my kitchen, your kitchen,
my face, your face. (35)

The implicit I/you dialogue that has sustained the whole poem is here rendered more generally inclusive. “Anyone” invokes Everyman and registers the broadening of the speaker’s attention from a specific reader (John) to a wider group; “us all” encapsulates both speaker and multiple readers. In the simultaneously transparent and reflective bowl, we look for self and find other, we look for other and find self. What we see is both “my kitchen” and “your kitchen,” “my face” and “your face.” Narcissism is revealed to be a public and discursive rather than private and hermetic gesture. The personal preoccupation (“my”) gives way to public responsibility (“your”). The quiet, balanced, closing lines of the poem, with their symmetry and soft diminuendo, mimic the gentle sound of an echo tailing off:
and sometimes in private,  
my kitchen, your kitchen,  
my face, your face.

John Holmes’s concluding message to Sexton in the letter that arguably inspired the poem specifically alludes to Ovid’s tale. Holmes’s anxiety about Sexton’s writing is galvanized by his fear that Sexton’s fate may repeat that of Narcissus: “You must liberate your gift, and let it create new life, not gaze always hypnotized on death and the wreck of nerves” (a comment that arguably provides a source for Sexton’s line “my own selfish death / outstared me”). “For John” ultimately answers confessionalism’s critics by expressly embracing the very process against which they warn. It not only explains, it shows. Sexton demonstrates that narcissism does not necessarily mean introspective stasis. As in Ovid’s tale, where Narcissus’s legacy is “a flower with a circle of white petals round a yellow centre” (87), Sexton’s speaker’s self-absorption is productive. It is transformed into “something outside of myself,” something that at least “ought” to be “special / for someone.”

It is illuminating to consider “For John” in relation to a prominent postconfessional poem that takes up the question of self-mirroring: John Ashbery’s “Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror.” Ashbery’s poem contemplates Parmigianino’s painting of that name and, in particular, the resonance of the convex mirror that is both the source (the artist paints from his reflection in it) and product of the painting (the finished portrait is painted on a convex wooden form that replicates that of the mirror). Ashbery, too, acknowledges that such a self-portrait is distorted and distorting, indeed “that you could be fooled for a moment / Before you realize the reflection / Isn’t yours” (194). In Ashbery’s poem, as in Sexton’s, the convex mirror privileges surface over depth. For Ashbery “everything is surface. The surface is what’s there” (190). In both poems the public display of the curved mirror emphasizes the outward-looking, social, discursive nature of what had previously been understood as a purely introspective narcissism. The imperative in each is not merely to gaze upon the self (“It is a small thing / to rage in your own bowl”) but to share that which is found with the reader. Sexton wields her glass bowl so that its “cracked stars” shine forth, disseminating meaning. Ashbery’s convex mirror similarly reaches outward. It is refracted in the “sawtoothed fragments” (191) of a puddle and finally reverberates more widely throughout “the city” in “the gibbous / Mirrored eye of an insect” (204) which, like Sexton’s crazed mirror, functions as a prism.
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As we saw in the opening lines of her poem, Sexton confronts the reader’s reluctance to participate in the hermeneutic process that it reveals. Her defiant wielding of the bowl forces the reader to participate in the narcissistic process, prevents him or her from looking away, inscribes a place for the reader within the text as one part of the mirrored scene:

And if you turn away
because there is no lesson here
I will hold my awkward bowl,
with all its cracked stars shining
like a complicated lie,
and fasten a new skin around it
as if I were dressing an orange
or a strange sun. (34–35)

Equally, Ashbery’s poem reminds us that the self-portrait “is a metaphor / Made to include us, we are a part of it” (196–97). Both poems, then, may be read as a contemplation of the process by which art (Parmigianino’s painting, Sexton’s poem, Ashbery’s self-portrait with a “pencil” [191]) enters into a productive and mutually sustaining relationship with its audience.

The surface of Parmigianino’s self-portrait in Ashbery’s poem glows with potential significations: it is a “silver blur” (192), its “cover burnishes,” it has a “disguising radiance” (204). Sexton’s bowl, too, radiates meaning. However, this is born not of authenticity but of artifice. Recognizing that alone it may not compel or retain the reader—indeed, that its very transparency or nakedness may repel him or her—the speaker takes steps to render her “lesson” more acceptable, dressing or disguising the bowl in luminous “orange” so that it shines like a “strange sun.” As the poem’s argument develops, what we see is emphatically not a pure, unmediated reflection of lived experience as might perhaps be expected of confessional poetry. Rather, it is a fabrication, an object masked or disguised, dressed with a “new skin.” In a genre apparently predicated on revelation, this metaconfession that the essence of confession lies in dressing up, rather than undressing, in disguise rather than nakedness, in deceit rather than honesty, is supremely telling.

Abrams, as we have seen, distinguishes between mimetic and expressive forms of art, between the mirror and the lamp. Perloff too posits a difference between postmodern and lyric forms of poetry based on a distinct—
tion between “artifice” and “authenticity.” I would contend that Sexton’s simultaneously reflective and luminous bowl refuses to choose between these aesthetics. The “glass bowl shining” both reflects and reveals. However, both functions are imperfect. The reflective surface is “awkward,” “cracked,” and “complicated,” offering no clear mimesis. The sun, instead of merely figuring illumination and insight, is veiled and disguised; dressed in a “new skin,” it cannot penetrate with directness or clarity but must carefully screen its message. In both cases, something ostensibly transparent or luminous is rendered translucent such that the confessional subject ostensibly being reflected or expressed is obscured by a crazed or veiled surface. However, with its self-consciously selected metaphors suggestive of the refraction and diffusion of light—of the prismatic splitting of its source into scattered elements—“For John” ensures that its meaning is shared. Something apparently singular, personal, and solipsistic is made multiple, social, discursive.

For self-reflexivity to be identified as characteristic of Ashbery’s writing (and of the work of a number of other postmodern writers) it has been necessary to deny its presence in Sexton’s work—to reduce confessionalism to this emergent poetry’s other. (Such a will to classify is foreshadowed, perhaps, in Ashbery’s suggestion in “Self-Portrait” that “If they are to become classics / They must decide which side they are on” [196]). Thus Harold Bloom declares that Ashbery “writes out of so profound a subjectivity as to make ‘confessional’ verse seem as self-defeating as that mode truly has been, from Coleridge (its inventor) down to Lowell and his disciples” (117–18). And Laurence Lieberman celebrates Ashbery’s presentation of self as “swept clear of melodrama, the news-hawking debris of personality, all the detritus comprising the stock-in-trade of the confessional poets’ school” (23). I would suggest, however, that the vehemence of these rejections of the confessional other reveals—while it attempts to deny—a profound commonality of poetic interests.

Marjorie Perloff sees as characteristic of modern (that is, pre-postmodernist) poetry the eventual realization of “some sort of epiphany, a moment of insight or vision with which the poem closes” (Dance 156–57). Yet, as we have seen in “For John,” “An Obsessive Combination,” and the other poems mentioned here, this is not a characteristic of Sexton’s work. Rather, her poetry features an arguably postmodernist tendency toward equivocation and indeterminacy, toward provisionality, uncertainty, and evasion. Sexton’s reluctance to conclude her writing on
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a resounding, authoritative, and thus normative and reassuring note is a sign of refusal to concede to totalization and of a wish to keep multiple interpretive possibilities open. Hence the multifaceted bowl of “For John” and the many-pointed star of “An Obsessive Combination”: insight is always complex and diffuse. Sexton’s poetry thus seeks the middle ground, the medial space between the outside and the inside, the public and the private, the mirror and the lamp (equally, between lies and truth, obfuscation and confession, artifice and authenticity). While exploiting the materiality of the mirror, Sexton’s writing’s primary interest is in the compelling intangibility of the reflection.

The received history of American poetry is the history of a movement from an impersonal, modernist aesthetic to a personal, lyrical, confessional narcissism and on to a cool, self-reflexive, linguistically sophisticated postmodernism. Sexton’s poetry, I have suggested, transgresses received generic boundaries and problematizes this trajectory. By redefining our understanding of the apparent narcissism of her early work we can see that the profound self-reflexivity, the language play, and the undermining of processes of representation and revelation that are thought to characterize avant-garde and postmodernist poetic forms alone are, in fact, central to Sexton’s poetics.

Notes

1. Anne Sexton: The Complete Poems is the source of all the poems I quote except “An Obsessive Combination,” which is from Selected Poems of Anne Sexton.

2. Other important post-Freudian readings of narcissism include those of Otto Kernberg and Heinz Kohut, psychiatrists whose work, although offering entirely divergent perspectives on the condition, has dominated the understanding of narcissism in the United States since the 1970s. See Berman 20 ff.

3. Interestingly, as Juliet Mitchell points out, Freud does not mention the role of Echo in his interpretation of the Narcissus myth (30).

4. Middlebrook speculates that “An Obsessive Combination” was written during August 1958 (124). However, as it is apparent that Sexton studied Hopkins’s poetry during her time as a student in Robert Lowell’s writing class (September 1958 to 1959), it is arguable that her poem originates at least one month later. On Lowell and Hopkins, see Hamilton (78) and Lowell (167–70).
5. See Middlebrook 98–99 on Sexton’s use of acrostics.

6. The mother’s portrait is perceived as “a cave of a mirror” (38). Unrecognized by previous commentators on this poem, Sexton’s linking of the mirror and the cave is profoundly significant, paralleling Echo’s retreat to the caves in Ovid’s story.

7. Heinz Kohut, a leading figure in the psychology of narcissism, notes the importance of empathy on the part of the observer/analyst to the resolution of primitive narcissism (Berman 31–32).

8. Manuscripts in the Anne Sexton collection at the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center indicate that the poem was drafted on 12 February 1959.

9. Sexton’s poem was probably critiqued in one of Robert Lowell’s Boston University workshops in the spring of 1959. Plath audited the class alongside Sexton, George Starbuck, and others. She first joined the group on 24 February 1959 and in her journal entry for the next day uses the image of a bell jar (470). One month later (29 March 1959) the seeds of the plot of the novel are recorded in her journal. The bell jar motif had been used once before by Plath (in July 1952) to describe the ennui of summer vacations. Sexton’s poem, with its image of the inverted glass bowl, may have prompted Plath to revisit the metaphor. Arguably, Sexton’s use of the image in her sophisticated exploration of writing, gender, and subjectivity offered Plath exactly the figure she needed to represent Esther Greenwood’s mixed sense of vulnerability and visibility.

10. As Jean-Jacques Rousseau explains in his Confessions: “I should like in some way to make my soul transparent to the reader’s eye, and for that purpose I am trying to present it from all points of view, to show it in all lights” (169).

11. The influence of Henry James’s The Golden Bowl is apparent here. Sexton annotated her copy of the book throughout, and there are many resemblances between the properties of his bowl and hers. In addition, the image of tapping is used to similar effect in both texts. In The Golden Bowl, Maggie has (metaphorically)

sounded with a tap or two one of the rare porcelain plates. She had knocked, in short—though she could scarcely have said whether for admission or for what [. . .] and had waited to see what would happen. Something had happened: it was as if a sound, at her touch, after a little, had come back to her from within. (328)

12. Christina Britzolakis makes a related point in connection with Plath’s use of mirror metaphors in her journals: “ironically, these are almost invariably linked with moments of specular mis- or non-recognition in which the sub-
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ject is encountered as abject, resistant otherness” (16) and are seen as “the sign of a self-reflexivity which is alternately paralyzing and enabling” (17).

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