

Medical Intervention, Normalisation and Power in Sylvia Plath's and Anne Sexton's Poetry

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Confessional Poetry and the Notion of Integrity

Sylvia Plath's and Anne Sexton's oeuvres have traditionally been regarded as paradigmatic examples of 'confessional poetry'. In approaches that have come to define subsequent interpretations of Plath's and Sexton's works, confessionalism is understood as a poetic practice that focuses on the exposure of the self. More specifically, literary criticism that responded to this mode at the time of its prominence¹ posited that the most determining characteristic of the genre is the interrogation of extremely personal, intimate experiences and the disclosure of a disturbed psyche tortured by mental disorders—often identified with the personal histories and biographies of the authors themselves.² Thus, while such an understanding of Sexton's and Plath's works presupposes an already existing self that is revealed through poetic practice, it also presumes that their oeuvres constitute products of pathology. If the traditional understanding of confessional poetry suggested that confessional texts expose an *a priori* self, the most recent criticism of the genre claims that it is not the disclosure of a pre-existing subjectivity that is operative in confessional poems but much rather, the construction of a (new) 'self' through textual coding and the renegotiation of poetic authority.³ As such, Plath and Sexton dislocate the idea of a pre-existing coherent self that could be represented in poetic discourse.

¹ Cf. Mascha Louis Rosenthal, 'Poetry as Confession', in *The Critical Response to Robert Lowell*, ed. by Steven Gould Axelrod (Westport: Greenwood, 1999), pp. 64-68., Laurence Lerner, 'What is Confessional Poetry?' in *Critical Essays on Anne Sexton*, ed. by Linda Wagner-Martin (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1989) pp. 227-233., Al Alvarez, *The New Poetry* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1966)

² In his review of Lowell's *Life Studies* Rosenthal claims that whereas previous poets, even when addressing personal experiences, adopted a poetic persona, 'Lowell removes the mask. His speaker is unequivocally himself, and it is hard not to think of *Life Studies* as a series of personal confidences, rather shameful, that one is honor-bound not to reveal' and consequently, his poems perform 'the most naked kind of confession'. Rosenthal, p. 64. In a similar vein, Robert Phillips claims that 'a true confessional poet places few barriers, if any, between his self and direct expression of that self, however painful that expression may prove' and as such, confessional poetry 'dispenses with a symbol or formula for an emotion and gives the naked emotion direct, personally rather than impersonally'. Robert Phillips, *The Confessional Poets* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1973), p. 8.

³ Cf. Jo Gill, 'Textual Confessions: Narcissism in Anne Sexton's Early Poetry', *Twentieth-Century Literature*, 50.1 (2004): 59-87., Deborah Nelson, *Pursuing Privacy in Cold War America* (New York: University of Columbia Press, 2002), Diane Wood Middlebrook, 'What Was Confessional Poetry?', in *The Columbia History of American Poetry*, ed. by Jay Parini (New York: Columbia UP, 1993), pp. 632-649., Elizabeth Gregory, 'Confessing the Body: Plath, Sexton, Berryman, Lowell, Ginsberg and the Gendered Poetics of the "Real"', in *Modern Confessional Writing*, ed. by Jo Gill (London: Routledge, 2006), pp. 33-49.

Not only do Plath and Sexton explore the notion of coherence on the level of identity, but they also address the concept of wholeness and integrity on a corporeal level. The ‘confessional poets’ representation of the body has been traditionally regarded as their attempt to ‘bare and shock and confess’ through including previously unaddressed and ‘taboo’ details about the body, such as menstruation, childbirth or various surgical procedures.⁴ Critical discourse has not just singled out such poems as representative of ‘confessional’ practice but it constructed the poetic exposure of the body as tantamount to the genre itself. In ‘What is Confessional Poetry?’ Laurence Lerner contends that ‘there is a concern [...] with the physiology of being a woman: [Sexton] writes about sex, menstruation, childbirth with total openness. It is not difficult to see why this material is called “confessional”’.⁵

In contrast to the conventional understanding of Plath’s and Sexton’s poems on corporeality, the present study will show that Plath’s and Sexton’s poems interrogate the notions of corporeal health, wholeness, integrity and deviance not for the sake of provocation but to investigate how various facets of embodiment and the medical attendance and facilitation of the body in particular are embedded in structures of power. The poems that will be discussed in this essay, Plath’s ‘The Surgeon at 2 a.m.’ and Sexton’s operation poems, address the various normalising and disciplinary discourses that subtend medical practice. Plath’s and Sexton’s ‘clinical lyricism’⁶ interrogates the dominant ideologies and power structures that underscore the clinical scenario by employing images of surgery as colonisation or exploitation in ‘The Surgeon at 2 a.m.’. The essay claims that the ‘poetic phenomenology of patienthood’⁷ that is offered by Sexton’s and Plath’s poems suggests that medical discourse tends to delegitimize the patients’ embodied experience of surgical procedures by assuming a position of scientific objectivity. The assumption of objectivity and the disregard of the patients’ experience are deployed to construct and maintain the authoritative position of the surgeons—this process is expressed in Plath’s and Sexton’s poems not only through the images of operations as colonisation but by the surgeons’ claim to transcendence as well.

The Representation of Medical Practice in Plath’s and Sexton’s Poetry

Plath and Sexton explore how medical practice is invested in the notion of bodily integrity through equating the notion of health with possessing a ‘whole’ and, more importantly, non-deviant body. The texts chosen for this study suggest that clinical discourse

⁴ John Holmes qtd. in Diane Wood Middlebrook, *Anne Sexton: A Biography* (London: Virago, 1991), p. 143.

⁵ Lerner, p. 229.

⁶ Christina Britzolakis, *Sylvia Plath and the Theatre of Mourning* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1999), p. 93.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 92.

delegitimises the position of embodied difference and aims at correcting, disciplining and normalising those bodies that fall short of the definition of the healthy and normal body. However, the poems to be discussed also emphasise that the concepts of what amounts to a healthy and acceptable body are by no means premised on 'objective' and scientific notions but they are informed by cultural and social ideals and expectations, which are not only ideological constructs but culturally and historically specific as well—as opposed to the surgeons' insistence on the idea of an objective and ahistorical truth.

In addition, Sexton and Plath highlight a significant paradox that underlies the process of operations and the contestable idea of bodily integrity in a medical framework. As Deborah Nelson notes, 'one of the most common figures in confessional poetry, and in Plath's poetry in particular, the surgeon makes a living by breaching the surface of the body', and the poems that address this problem provide 'a figure of the forced transgression of bodily integrity'.⁸ Thus, although surgical practice claims to reinstate corporeal integrity, it can only do so by violating the body's boundaries. Consequently, the poems suggest that the clinical facilitation of the body does not aim at the restitution of wholeness and health that preceded medical intervention. Rather, medicine (re)inscribes the structure of normalcy and disciplines supposedly deviant or unruly bodies in order to live up to a cultural idea of embodiment and subjectivity and it thus wants to achieve the 'purported wholeness of the modern body'.⁹

The act of opening up the body has significant implications not only for ideological structures but discourses of (poetic) representation as well. As Nelson contends, exposing the body's insides in surgery functions as a fundamental metaphor with regards to the poetic, rhetorical strategies of the confessional genre, insofar as confessional poetry revealed theretofore unaddressed and 'taboo' details about the body. However, Nelson also situates this exposure in the specific historical discourses of Cold War America when she claims that confessional poets made 'use of the medical context to reveal the deep and pervasive intrusion of medical science into the "private" space of the body' and thus 'the "operation" poems constitute confessional poetry's most revealing confrontation: the individual's loss of bodily privacy'.¹⁰ Being deprived of such bodily privacy can be seen as a specific and defining transformation in Cold War America insofar as the discourses of surveillance that were operative on a nationwide scale entailed that 'what got "lost" at the

⁸ Deborah Nelson, 'Plath, History and Politics', in *The Cambridge Companion to Sylvia Plath*, ed. by Jo Gill (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2006), pp. 21-35 (p. 33).

⁹ Christopher E. Forth and Ivan Crozier, 'Introduction: Parts, Wholes People', in *Body Parts: Critical Explorations in Corporeality*, ed. by Christopher E. Forth and Ivan Crozier (Lanham: Lexington, 2005), pp. 1-14 (p. 6).

¹⁰ Nelson, *Pursuing*, p. 117.

end of the 1950s was a certain fantasy of privacy as a stable and self-evident concept'.¹¹ Thus, by situating operations as central metaphors of confessional poetry in the context of a certain historical and geographical framework Nelson also emphasises that medical discourse and how it is deployed cannot be divorced from its cultural-historical specificity.

The present study will argue that Plath's 'The Surgeon at 2 a. m.' and Sexton's operation poems ('The Operation' and 'August 17th', the latter from the sequence 'Scorpio, Bad Spider, Die: The Horoscope Poems') foreground the fact that the procedure of constructing bodily integrity through the very breach of the body is imbricated in structures of ideology and power. The following analyses of Plath's 'The Surgeon at 2 a. m.', Sexton's 'The Operation' and 'August 17th' will focus on how these texts represent the symbolic and literal violence that is deployed to have bodies comply with the cultural norms of the healthy and whole body that is postulated as the locus of the autonomous and self-same subject.

'The body is a Roman thing'—Power Discourses and Bodily Integrity in Plath's 'The Surgeon at 2 a.m.'

Sylvia Plath's 'The Surgeon at 2 a.m.' (1961) explores how the clinical scenario is embedded in a matrix of power relations, primarily through addressing the surgeon's claim to transcendence. The surgeon whose voice the poem adopts exerts a markedly superior and authoritative tone. The opening line of the poem constructs the surgical setting as a metaphysical environment by stating that 'The white light is artificial, and hygienic as heaven'.¹² The supposed transcendence of medical authority is in sharp contrast with how the surgeon situates the patient undergoing medical procedure:

The soul is another light.
I have not seen it; it does not fly up.
Tonight it has receded like a ship's light.¹³

Thus, although the patient is presented as possessing an innate essence, a 'soul' (as opposed to the artificiality of the surgeon's light), it is deprived of ascension, taken to be a signifier of metaphysical guarantee.

What is more, the soul is construed as being in need of medical intervention to be salvaged. The patient's body is presented as an untamed natural environment (a point to which I will return later), which in a Biblical context can be understood as a postlapsarian garden of Eden:

¹¹ Ibid., p. xiii.

¹² Sylvia Plath, 'The Surgeon at 2 a.m.', in *Collected Poems* (London: Faber, 1981), pp. 170-71 (p. 170), l. 1.

¹³ Ibid., ll. 8-10.

It is a garden I have to do with—tubers and fruit
 Oozing their jammy substances,
 A mat of roots. My assistants hook them back.
 Stenches and colors assail me.
 This is the lung-tree.
 These orchids are splendid. They spot and coil like snakes.
 The heart is a red bell-bloom, in distress.

In this context, the surgeon's artificial light, 'hygienic as heaven' corrects the perceived bodily 'sin' which is underwritten by the messy and unruly qualities of the patient's organs and the reference to the intestines of the body 'coil[ing] like snakes'. After the surgeon finishes the operation and 'perfects'¹⁴ the patient who is given a 'clean, pink plastic limb',¹⁵ the soul is also presented as recovered:

Over one bed in the ward, a small blue light
 Announces a new soul. The bed is blue.
 Tonight, for this person, blue is a beautiful color.
 The angels of morphia have borne him up.¹⁶

Thus, the surgeon implies that metaphysical good is to be achieved through the surgical restitution of bodily integrity. Consequently, although the emphasis on the soul initially postulates a dichotomy between body and soul, the fact that the soul can only be 'redeemed' through the reconstruction of the body via medical intervention, reveals that the processes of corporeality cannot be divorced from the processes of the 'self'.

Although the surgeon adopts the tone of authority and mastery through employing a religious vocabulary, his claim to transcendence is thoroughly ironised and critiqued in Plath's poem. As Jacqueline Rose contends, the lines 'The blood is a sunset. I admire it. | I am up to my elbows in it, red and squeaking'¹⁷ function 'both to celebrate the surgeon's quasi-mystical art and to parody its metaphysical pretension'.¹⁸ The Biblical structure that the poem deploys is also ultimately subverted by the fact that the surgeon's 'heaven' is presented as an empty ideal: it is artificial and hygienic, destitute of the abundant organic life force that characterises the patient's body. In fact, 'The microbes cannot survive' this heavenly light and 'They are departing in their transparent garments, turned aside | From the scalpels and the rubber hands'. Consequently, it is contestable whether the medicalised

¹⁴ Ibid., l. 32.

¹⁵ Ibid., l. 40.

¹⁶ Ibid., ll. 50-53.

¹⁷ Ibid., ll. 30-31.

¹⁸ Jacqueline Rose, *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath* (London: Virago, 1991), p. 134.

recovery of the soul at the end of the poem can be seen as a straightforwardly positive or redeeming event. If the transcendence of the medical profession is a clinical one, as the poem suggests, it can only achieve (metaphysical) recovery through a violent and objectifying intervention into the body. Indeed, the bodily perfection that the surgeon aims at and the metaphysical good he intends to achieve through perfecting the body is attained by dismembering the body and restructuring it via ‘artificial’ methods:

I have perfected it.
 I am left with an arm or a leg,
 A set of teeth, or stones
 To rattle in a bottle and take home,
 And tissues in slices—a pathological salami.
 Tonight the parts are entombed in an icebox.
 Tomorrow they will swim
 In vinegar like saints’ relics.
 Tomorrow the patient will have a clean, pink plastic limb.¹⁹

Here, the disintegration of the patient’s corporeality is enacted on the level of poetic devices as well: just like the body becomes dismantled and separated into small, discrete units, the lines of the poem become short and fragmented through enjambments.

As a result of the surgical procedure, the patient becomes tamed and subdued by the doctor, but this by no means amounts to becoming ‘healthy’ and ‘whole’. In contrast, the patient is dismantled into a collection of detached parts, deracinated flesh—‘a pathological salami’. Not only do the body parts of the patient become detached, but they are objectified as well: teeth become ‘stones | To rattle in a bottle and take home’ and the disjointed body parts become specularised medical specimens, swimming ‘In vinegar like saints’ relics’. In addition to this, via these figurations the surgeon’s ideal of bodily ‘perfection’, cleanliness and transcendence is underscored as a violent construction, both in a symbolic and literal sense. The violence the surgeon exerts is literal insofar as it results in dismantling the body and introducing an inorganic, artificial limb into it, and symbolic to the extent that achieving the medical ideal of perfection necessitates the disciplinary regulation and the objectification of the body.

The medical procedure’s objectification of the body is also discernible in the metaphors of the patient as a statue, as well as in the references to ancient Roman architecture and ideals of beauty:

¹⁹ Ibid., ll. 31-40.

How I admire the Romans—
 Aqeducts, the Baths of Caracella, the eagle nose!
 The body is a Roman thing.
 It has shut its mouth on the stone pill of repose.

It is a statue the orderlies are wheeling off.
 I have perfected it.²⁰

Throughout her oeuvre, Plath often deploys images of classical statuary of gods and ancient ideals of the body as shorthand for physical perfection (such as in 'Barren Woman' or 'Heavy Women'). In 'The Surgeon at 2 a. m.', before claiming that 'The body is a Roman thing', the term 'Roman' is constructed as an epithet that comprises connotations of harmony and perfect structures. The surgeon's admiration of Roman culture is revealed to be his reverence for the 'Aqeducts, the Baths of Caracella'—impeccable architectural structures based on the principle of symmetry and proportion. Significantly, while the aqueducts were intricate systems of maintaining water supplies they were also used as sewage systems, thus they were responsible for a controlled and orderly disposal of human bodily waste. Plath's surgeon is emphatically interested in disciplining the body to render it an orderly system, and the patient's abject, 'messy corporeality'²¹ with its 'tubers and fruit | Oozing their jammy substances'²² denies and defies precisely this ideal of the 'clean and proper body'.²³

There is a constant tension in the poem between the emphatic materiality and leakiness of the human body and the clean but 'synthetic quality of the hospital environment'.²⁴ The surgeon's 'scalpels and the rubber hands'²⁵ attend to the 'purple wilderness'²⁶ of the body, and the hygienic, artificial light of the operation room annihilates the microbes of the living organism. Although the implements of the medical setting are sterile and lifeless, their neatness and cleanliness is preferred to the unruly corporeality of the human body: in the first stanza the 'scalded sheet' is described as 'a snowfield, frozen and peaceful',²⁷ while the third stanza constructs the body as a

hot spring
 I must seal off and let fill

²⁰ Ibid., ll. 27-32.

²¹ Tracy Brain, *The Other Sylvia Plath* (Harlow: Longman, 2001), p. 124.

²² Plath, ll.11-12.

²³ Kristeva, Julia, *Powers of Horror. An Essay on Abjection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), p. 73.

²⁴ Michel Davidson, *Guys Like Us. Citing Masculinity in Cold War Poetics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), p. 188.

²⁵ Plath, l. 4.

²⁶ Ibid., l. 20.

²⁷ Ibid., l. 5.

The intricate, blue piping under this pale marble.²⁸

While traditionally we might associate images of frozenness and winter with death, here they stand for a privileged ideal of peace and boundedness, whereas the 'hot spring' conventionally equated with resurrection has to be subdued and the body has to be literally sealed off. Moreover, the 'pale marble' of the hospital bed is in contrast with the 'intricate, blue piping' collecting the patient's blood. This image explicates the ideological premises of the surgeon's practice in a particularly succinct way: to comply with the bodily ideal of medical practice represented by the surgeon, the body has to be bereft of its abject leakiness and unruly corporeality and has to adhere to the principle of the inorganic but orderly 'pale marble'. The surgeon's claim to have perfected the body thus amounts to rendering it 'a statue the orderlies are wheeling off',²⁹ which does not only lack its previous overflow of fluids but also conforms to the classical ideals of the body demonstrated by ancient statuary; significantly, the surgeon's definition of the body as 'a Roman thing' immediately follows the description of the perfected body as a statue. In this sense, the prosthetic limb the patient acquires at the end of the medical intervention can be seen as the literalisation of the ideological/discursive underpinnings of the surgical procedure, the inevitable consequence of the objectifying force of the surgeon's practice.³⁰

Plath's imagery thus interrogates not only the immediately physical but also the ideological and discursive exploitation that is at work in medical practice. According to Michael Davidson, in employing references to ancient Rome,

Plath mocks the voice of a scientific rationality that gains legitimacy for its work by quoting from the classics. The surgeon's admiration for Roman civilization signifies his enlightened sense of power, one that he exploits by treating the body as a 'statue' or a work of art. By reifying the body into an object, the surgeon perverts an enlightenment ideology of progress, based as it is on references to Greece or Rome.³¹

Indeed, Plath's poem interrogates the dominant power structures that are at work in medical practice through various images. Apart from the 'enlightened sense of power' suggested by the ancient references, the construction of the body as an 'unruly landscape'³² also

²⁸ *Ibid.*, ll. 24-26.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, l. 31.

³⁰ The hyperbolic preference of the inorganic is also embedded in the context of 1950s American consumerism. As Tracy Brain suggests, 'Plath here satirises a version of postwar consumer capitalism which has it that anything home-grown or natural must be inferior to the artificial and factory-made—the human body included'. Brain, p. 124.

³¹ Davidson, p. 189.

³² Brain, p. 123.

establishes the framework of power dynamics. As mentioned above, the surgeon describes the body as a rampant garden:

It is a garden I have to do with—tubers and fruit
 Oozing their jammy substances,
 A mat of roots. My assistants hook them back.
 Stenches and colors assail me.
 This is the lung-tree.
 These orchids are splendid. They spot and coil like snakes.
 The heart is a red bell-bloom, in distress.
 I am so small
 In comparison to these organs!
 I worm and hack in a purple wilderness.³³

Apart from focusing on the abject messiness of the body, this stanza also construes the patient's corporeality as a wilderness, an uncharted frontier, evoking the discourse of colonisation. According to Britzolakis, Plath constructs the surgeon as 'a sinister figure for whom the task of dissecting and repairing the human body is cathected with a desire to colonise and subordinate the other'.³⁴ Thus, medical practice is presented as not necessarily involved in the restitution of health in a framework of an ethics of care, but is seen as being involved in the disciplinary regulation of bodies which ensures that they conform to a set of ideological or cultural norms.

Importantly, 'The Surgeon at 2 a. m.' does not problematise the power dynamics and the coloniser-colonised relation of the surgical process simply on a general or ahistorical level, but it also mobilises a racial context while drawing on specific cultural discourses that were operative in 1950s America. The surgeon's description of the patient as having 'no face' and being only '[a] lump of Chinese white'³⁵ speak to not only the processes of dehumanisation that underlie the practice of Plath's surgeon but also to a more specific process of racial victimisation. Britzolakis contends that Plath's images of racial exploitation

form part of a dialogue with the legacy of modernist primitivism, transposed into the post-World War II moment of global expansion of American influence. The paranoid optic of the Cold War, with its cult of national, familial and racial hygiene, is satirized

³³ Plath, ll. 11-20.

³⁴ Britzolakis, *Theatre*, p. 92.

³⁵ Plath, l. 7.

in *The Bell Jar* and, more obliquely, in poems such as 'The Surgeon at 2 a.m.', 'Letter in November' and 'The Arrival of the Bee Box'.³⁶

In this context, then, the surgical procedure can be seen as a metaphor of the attempt to maintain 'racial hygiene'³⁷ and to eliminate unruly and potentially dangerous elements from the body politic.

Apart from the above mentioned implications of historical calamities and racial victimisation, the figuration of the body as an untamed wilderness, rendered orderly by the surgeon, also mobilises a power discourse pertaining to gender. On the one hand the poem draws on the longstanding association between nature and the feminine through the trope of the body as a disorderly natural environment which is regulated by (masculine) medical science, which has a claim to the objective. According to Rose, 'the image of the doctor shows Plath entering into a role and identity (the medical profession) which elsewhere in her writing, and on more than one occasion, she represents in terms of the worst of male institutional and sexual power'.³⁸ It is not only the traditional identification of nature and woman and the emphatic leakiness of the body that is presented through metaphors of nature that evoke the framework of sexual politics in the medical environment. The image of the body's microbes 'departing in their transparent garments'³⁹ explicitly feminises (what is more, sexualises) the operation. Indeed, as Britzolakis points out, 'the hospital metaphor is embedded in the sexual politics of the transference' where the 'condition of patienthood or victimhood is assigned to femininity'.⁴⁰

Although Plath foregrounds the gendered discourse that is at work in the power dynamics of medical practice, she also dislocates straightforward identifications of pathology, victimhood and the feminine. While the majority of critics, such as Rose and Britzolakis read 'The Surgeon at 2 a.m.' as an example of a male surgeon exploiting a female patient, through a subtle reference it is revealed that the patient is in fact a male one. The doctor mentions that the body that will be operated on has 'seven holes thumbed in',⁴¹ as such, it is a male. Through choosing to describe a male patient undergoing a medical procedure that is entrenched in feminised imagery 'Plath rejects any stereotypically gendered relationship of power and passivity, coloniser and colonised'.⁴² What is more, such an image also disrupts the idea that pathology, leakiness and corporeal disorder are the properties of feminine subjects and it reveals that the masculine subject position is also

³⁶ Britzolakis, 'Ariel', p. 118.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Rose, p. 134.

³⁹ Plath, l. 3.

⁴⁰ Britzolakis, *Theatre*, p. 94.

⁴¹ Plath, l. 8.

⁴² Brain, p. 124.

liable to those ruptures that dismantle the cultural fiction of bodily integrity. Furthermore, this image also dislocates the conventional power dynamics of the medical scenario, thus the poem underscores that such power relations are ideological constructs, therefore they are not objective and ahistorical givens but contestable structures that could be questioned and subverted.

Anne Sexton's 'Operation Poems'

Similarly to Plath, Sexton explored the medical scenario in multiple poems, such as 'The Abortion' (1962), 'The Operation' (1962), 'The Surgeon' (1972) or 'Doctors' (1975). The second section of the present study focuses on how the ideological underpinnings of medical intervention into individual corporeality are addressed in 'The Operation' and 'August 17th' (1971). On the one hand Sexton's 'operation poems' interrogate the doctors' position of authority and control over the patients' body, in a similar manner to Plath's presentation and ironisation of the surgeon's claim to an authority of transcendental proportions. On the other hand, Sexton's texts also detail how the patient becomes dehumanised and deprived of their identity and humanity as a result of entering the medical scenario and suggest that the notion of bodily integrity is tested and reinscribed by such processes. What differentiates Sexton's poetry from Plath's is that Sexton seems to be more concerned with the how the female body specifically is affected by medical practice. Furthermore, her poems tend to address the ideological underpinnings of the power structure involved in surgical procedures more explicitly, although not less effectively than Plath. Sexton also engages more directly with the idea of the body becoming not just objectified but also a synthetic and mechanical structure as a result of medical intervention, evoking the processes that are explicated in Donna Haraway's later theory of the cyborg.

One of the main concerns of Sexton's poems about the medical profession is how practitioners of medicine assume a position of authority and mastery over bodies as well as various forms of knowledge. In 'The Operation', there is a constant tension between the patient's experience and emotional response to her hospitalisation and her surgery and the surgeons' and nurses' practical and scientific approach. In the lines 'No reason to be afraid, | my almost mighty doctor reasons',⁴³ it is not only the representation of the surgeon as 'mighty' that foregrounds the power structure that underpins the operation. Indeed, the contrast between the doctor's strategy of reasoning and thus his claim to the objective and the patient's emotive reaction of fear serves to delegitimise the speaker's position and dismiss it as unreasonable. The speaker's confrontation with the nurse functions in a similar way:

⁴³ Anne Sexton, 'The Operation', in *The Complete Poems* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1981), pp. 56-59 (p.56), ll. 28-29.

she brings two mysterious needles: the skills
 she knows she knows, promising, soon you'll be out.
 But nothing is sure. No one. I wait in doubt.
 [...] At ten
 she returns, laughs and catalogues
 my resistance to drugs.⁴⁴

Here the nurse's practice is emphatically represented as the possession of a set of skills implying objective knowledge, as opposed to the patient's interpretation of the needles as 'mysterious'. Not only is the nurse in command of her praxis but she is also confident in its effectiveness and potential to heal, which is in sharp contrast with the speaker's sense of uncertainty (emphasized by the doubt/out rhyme) which is based on her subjective experience of the surgical process. In a similar vein, the nurse's reaction to the patient's 'resistance to drugs' also undermines the speaker's possibility of having a viable position in the medical framework: how the patient's body reacts to drugs is only interesting to the nurse insofar as it provides valuable information for the surgery. Thus, the nurse fails to initiate a humane relation to the speaker by just registering the medical facts and even laughing at the complications.

Similarly to the persona of Plath's 'The Surgeon at 2 a.m.', Sexton's medical practitioners also adopt the position of not only scientific but metaphysical mastery. A significant difference between Plath's and Sexton's poetic exploration of the medical setting is that Sexton's poem assumes the voice of the patient as opposed to the doctor, thus the repercussions of the medical intervention on the patient are represented in a more overt way while making the described situation more relatable to the reader. From the very first stanza the surgeon is referred to as an 'almost mighty doctor' and over the course of the poem the medical scene is consistently constructed as an environment underscored by metaphysical qualities. Although the speaker's representation of the 'two pillows | at my elbows, as soft as praying cushions'⁴⁵ might suggest that the hospital environment is understood as a place of comfort and healing, the majority of the images that align the medical and the transcendental construe the medical scene as a source of suppression and threat. The speaker describes the actual surgical procedure in the following way:

The great green people stand
 over me; I roll on the table

⁴⁴ Ibid., ll. 61-63, 67-69.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 109-10.

under a terrible sun.⁴⁶

Similarly to Plath's light in the operating theatre, which is 'artificial, and hygienic as heaven',⁴⁷ Sexton positions the surgeons' light in possession of transcendental qualities— however, this transcendence does not seem to offer redemption but bears the threat of damage and annihilation. The nurses are also represented as 'starchy ghosts'⁴⁸ hovering over the speaker, suggesting that the presence of the transcendental-spiritual does not necessarily entail consolation and comfort. On the contrary, it can be positively disquieting.

In 'The Operation' the speaker reports that as a result of anaesthesia, '[p]ale as an angel [she] float[s] out over [her] own skin'.⁴⁹ While the speaker's paleness is reminiscent of the angels' emphatic whiteness, the connotations of their ethereal, unearthly presence evokes the idea of the speaker entering a disembodied, transcendent state that is induced by anaesthesia. This figuration is particularly revelative, since it reiterates the dissociation of body and soul that underwrites not exclusively religious discourses but what also serves as the fundamental dichotomy of the Cartesian self. After the speaker's soul leaves her body it hovers over the other patients in the hospital, and then subsequently re-enters the body:

I plunge down the backstair
calling mother at the dying door,
to rush back to my own skin, tied where it was torn.⁵⁰

The fact that the speaker notes that after the operation the patient's skin is 'tied where it was torn' exposes how the restitution of health, wholeness and integrity is achieved through the breach of this very 'integrity'. When describing the night preceding the operation the speaker emphasises her 'wholeness' prior to medical intervention:

The rooms down the hall are calling
all night long, while the night outside
sucks at the trees. I hear limbs falling
and see yellow eyes flick in the rain. Wide eyed
and still whole I turn in my bin like a shorn lamb.⁵¹

Whereas the speaker insists on the integrity of the body, in her environment she perceives fragments of bodies, such as the 'yellow eyes' that 'flick in the rain'. The process of

⁴⁶ Ibid., ll. 72-74.

⁴⁷ Plath, 'The Surgeon', l. 1.

⁴⁸ Sexton, 'The Operation', l. 95.

⁴⁹ Sexton, 'The Operation', l. 75.

⁵⁰ Ibid., ll. 79-81.

⁵¹ Ibid., ll. 46-50.

fragmentation is also discernable on the level of poetics, as the flow of sentences becomes interrupted through enjambments. Moreover, through the polysemy of the word 'limb', the description of the storm as 'limbs falling' also foreshadows the fragmentation of the body as the natural environment and the breach in the body become mapped onto each other. The speaker's investment in the notion of bodily integrity is also revealed by the description of the events immediately preceding the operation: 'On the stretcher, citizen | and boss of my own body still, I glide down the halls'.⁵² These lines bring into focus the fact that a fundamental trauma of surgery for the speaker is a loss of control and ownership of her body. This realisation is in accord with Courtney S. Campbell's claim that when the body becomes an object of medical practice 'we cannot avoid questions about whether the human body is a form of private property and whether persons own their bodies'.⁵³ Sexton's poem seems to suggest that operations deprive patients of this ownership and this loss amounts to one of the most significant disruptions instilled by surgical intervention into the body.

Apart from interrogating how the surgical procedure initiates the loss of ownership over one's body, Sexton also investigates how the processes of medicalisation lead to the body's objectification. In order for the operation to commence, the patient is 'hung up like a saddle',⁵⁴ thus, the human body becomes manageable by medicine if it is rendered inanimate and becomes similar to an instrument. In a similar manner, the surgeons are defined as the 'mechanics | of the body' who 'pump for their tricks'⁵⁵—this figuration not only reiterates the idea of medical practice as an exercise of objective, practical skills, but it also constructs the body as a machine. The trope of the human body as a mechanical structure has subtended Western discourse at least from the era of the Enlightenment,⁵⁶ but Sexton takes this figuration further since in her poems the image becomes literalised insofar as the body does not only behave like a machine but is merged with it. Such a fusion is represented in the following section of the poem:

Four days from home I lurk on my
mechanical parapet [...]
My knees work with the bed that runs

⁵² Ibid., ll. 67-68.

⁵³ Courtney S. Campbell, 'Body, Self, and the Property Paradigm', *The Hastings Center Report*, 22.5 (1992), 34-42 (p. 34).

⁵⁴ Sexton, 'The Operation', l. 74.

⁵⁵ Ibid., l. 97.

⁵⁶ Cf. René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy. With Selections from the Objections and Replies* (1641; repr. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2008), p. 60., Julien Offray de la Mettrie, *Man a Machine. Translated from the French of the Marquiss D'Argens* (London: W. Owen, 1749), p. 9., Allison Muri, *The Enlightenment Cyborg. A History of Communications and Control in the Human Machine 1660-1830* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007), pp. 13-17.

on power⁵⁷

Thus, the speaker becomes similar to the cyborg figure delineated by Donna Haraway, 'a hybrid of machine and organism'.⁵⁸

A similar dynamic is at work in another hospital poem of Sexton's, titled 'August 17th', which is a part of the 'Scorpio, Bad Spider, Die: The Horoscope Poems' sequence from 1971. The poem describes the hospital as an unsettling space inhabited by patients who become increasingly machine-like and who fuse with mechanical and inorganic material:

Surely I will be disquieted
 by the hospital, that body zone—
 bodies wrapped in elastic bands,
 bodies cased in wood or used like telephones,
 bodies crucified up onto their crutches,
 bodies wearing rubber bags between their legs,
 [...]
 Bodies made of synthetics. Bodies swaddled like dolls
 whom I visit and cajole and all they do is hum
 like computers doing up our taxes, dollar by dollar.⁵⁹

In this section of the poem the almost compulsive repetition of the word "bodies" replicates the machine-like behavior of the patients through aesthetic devices. Apart from this almost non-human behavior, what is experienced as disconcerting in the 'body zone' of the hospital is the introduction of synthetic elements into the human body. Although these images seem to be in line with Haraway's claim that 'modern medicine is also full of cyborgs, of couplings between organism and machine',⁶⁰ Sexton here construes the introduction of synthetic material as a method of disturbing the economy of the body as opposed to Haraway's understanding where the fusion of the organic and the inorganic is conceptualised as an empowering event. Contrary to Haraway's model of the cyborg whose hybridity signals the prolongation of life through a new form of existence, in Sexton's poem the presence of the inorganic only signifies the disintegration and breakdown of the body that is entailed by ageing. Sexton's speaker is well aware of such dilapidation and she wants to warn young girls about this:

⁵⁷ Sexton, 'The Operation', ll. 103-104, 107-108.

⁵⁸ Donna Haraway, 'A Cyborg Manifesto. Science, Technology and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century', in *The Cybercultures Reader*, ed. by David Bell and Barbara M. Kennedy (London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 291-324 (p. 291).

⁵⁹ Anne Sexton, 'August 17th', in *The Complete Poems* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1981), pp. 603-604 (p.603, 604) ll. 1-6, 34-36.

⁶⁰ Haraway, pp. 291-2.

Ha, someday you'll be old and withered
 and tubes will be in your nose
 drinking up your dinner⁶¹

What the speaker points out here is that the dissolution of youth and physical health go hand in hand with the implementation of inorganic elements into the body which, however, do not seem to offer the perspective of a new, viable form of existence.

Indeed, the surgeon's intervention into the disintegrating and failing body is presented as a superficial, ephemeral and ultimately futile endeavour, since

Each body is in its bunker. The surgeon applies his gum.
 Each body is fitted quickly into its ice-cream pack
 and then stitched up again for the long voyage
 back.⁶²

Earlier on in the poem the process of 'going back' is explicitly equated with death:

Someday you'll go backward. You'll close
 up like a shoebox and you'll be cursed
 as you push into death feet first.⁶³

Thus, it is implied that neither the surgeon nor mechanisation can salvage the disintegration of the body. In addition, the clinical attempt to recover the health of the body is satirised and even ridiculed by referring to the medical mending and reconstruction of the patient's corporeality as the doctor 'apply[ing] his gum', since this image constructs medical practice as a trivial and almost childish attempt.

In addition, Sexton's poem explores how the mechanisation of the body as a consequence of surgical intervention leads to the patients' dehumanisation. The following lines present the patients as machine-like not only in the sense that they have inorganic implements but also to the extent that their activities are also mechanical, destitute of conscious and agentive actions:

Bodies swaddled like dolls
 whom I visit and cajole and all they do is hum
 like computers doing up our taxes, dollar by dollar⁶⁴

⁶¹ Sexton, 'August 17th', ll. 14-16.

⁶² Sexton, 'August 17th', ll. 37-40.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, ll. 17-19.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, ll. 34-36.

By aligning the patients' automatic movements and palsied existence to 'computers doing up our taxes, dollar by dollar', the poem also situates the hospital environment and medical care in the context of national and economic concerns. This image also draws our attention to the tension with regards to how 'unhealthy' bodies are regarded with respect to their function in the national body, insofar as ill and ageing subjects are deemed unproductive in economic terms and their medical facilitation is seen as a drain on national resources. In contrast, in the poem the patients are productive to the extent that they are 'doing up our taxes, dollar by dollar', thus they do contribute to the nation's economic processes.

Sexton's poems on the processes and repercussions of medicalisation speak not only to how the absence of health relates to national-economic concerns, but also to how medical practice functions in a social context of corporeal and ideological normalisation on a broader scale. In 'The Operation' the speaker repeatedly presents the relation of the patient and doctor in the clinical environment as that of regulation and exploitation. The speaker employs images of helpless and abused animals to describe her experience in the hospital: when all of the hair from her body is removed prior to the operation she defines herself as a 'shorn lamb'⁶⁵ which is abused on a regular basis in order to provide useful material for human economic production.⁶⁶ In a similar manner, the speaker presents her anticipation of getting admitted into the operation theatre as waiting 'like a kennel of dogs | jumping against their fence',⁶⁷ emphasising the sense of helplessness and coercion preceding the surgery. The image of being incarcerated, is, then, mapped onto the hospital bed: 'I glide down the halls | and rise in the iron cage toward science and pitfalls', implying that the same power dynamics are at work in caging and disciplining an animal and medical intervention into human corporeality.⁶⁸ Moreover, the fact that the speaker emphasises that it is 'science and pitfalls' that she rises against in the 'iron cage'⁶⁹ of the hospital bed implies that it is scientific discourse and its assumption of an objective position that has the effect of duress and confinement.

The sense of coercion that is operative in the medical scenario is the most succinctly delineated by the description of the gynaecological examination that precedes the surgery in the first stanza:

I come to this white office, its sterile sheet,
its hard tablet, its stirrups, to hold my breath

⁶⁵ Sexton, 'The Operation', l. 50.

⁶⁶ This image also mobilizes religious connotations of sacrifice.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, ll. 64-65.

⁶⁸ The disciplinary nature of the hospital environment is also suggested by presenting the nurses' shifts as acts of surveillance, such as in the line 'A nurse's flashlight blinds me to see who I am'. This image also implies that entry into this power structure subdues the subject.

⁶⁹ Sexton, 'The Operation', l. 69.

while I [...] must allow the glove its oily rape.⁷⁰

As Nelson highlights, by mobilising connotations of both constraint and agency, the phrase 'must allow' 'expresses both the oxymoron of women's self-determination and the fictionality of any privacy that depends on being forced to grant permission for violation'.⁷¹ The fact that the speaker 'must allow the glove its oily rape' also entails that 'diagnosis, the interpretation of her body, and rape, the invasion of her body, are bound together grammatically',⁷² thus the gynaecological examination is also located in the context of sexual power dynamics as well.

Conclusion

By addressing the various processes of normalisation, regulation and discourses of power that subtend a wide range of operations and interventions into the body, both Sexton's and Plath's poems reveal that medical practice aims at producing what Michel Foucault has termed 'docile bodies'. According to Foucault, 'a body is docile that may be subjected, used, transformed, and improved'⁷³ through disciplinary procedures. What Plath and Sexton's poems on surgeries expose is precisely the methods of subjection and normalisation that are at work in clinical procedures. Medical discourse claims to reinstate corporeal health, to stop and reverse the processes of ageing and as a result, to improve the body. However, these putative improvements are only attainable via the regulative acts of having the body comply with cultural and social ideals and norms of integrity and health. As Rosemarie Garland-Thomson states regarding contemporary medicine,

these procedures benefit not the affected individuals, but rather they expunge the kinds of corporeal human variations that contradict the ideologies that the dominant order depends upon to anchor truths it insists are unequivocally encoded in bodies. [...] [T]he medical commitment to health [...] has increasingly shifted toward an aggressive intent to fix, regulate, or eradicate ostensibly deviant bodies.⁷⁴

Although clinical practice claims to be invested in an ethics of care, Plath's and Sexton's poems highlight that various surgical procedures, and medical practice in general, function to reinscribe bodies and identities so that they live up to the Western ideal of the subject. By eliminating any form of deviance and openness, operations are deployed to produce the

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, ll. 4-6.

⁷¹ Nelson, *Pursuing*, p. 125.

⁷² *Ibid.*

⁷³ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish. The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Pantheon, 1977), p. 136.

⁷⁴ Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, 'Integrating Disability, Transforming Feminist Theory', *NWSA Journal*, 14.3 (2002), 1-32 (pp. 12-13).

bounded body, *taken to be* the guarantee of the self-same, autonomous individual. However, Sexton and Plath do not simply draw our attention to the pervasiveness of the discourses of normalisation and regulation that underwrite the clinical scenario. They also ironise and thus subvert the authoritative position medical practitioners assume, emphasising that despite their claims to transcendence, surgeons and doctors 'are only a human | trying to fix up a human'.⁷⁵

⁷⁵ Anne Sexton, 'Doctors', in *The Complete Poems* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1981), pp. 465-66 (p. 466), ll. 11-12.

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